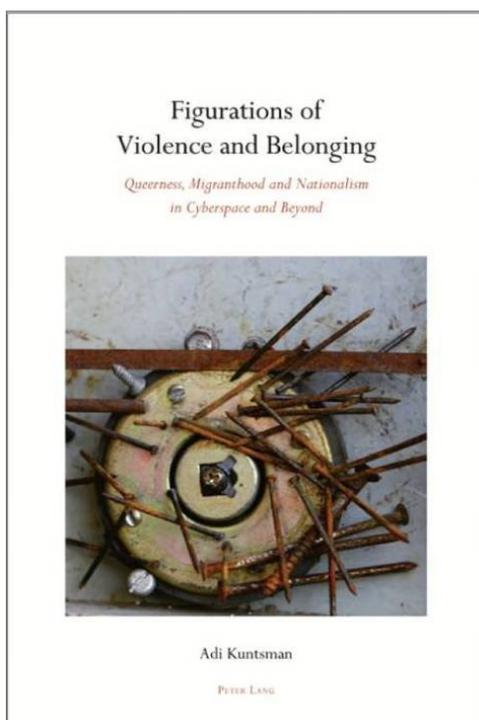


Reviews and Comments

Figurations of Violence and Belonging: Queerness, Migranhood and Nationalism and Cyberspace and Beyond, by Adi Kuntsman, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009, £38.00. ISBN: 978-3-03911-564-8. Language: English.



In his study of the Biblical apostle Thomas, the philologist-cum-historian Glenn Most aptly formulates why sticking to one's disciplinary trade is never wise in academic inquiries. The study of processes of cultural transmissions, says Most, "must necessarily transgress the boundaries that academic disciplines have, wisely or not, seen fit to draw around themselves.... The question is therefore not whether interdisciplinarity is to be accepted—no other procedure is fitted to this object—but to what extent its risks can be minimized" (*Doubting Thomas*, 2005).

Adi Kuntsman is no cultural historian—but if she has read Most's book, she is sure to have nodded upon encountering this passage. A sociologist and lecturer in Internet and communication by training, Kuntsman has written a book in which sociological analysis goes hand in glove with gender and queer theory, discourse analysis, political, cultural and literary history, and new media theory. Nationalism, cultural memory, sociologies of emotion,

diaspora, hate speech, sexuality, migranhood, queerness, colonialism, cyber-identity: in *Figurations of Violence and Belonging*, the author weaves apparently distinct mental categories into a tightly linked narrative, one that revolves around an ethnographic study of online sociality among Russian-speaking queer immigrants in Israel/Palestine.

Having grown up in Soviet Russia, Kuntsman immigrated to Israel in the late 1980s, as part of "the national project of Jewish repatriation," as she calls it, and became active in the then-emerging Russian-immigrant queer scene. When she stumbled upon the new web site "The Pan-Israeli Portal of Russian-Speaking Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals and Transsexuals" (www.aguda.org) in the early 2000s, she joined the initiative and started to participate in online discussions. After having moved to the United Kingdom, Kuntsman continued to partake in and observe activities on the site, ultimately deciding to turn this into the main site of her research.

Her decision led to a provocative dissertation-turned-book, which never settles for easy answers. Tracing how Russian-Israeli queer identity is constituted in online (and offline) fo-

ra, Kuntsman focuses on the convoluted relationship between violence and belonging. “The two are often envisioned in opposition,” she explains in the introduction:

[V]iolence is viewed as an obstacle to belonging or as a background against which belonging—understood as a creation of “safe spaces” on and off-line—takes place. This book takes a more complex approach to conceptualising the two, by looking at the ways various forms of violence constitute, rather than contradict, the sense of sexual, ethnic and national belonging of Russian-speaking, queer immigrants (pp. 2-3).

Just how complex “figurations” of violence and belonging can be, is demonstrated by Kuntsman in six chapters, each of which highlight a different tropic figure. Of these six figures, the last three—to which I devote most attention here—are particularly interesting for the scholar of Russian-language new media.

Before turning to cyberspace, Kuntsman travels back in time. In Chapters 1 and 2, she focuses on “haunted figures”: the shadows of violent pasts which Russian-speaking immigrants use to constitute a feeling of national or social belonging. The first, the Shadow by the Latrine, refers to the “ghostly shadow” of the homosexual as it emerges from Gulag memoirs. In a groundbreaking analysis of these literary documents, which are highly formative to views of queerness in Israel’s Russian-immigrant community, Kuntsman shows how they persistently present queer sexuality as criminal and inhuman.

How Russian-queer immigrants resist that trope is narrated in Chapter 2, in an exploration of the figure with which immigrant queers themselves identify: the Jewish Victim. Aligning the dangers of homophobia with those of anti-Semitism and Nazism, they turn Jewish victimhood into a political strategy, one which allows them to “write their queer sexuality into the nation” (pp. 87-88).

If these chapters take us back into history, the next two are firmly rooted in the here and now. Zooming in on three “border figures”—The Soldier, The Terrorist, and the Daughter of Palestine—Kuntsman analyzes how queer immigrants use yet another strategy to claim their belonging as Israelis: that of conjuring up national and racial borders. Glorifying Israeli-cum-Russian stereotypes of the sexy Soldier, in their online discussions of “Arab terrorists” and Palestinian queers, Russian-queer immigrants employ verbal hatred as a means to “come into being as sexual and national subjects” (pp. 127-28), in other words, as cultural capital. What happens when that practice is challenged indicates the story of the Daughter of Palestine, a character which briefly posted provocative comments on queerness and nationalist belonging in aguda.org discussions. In analyzing her appearance, Kuntsman points out that play with online identities is rarely strictly playful; it can contain solid doses of violence (p. 150).

With the Daughter of Palestine we land, more than in the previous chapters, in the world of cyberspace and cyber-violence. By this point in the book, Kuntsman has repeatedly discussed the theoretical specificities of that world in passing: when considering how words and feelings circulate online (p. 4), for instance; when insisting on the interrelatedness of offline warfare and on-line “flame wars” (hostile interactions between web users) (pp. 5 and 28); when challenging the view of the web as a nationless or borderless space (p. 17); or when surveying existing research on online identities (p. 133). But the question of the distinctive shape of online violence and belonging takes centre stage only towards the end of the book.

Chapter 5: The Club ponders what feelings participants of aguda.org discussions project onto a “Russian” queer club in Tel-Aviv. As Kuntsman shows, the commenters at the same time hail it as an idealized “substitute home” and reject it—in sometimes aggressive wordings—as “too Soviet.” That their discussions adopt specific contours in cyberspace is explained in Chapter 6, titled The Flamer. Scrutinizing the structure of online flaming, this chapter proffers a reading of flame wars as a “choreographic” movement, which “navigat[es] between topics and genres, often shifting in register from one moment to another and moving virtuously between playfulness and wounding words” (p. 192). In their verbal dances on this choreography’s “waltzing rhythm,” flammers hark back to ancient cultural tropes, such as that of the clown or the jester.

In this last, cyber-centric chapter, I find Kuntsman’s reading of these tropes and of online laughter the most fruitful. She is right, I think, in her explanation of laughter in flame wars as a melancholic or “uncanny” laughter, which is intricately interwoven with violent exchanges. The smiling, laughing, and winking emoticons that accompany those exchanges, she warns, are far from neutralising gestures.

[I]nstead of approaching emoticons in the simplistic sense, as an expression of the speaker’s intention, I want to think about them as masks in the Bakhtinian sense, masks that have no existence of their own but whose function is to externalise other modes of being (pp. 196-97).

Neither is flaming ever an innocent exchange of “just words”: in a flaming war, jokes can not only serve to rechannel violence, but their location in virtual space prevents others from pinpointing that violent dimension. If a flamer adds a smiley to an abusive comment, he or she can defend the aggression by claiming he or she was just kidding and blame the offended or hurt party for simply not getting the joke.

The Daughter of Palestine incident highlights an additional complication of interpreting online laughter: the slipperiness of online identities and their transformations. The possibility to clone, gender cross-dress, and erase a character prevent a reading of both victim and perpetrator of violent laughter as stable identities. Thus, the aguda.org community was highly confused by the question of who the Daughter of Palestine “really was.” Were they really dealing with a woman? And when a second character with the same name appeared, which of them was the *real* Daughter of Palestine and which was the clone? Finally, shouldn’t this provocative character be refused access to the site altogether?

If this summary of the book shows that Kuntsman adopts a critical, politically provocative stance to the themes at issue, then her arguments never suffer from a lack of subtlety. A fervent protester against “either/or” simplifications, she may unmask the violence of online flame wars, but she does not read that violence as strictly destructive. The flammers merely “illuminate yet another way belonging can work through violence” (p. 212).

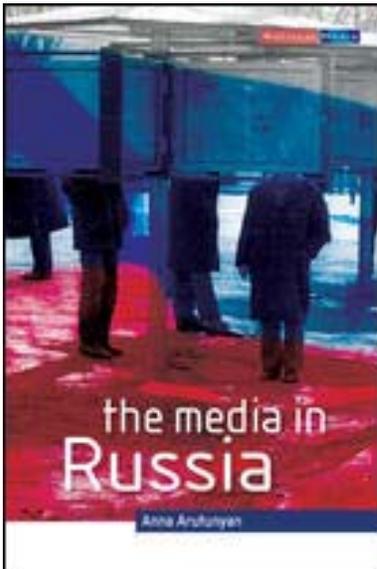
A similar theoretical and argumentative delicacy resonates throughout the analysis. It in no way interferes with the activist dimension that marks it from scratch. In Kuntsman’s own words, her project provides both “a form of theorising and a form of political intervention.” The latter prevails in the conclusion, which ends in a plea, among other things, to “refigure humanness, not only in relation to Gulag shadows, but in immigrant and queer politics and particularly in Israel/Palestine” (p. 241). By that point, only a thoroughly distracted reader

will have failed to misread this book for what it is: a successfully attempted first step in that direction.

Is praise all that this book elicits? On a few minor points, the answer is no. In the analysis on Bakhtinian, melancholic, and uncanny laughter, this reader missed a discussion of its relation to *stio*b (Soviet/post-Soviet linguistic parody). After all, the users of *aguda.org* have cultural roots in late Soviet Russia, where this politically motivated form of ironic humour was ubiquitous. On a more practical note, the text brims with typos; I stopped counting the occasions on which “through” was spelled as “though,” for one. It is a pity that a narrative as carefully composed as this suffers from such poor editorial treatment. Hopefully, in a new edition this problem will be absent. That there *will* be a second edition is beyond doubt: this study is a treasure trove of new insights for scholars in a range of academic disciplines, with new media as only one among many.

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The Media in Russia, by Anna Arutunyan, Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2009. Paperback, pp. 200, £20.99, ISBN: 978-0-33522-889-8. Language: English.



Anna Arutunyan’s *The Media in Russia* is one of several publications that have appeared in Great Britain in recent years on the subject of Russian media, including Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova’s *Television and Culture in Putin’s Russia* (2009), Birgit Beumers, Stephen Hutchings, and Natalia Rulyova’s *The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Power, Change and Conflicting Messages* by (2008) and David MacFadyen’s *Russian Television Today: Primetime Drama and Comedy* (2007), all three published as part of the BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies.

Whereas these publications aim to provide a theoretical framework to the recent changes in the Russian mediascape and to debate “old and new” issues such as Russia’s journalism, freedom of speech, and the role of the state, among other things, the main objective of Arutunyan’s *The Media in Russia* is to introduce the Russian media to uninformed readers and to demonstrate the uniquely Russian qualities of the country’s media system. The book offers an accessible overview of media developments in contemporary Russia as part of a specific historical narrative of the national media and culture. Arutunyan acknowledges that the book is not grounded in academic research; rather, it relies on the author’s personal experience of working in the Russian media. Therefore, one should view the book not as a work that broadens our theoretical understanding of Russian media, but as a publication that “translates” academic discourse on the subject into a more popular and yet well-informed idiom.

The Media in Russia is the third volume in the series of *National Media* publications under the direction of series editor Brian McNair; others include Matthew Hibberd's *The Media in Italy* (2007) and *The Media in Latin America* edited by Jairo Lugo-Ocando (2008).

One of the main achievements of Arutunyan's text is that it transcends the standard Soviet/post-Soviet dichotomy and anatomizes specific features of Russian media in a wider historical and cultural setting, building a media lineage that spans over 300 years of history of Russian modernity. As a result, the author builds a single cultural continuum that illuminates recent media developments. On the other hand, the book rarely acknowledges the complex ethnic, cultural, and confessional composition of the Russian Federation (not to mention the Soviet Union), streamlining cultural flows and providing a somewhat simplified, albeit unified, picture of Russia's mediascape.

The book consists of seven chapters: the first provides a general account of the mediascape and poses central concerns for discussion. The next two sections focus on the issues of ownership and freedom in the Russian press. The remaining four chapters investigate Russian media from the point of view of their medial affiliation, starting with newspapers, moving on to television and film, then radio, and concluding with a chapter on new media, entitled "The Internet, Blogging, and the Media of the Future." The structure of the book demonstrates a seismic shift in the study of Russian media, with economic concerns superseding ideological ones. This is, certainly, a breakthrough for Russia, as well as for the study of media in the Russian Federation. The thematic approach enables the author to put forward general issues pertaining to Russian media and then analyse them in detail in the context of a specific medium. This approach accounts for the unusual break in the medium genealogy, with a chapter on television preceding the chapter on radio.

In her opening chapters, Arutunyan attempts to speak about Russian media "not from the point of view of media critics, but from the point of view of audiences" (p. 9). However, Arutunyan's analysis is based largely on her experience of working as the editor of *The Moscow News*. The author bases her study on Yan and Ivan Zassursky's media theory, positioning the issue of the political domination at the core of the argument. Inevitably, Arutunyan recycles and reinstalls cultural stereotypes, including the position and role of journalists, freedom of speech, and media ownership. Her swift leaps from the Russian to Soviet and post-Soviet contexts sometimes result in a dazzling array of facts and interpretations that require significant background knowledge on behalf of the reader. Moreover, while aiming to explore and present the uniquely Russian qualities of media, Arutunyan mixes Russia with the Soviet Union, and occasionally uses these terms as political and cultural synonyms.

The book also contains numerous anecdotes and cultural observations that, although entertaining, are sometimes difficult to substantiate. For example, on page 3, Arutunyan starts a new section on the history of media by saying, "The Russian intelligentsia likes to welcome guests and foreigners with a self-deprecating saying: 'A poet in Russia is more than a poet.'" I cannot help but exclaim at this juncture: What is so self-deprecating about a saying that captures the pivotal role of the role of the writer in nineteenth-century literature? And when is it that the Russian intelligentsia started welcoming its guests with obscure sayings rather than the proverbial tea or wine?

One might expect that a contemporary title analysing media, especially when addressing an uninformed audience, should include visual examples of media outlets under analysis, for

example, photographs of newspapers or screen shots of online publications. Indeed, on page 86, *The Media in Russia* features a photograph of Russia's *Vedomosti* from 2 January 1703. The inclusion of this historical document has its own merit, but the impact on the reader would have been enhanced if the first Russian newspaper had been contrasted with a contemporary edition with a similar title. At least the reader would have noted the change in the alphabet and spelling that Arutunyan, in her account of media developments and rise of new types of readers and audiences, somehow fails to acknowledge.

Speaking of images and politics of visual representation, the book contains a map of contemporary Russia (p. viii), which shows only the European part of the Federation, with the Kaliningrad oblast and the whole swathe of Eastern Siberia and the Far East conspicuously absent. Needless to say, this type of map confuses the reader and promotes a problematic scholarly perspective, that is, an over-reliance on the study of Russia's urban centres, especially the two capitals. This tendency to privilege urban centres ultimately signposts an obsession with issues of authority and power in relation to media use in the Russian Federation. Furthermore, on page 2, Arutunyan poses the perennial question of whether Russia can become part of the West. "In the purely geographical sense, of course it cannot," the author concludes, which, ironically, contradicts the politics of the map she employs which completely ignores the Asian part of the country.

The section on the Internet (pp. 153-163) opens with a short history of web technologies in the USSR and post-Soviet Russia, listing a few successful Internet projects. The subsequent section is devoted to the assessment of the role of online media—Lenta.ru, Gazeta.ru, and other outlets—and its relation to traditional print media. Arutunyan finishes this section with a technological overview of Internet connections in contemporary Russia. In the concluding section of the chapter, Arutunyan introduces LiveJournal as an example of blogging on Runet, providing the reader with a few anecdotes from the history of the web log platform. The author borrows Evgenii Gornyi's classification of types of blogging in LiveJournal, and uses LiveJournal as a link to the final paragraphs of the chapter, in which she introduces Russian social media sites as spin-offs of American sites.

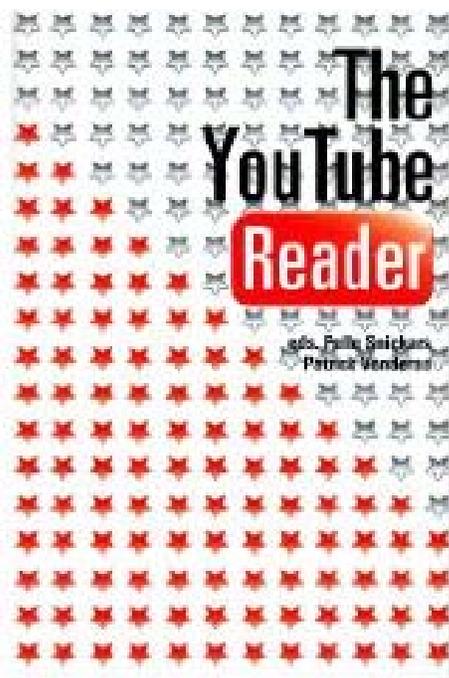
The book provides interesting facts and original points of view, although occasionally the argument is difficult to follow. For instance, on page 8, Arutunyan states that "a policy of secrecy, silence, and excessive caution still reigns"; she then draws on the August 2008 Georgian-Ossetian conflict to demonstrate her point only to conclude that Russia lost in the global information war because, unlike President Saakashvili, Vladimir Putin did make optimal use of the public relations apparatus. While I agree with each individual point Arutunyan makes, I do not see how a reader can decipher the codes of this sweeping argument. Another example is Arutunyan's attempt to define Russian media (pp. 13-14). She begins with a distinction that pertains to the legacy of the totalitarian regime, accentuating the media's ability "to serve as powerful tools in manipulating mass consciousness" (p. 13). She continues with a reference to the 1990 Russian media law and concludes with a linguistic difference of mass media and *sredstva massovoi informatsii*, which she translates into English as 'instruments of mass information' (p. 14). In the space of just three short paragraphs, interspersed with a long—and largely unexplained—quotation on media regulation, Arutunyan makes massive leaps in an argument that raises more questions that it attempts to answer.

As a minor drawback of this publication I would identify inconsistent transliteration of Russian words and titles, for example, on page 88, we find *Trudolyubivaya Pchela* and on page 89, the same letter/sound combination is rendered as *Drug Chestnykh Liudey* (emphasis is mine).

In spite of its discursive flaws, Anna Arutunyan's *The Media in Russia* is a valuable introduction to the study of Russian media, especially for readers seeking a personal approach to the subject.

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YouTube Reader, edited by Patrick Vonderau and Pelle Snickars, Stockholm: National Library of Sweden (distributed by Wallflower Press), 2009, pp. 512 pages. Hardcover, £19.99, ISBN: 978-9-18846-811-6. Language: English.



YouTube Reader is an exciting volume coming from Wallflower Press. It is the first book-length study of YouTube as a medium, industry, and cultural form. The volume was edited by Pelle Snickars, who is head of research at the Swedish National Library in Stockholm, Sweden, and by Patrick Vonderau, an assistant professor in the Department of Media Studies at Ruhr University, Germany. In spite of its global appeal, the book has an inexplicable European charm, particularly evident in the high quality of design and print (produced in Lithuania by Logotipas). Among the book's many contributors are world leading specialists in film and new media studies: Christopher Anderson, Thomas Elsaesser, Richard Grusin, Bernard Stiegler, William Uricchio, and Janet Wasko, to name just a few. Their contributions provide a wide range of discussion and analysis, as well as a certain degree of authority necessary for a study of such a novel phenomenon as YouTube.

In the Introduction, the editors provide an historical outline of YouTube as a media platform. They argue that YouTube is a community-driven medium that operates in an environment where it needs to compete with other online distributors of audio-visual material. The success of YouTube is grounded in its ability to reflect on its own content, to combine features of an unobtrusive channel of communication and a proprietary model, and to transform in response to the demands of both community/ies and commerce. The editors utilize a series of metaphors when trying to define YouTube—platform, archive, library, database, television, etc.—only to arrive at an unexpectedly futuristic conclusion: YouTube is “a way of strategically combining video content with numerical data” (p. 16). Having defined You-

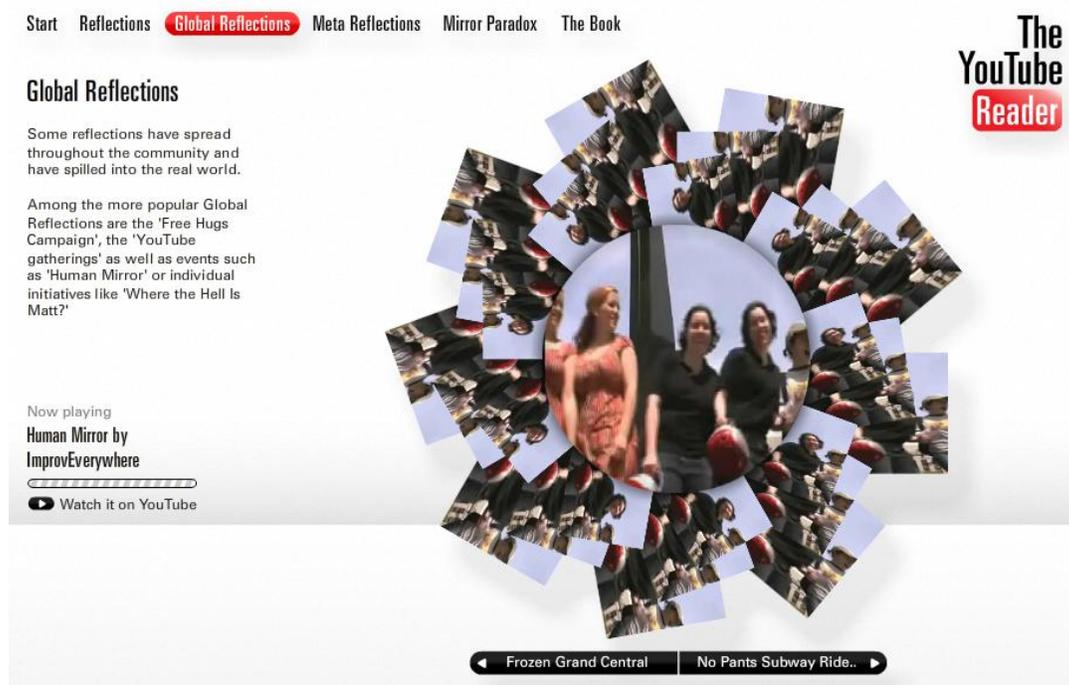
Tube, the editors briefly sketch out the structure of the book, simultaneously informing the reader about how the book was conceived: “The idea was to invite renowned scholars from both the U.S. and Europe to send us short, essayistic articles, employing their own research interests and approaches as a vantage point” (p. 18). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the contributions vary greatly in style, academic rigour, and theoretical scope. There are some disappointing repetitions, with a few chapters begin with a recount of YouTube’s history. (This is probably because this history is so short that it requires iteration to gain accuracy and authority. In addition, one may read these repetitions as a form of engagement with YouTube as a medium, a quality which makes sense when one considers the somewhat provocative title of the volume as a *reader*). Other chapters do not effectively culminate in any theoretical conclusion, whatsoever, merely providing data and a few critical observations. While rich in empirical data, as a whole, the volume needs to provide the reader with a more thorough theoretical contextualization of its material. It would be most helpful if the editors could expand the Introduction in such a way that would further elucidate the emergence and role of YouTube as a cultural form, its relation to previous platforms of distribution of audio-visual material, and, perhaps most importantly, would also establish a connection between the chapters.

In total, there are 28 chapters in *YouTube Reader*, as well as the Introduction discussed above, as well as a very useful section containing a general bibliography. The material is structured around six issues, forming discreet sections: mediality, usage, form, storage, industry, and curatorship. Two sections—“form” and “industry”—seem to take the central position in the discussion of YouTube as a contemporary cultural phenomenon. Indeed, it is incredibly difficult to distinguish between YouTube’s status as a cultural form dependent on its function as a popular culture industry. Conversely, YouTube’s engagement with cultural industries informs our understanding of the phenomenon as a meta-medium capable of mediating and reflecting on other media. For detailed analysis, I will single out just one chapter because it speaks directly to a range of issues that *Digital Icons* aims to engage. It is a contribution entitled “From YouTube to RuTube, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love All Tubes,” written by Andrey Gornyxh, Professor at the Department of Social Sciences of the European Humanities Institute in Vilnius, Lithuania.

In a relatively short chapter—just over twelve pages—Gornyxh attempts to conceptualize, compare, and contrast national forms of YouTube (in this case, its Russian embodiment, RuTube). To my knowledge, this is the first essay in book format that investigates the Russian online platform of distribution of audio-visual material, a fact that accounts for the following criticisms. After an extended overview of the history of RuTube which includes lengthy citations of opinions expressed by RuTube owner Oleg Volobuev and an anonymous user, Gornyxh proceeds to categorize YouTube/RuTube in terms of visual culture. Somewhat predictably alluding to Raymond Williams, Gornyxh defines the phenomenon not only as a technological breakthrough, but also a means of classifying contemporary culture. The author finds it necessary to affirm his position by providing a long list of sub-categories displayed on RuTube, that—I assume—are meant to elucidate some nationally specific features of the Russian platform. (Or is it, on the contrary, an assortment of elements of global culture that resist any local adaptation? Ultimately, I was left wondering.) Gornyxh struggles to bring his claims together; the notion of the reversed structure of RuTube is superimposed on RuTube

usage, resulting in a banal statement that RuTube videos range in their display of “excessively negative subject matter to absolutely positive” (p. 446). In the following part of the chapter entitled “RuTube as/and Television,” Gornykh provides an analysis of RuTube in relation to the national tradition of television, and this is where his cultural analysis is at its best. He concludes the section with a rigorous theoretical claim that is worth reproducing at length here: “RuTube reproduces what has been coding the mass audience on television for decades, and what is more, it also legitimates television entertainment as a pre-existing reality, veiling the routine and senselessness of dramatic media events, and embellishing the ubiquitous sameness of mass culture with a secondary originality” (p. 448). In the final section of the chapter, Gornykh inevitably touches upon the political aspect of RuTube, using the event of the 2008 Georgian-Ossetian War to illustrate his argument, revealing that the system of Russian political life—just like RuTube videos—is structured as “incoherent fragments of fights” (p. 451). While providing an insightful critique of Russian political videos and Russian video politics—i.e., RuTube—Gornykh makes a gross cultural mistake when referring to the peoples of Caucasus as Caucasians, a loaded term that—at least in English—denotes a completely different set of racial categories. In spite of these lapses, the chapter provides the first account of RuTube and other online platforms of distribution of audiovisual material in Russia, putting forward a set of valuable theoretical claims and perceptive observations.

Figure 1. Screenshot of *YouTube Reader* online exhibition.



Source: <http://www.youtubereader.com/> (accessed 1 December 2009)

YouTube Reader is accompanied by an online exhibition displayed at <http://www.youtubereader.com/>. The site is hosted by the National Library of Sweden and is

curated by the Nederlands Filmmuseum. The purpose of the exhibition is to provide some visual material to complement the book. The exhibition displays a number of popular YouTube videos, including *Free Hugs* by fewwy, *Spaghetti Cat (I Weep for You)* by ParryGripp, and many others. The videos have been remastered to give them a nifty look. Presented outside their normal YouTube environment of ratings, comments, and advertised videos, these works make an impression of genuine video art with superior qualities of visual presentation and cultural depth. The videos are exhibited in four sections: Reflections, Global Reflections, Meta Reflections, and Mirror Paradox. These categories—presented in linear progression to accentuate the development of the main argument—put forward a notion of YouTube as a global self-reflexive phenomenon. The curators utilize a metaphor of the mirror maze to account for the YouTube culture, with its endless circulation of images and obsessive patterns of repetition. Particularly striking is the second section—Global Reflections—which affirms YouTube’s transnational status and its role as a global mediator of video flows, rendered with the help of a circular image window and rotational manner of streaming (see Figure 1).

YouTube Reader is an extremely valuable compendium of contemporary research on online audio-visual presentation. The text also extends the established boundaries of thinking about the Internet, digital art and film, fandom, and amateur versus auteur production. Undoubtedly, the volume is destined to generate further debates over the role of digital platforms for distribution and display of video and films. It is also a fantastic resource for lecturers teaching new media, film, video, and digital art, since—together with the online exhibition—it provides a set of critical texts and primary resources necessary for stimulating intellectual debates with students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Finally, the accessible style of the book should attract general readership that is more familiar with YouTube phenomenon than with new media and digital film theory.

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