

YouTube and the Urban Experience Embodied¹

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While abstract anthropological concepts such as the ‘urban feel,’ ‘urban spaces’ and ‘urban imaginaries’ are difficult to wrestle with, I would nevertheless like to introduce a new perspective of ‘urban-ness’. By focusing on the recent explosion of home-made, worldwide dance videos on YouTube, I will illustrate how, in the search for ‘otherness’, young people are now motivated primarily by a yearning for cosmopolitanism and urban-ness. I will explore how that desire has taken hold, as well as how it is disseminated. Furthermore, I will examine how this yearning for otherness is shaped by the very vehicle that disseminates it. Specifically, I will explore dance culture that as it has emerged trans-locally from dance clips on YouTube-particular local places. I will highlight several different dance genres, all of which emanate from urban centres. The platform YouTube provides facilitates and disseminates these expressions – ones which, in turn inspire new dance expressions and genres.

Key words: urban alterity, youtube, dance, globalization, internet.

Charles Beaudelaire’s flâneur figure has historically been important to the discussion of the modern urban experience. Walter Benjamin characterized the Parisian arcade flâneur of the 19th Century as a figure who ‘plays the role of scout in the marketplace. As such, he is also the explorer of the crowd’ (Benjamin 1999: 21). YouTube audiences may be seen as virtual flâneurs, traveling virtually to burgeoning cities, exploring new dance forms and where they are being created.

Benjamin’s analysis of Beaudelaire’s flâneur reveals a character who is at once a dispassionate member, and observer, of the city’s crowd. In other words, the flâneur is both producer and consumer — not dissimilar to the role of the YouTube user. The virtual flâneur surfs the Internet, observing other people’s activity, sometimes commenting, other times becoming the activity by producing content. With the help of YouTube, the virtual flâneur is afforded the possibility inclined to of embodying an urban alterity, as well as the opportunity to participate in the online communities of urban dance aficionados. YouTube allows people to self-publish videos for potentially huge online audiences, which has prompted new forms of sociality to emerge (Lang 2007; Boellstorff 2008). In addition to providing a video sharing platform, YouTube also enables its users to construct their own personal profile page — called a ‘channel page,’ where people can ‘friend’ other users. The study of how young people project identities affiliated with particular

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social groups by using YouTube's video sharing and commenting features is one that merits attention.

As well as offering these new social tools, YouTube has also become a new pedagogical tool. In a non-institutionalized way, individuals can now produce 'how-to' videos and tutorials, the sole aim of which is to instruct others, for example videos produced by young Jamaicans about how to perform the latest Dancehall steps. Rather than just filming themselves performing a dance, they break down its movements and articulate the best execution. By focusing on dance performed on YouTube, I will examine some of the ways in which young people are currently copying, performing, and embodying and mimicking urban-ness. One only needs to do a simple search on YouTube to discover the profusion of dance videos that people post of themselves emulating urban dance genres from around the world — ones depicting cosmopolitan scenarios. I will also consider how global urban-ness, as well as knowledge of particular local urban-ness, has become cultural capital for young people around the world. The emulation and appropriation of dance forms new to one's own repertoire is a cross-cultural phenomenon that is equally present among youth in the West as well as the global South.

Not just a Western thing

Although there have been exciting advancements in technology and Internet expansion, my attempt at analyzing the new international public spheres created by the Internet does not discount the fact that access to Internet technology remains uneven. However, it must be said that dance videos posted by young people from a wide-range of socio-economic classes in the global urban Africans South from a wide-range of socio-economic classes are proliferating. We know this in part because YouTube has a built-in feature to track the number of people watching each video, as well as their respective countries. It is not uncommon to find videos of urban youth in cities in the developing world posting videos of themselves performing dance to European-style techno music.

One particular video that comes to my mind of people looking 'further abroad' is of a group of young boys in the streets of Harrare, Zimbabwe. Positioned in a semi-circle around the trunk of a car, listening and dancing to fast-paced techno, dancers are clearly performing for the camera, each taking turns showing off their own moves and dance steps. Posted in February of 2010, the dance video has since been viewed 75,000 times. This is a prime example of the ways

in which YouTube has penetrated communities and cultures globally; not only are these Zimbabweans publicly displaying local popular dance expressions, but they are also using European music, though their exposure to this musical form may or may not be a direct result of their YouTube use. The YouTube viewer is afforded the chance to get a glimpse of city-life in motion within urban popular dance videos. There is a sense in which city-living and traveling have become synonymous, and it is apparent that ‘virtual tourism’ is not unique to the West. On YouTube, viewers are not just exposed to other forms of dance expression, but also often imitate them. When these viewers become producers of content on YouTube, others can then view and become inspired by their dance performances.

A shift in values: Privileging the city and the new

In the exploration of cultures different from one’s own, many have found it important to feel as though they were getting an authentic representation of that culture. However, as far back as the Romantic era, and as recently as the 1990s, the authenticity of an exotic cultural encounter was determined by how pristine and isolated from modernity that culture was. This was often characterized by a rural or pastoral setting, untouched by technology or other civilizations. Though the search for authenticity remains, it is now qualified differently. Increasingly, people no longer expect that reality to be one of closed-off village life, and instead seek ‘real’ urban expressions. YouTube reflects as well as reinforces this new sentiment.

YouTube urban dance viewers are engaging with current forms of expression, privileging the new, and the future. Michael Wesch (2008), who released a video about conducting anthropological research with YouTube, suggests that, with the increase in commercialization, we see a longing for authenticity. Young people are yearning for something (specifically urban) that is more real than what is being produced by the culture industry, and they are finding this on the Internet.

In the 1990s, the body of literature documenting ‘World Music’ shed light on the way it was romantically marketed to Western audiences as an ‘authentic’ product of non-Western music from often ‘traditional’ rural settings (Erlmann 1996; Taylor 1997). In contrast to the Romantic-era traveller or the World Beat aesthetic of ‘rural’ and traditional folk music, YouTube dance clips often portray young dancers in urban settings, such as parking lots, rooftops, apartment courtyards, and crowded streets. For the most part, popular dance genres crop up in large urban

centres. For example, kuduro is a music and dance genre that chronicles daily urban life in the slums of Luanda, Angola. Dancers who have been victims of Angola's civil war feature prominently in YouTube videos, making use of their crutches and missing legs in their dance performances (Brown 2010). In addition, technology, such as cell phones, is celebrated by being incorporated into dance choreographies. Mixing elements of techno, hip-hop, and reggae, kuduro is at once an Angolan and a global music — a bricolage of musical cultures. This is but one example of an authentic dance expression from a culture that has been touched by technology and has been influenced by other popular culture genres.

British/Sri Lankan musician M.I.A. has been instrumental in bringing kuduro to the international mainstream. There is something about dance music coming out of an urban context that resonates with young audiences. The widespread popularity of music and dance forms emerging from poor urban centres is in itself a testament of young people's favouring the urban over the rural when it comes to cultural consumption.

Like the travels of the 19th Century Romantic tourist, there is an element of romance in watching dance from different international cities on YouTube. The experience is like an adventurous journey into a new land, with the hope of discovering something new and inspiring. However, instead of journeying into the jungle or some wide-open rural space in search of 'tradition,' the YouTube explorer travels through cyberspace to new cities in search of new 'authentic' expressions. Unlike the 19th Century Romantic tourist, or to the consumer of World Beat music, the YouTube dance tourist considers technological change, digitized music, and the grittiness of urban life as marks of authenticity.

A moment to shine

With the conclusion that contemporary popular expressions from the global South are not necessarily bound to traditional village life, it is important to consider YouTube's role in this shift in understanding. YouTube now gives young, poor people in urban centres an opportunity to showcase their own popular expressions as well as to view those of others. These expressions are often considered 'authentic,' as opposed to what the music industry presents because they come from the 'source' and have not yet been commodified.

Young people living in non-Western urban centres, despite their increasing numbers, find themselves at the margins of the economic, political, and public spheres in their own nations.

Despite this marginalization, the Internet has allowed them to make their presence known on the international stage as social actors in the field of popular culture. Getting famous over the Internet is not unique to the West; young people in the developing world are also aware of the potential technology offers to one's quest for fame, and they are taking advantage of it. Young dancers from the global South who would likely not have been seen in the West until the advent of the Internet are now being imitated by dancers all over the world, including in the West. As the access to technology increases in cities throughout the world, young people have begun to represent themselves and disseminate their urban experiences on the Internet (Spitulnik 2002).

Internet technology has become a primary means for young people to sidestep the obstacles set up by the culture industry and to showcase their expressions. In her chapter entitled 'To Survive and To Shine' (2000), Janet MacGaffey addresses some of the ways in which young Africans in both Kinshasa and France have done this. In the case of music and dance, technological advancements have contributed to the creation of new mediums through which young people can shine. For example, in many countries in the global South, musical instruments are now more expensive than some forms of computer technology, like drum machines and synthesizers. Young people are now equipped with cheaper means of producing music, which consequently has birthed new genres of music and accompanying dance forms.

Music industry tourism

The music industry is aware of the shift in values and in what it means to be authentic. And it understands that what is 'cool,' as defined by what is 'real,' is no longer a pristine, untouched, and pastoral ideal but, rather, is urban, and affected by industry and technology. The culture industry is presently attempting to capitalize on this YouTube phenomenon, as is illustrated by one of Beyoncé's music videos. Marketing herself as an 'urban music' artist, Beyoncé's team has used YouTube videos as dance inspiration. The Mozambican kwaito dance group Tofo Tofo recently served as inspiration for the pop star's 2011 music video 'Run the World (Girls)'. Posted by a Swedish tourist in Mozambique, Tofo Tofo's YouTube video shows the threesome dancing clad in matching outfits in a local bar. Beyoncé's team's interest was subsequently piqued after viewing the video. According to one of the members of Beyoncé's team, it took them four months to track down the group in Africa. Tofo Tofo was then flown to the United States to help

create the choreography for the dance video. The video evokes a kind of post-apocalyptic scenario in which people from diverse backgrounds are now living together in an ambiguous, dilapidated, urban African shantytown.

Bob White (2011) writes about the ‘personal listening utopias’ that can arise from world music consumption. He questions whether these cosmopolitan yearnings are symptomatic of the anxieties associated with global capitalism. The contemporary consumer of popular music no longer wants to buy into the old utopic ideal of the noble savage living in a pristine natural environment. Today’s music industry is responding to this trend by glamorizing the grittiness of urban poverty instead.

Embodying urban fantasy

Given how urban-ness is now being privileged, even within the music industry, it is useful to explore YouTube as a platform that reflects and disseminates that attitude. It does this in several ways. As I previously showed, YouTube helps people to showcase their own local experiences, and allows others to learn about those new dances. But YouTube also allows people to go beyond that, by embodying the urban fantasy. People can take what they have learned viewing other dances and perform their own version, again using YouTube as a platform to showcase that knowledge. This participatory and transformative act of becoming the ‘other’ contrasts with cultural flâneury, which is passive and observing. This active participation can be expressed through mimicry.

Brian Larkin notes that ‘people consuming popular media participate in the imagined realities of other cultures as part of their daily lives’ (1997: 406). Picture the following scenario, of which there are many variations on YouTube: A young man in Stockholm is intently watching a YouTube clip of another young man in Chicago’s SouthSouth Side, who is performing the latest hip-hop dance, called the *dougie*. The Swede may be watching the video to get an idea of what an inner city looks like and how young people there behave, but he may also be watching to learn the dance. Perhaps this young Swede will later perform his own version of the *dougie* on YouTube himself. With diverse socio-economic classes gaining greater access to the Internet, urban dance has been brought to a large international audience. Even First Lady Michelle Obama was recently filmed doing the *dougie* at a public school in Washington D.C., an event that was

widely circulated over the Internet. The dichotomy between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture today is being dissolved by a new sense of ‘urban-ness,’ which is being facilitated by the Internet.

Whereas the example of the Swede watching the Chicago dancer is an isolated instance of one individual observing another, there are cases of entire subcultures being transplanted via YouTube to other parts of the world. For example, Japanese youth are consuming massive amounts of YouTube video clips of Jamaican Dancehall, which emerged from Kingston’s urban shantytowns. Thousands of young Japanese dancers are performing Dancehall moves, perfectly reproducing the mechanics of the dance. There is even an increase of Some Japanese are even traveling to Kingston to compete in dancehall competitions. Marvin Sterling writes about the Japanese engagement with Jamaican Dancehall, explaining that during his fieldwork in 1998 and 2001, many young Japanese dancers learned to dance from DVDs of parties and events filmed in Kingston. ‘These individuals seek in various ways to deepen their subcultural identifications with Jamaican popular culture, to come into intimate contact with — to ‘touch’, so to speak — the far-away Caribbean island as authentic source of dancehall reggae music’ (Sterling 2001: 54). Now, with the prevalence of young Jamaican DJs and dancers posting videos of themselves, Japanese dancehall aficionados can keep privy to the new developments within this popular cultural form.

Even for people who do not live in urban settings, YouTube can facilitate their imagination of the urban, keeping them abreast of current trends, so that they acquire a kind of cosmopolitan competence, or what Bourdieu (1984) calls ‘cultural capital’. Being ‘in the know’ is an important part of being young, but in our contemporary world, knowing about one’s immediate community is not enough. ‘Being in the know’ now encompasses popular urban culture on an international scale. Young people are not only observing what urban-ness can be like elsewhere on the planet, but are also attempting to feel that difference. In the case of dance, that difference is literally embodied. Until recently, people’s choices of cultural roles have been relatively limited. But now, in the comfort and privacy of our homes, we can watch and learn foreign urban dance genres, and imagine ourselves as part of an urban sensibility.

Mimesis: An expression of cosmopolitanism

Michael Taussig’s (1993) exploration of the ‘mimetic faculty’ might help us to better understand people’s participation on YouTube. For Taussig, the mimetic faculty is described as ‘the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore

difference, yield into and become Other' (1993: 25). In studying the Cuna in Colombia, Taussig discerns the ways in which people from one group adopt the nature and 'culture' of another group while maintaining distance.

Through the act of mimicking, the copier brings the copied into the physical world. This not only fosters empathy but allows for an experience whereby the relationship between subject and object is blurred, enabling identity experimentation. Furthermore, through mimesis, the individual absorbs influences from the Other without having to compromise his or her own identity or value system — that is, without having to become what is being imitated. Paul Stoller furthers this discussion by positing that 'one sometimes copies otherness to make partial sense of it, to master it' (1995: 87). In other words, one copies or mimes something — in this case, urban dance genres performed on the Internet — to comprehend and master it. Hannerz proposes that 'genuine cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It entails an intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity' (1996: 103).

An example of such cosmopolitanism in dance would be Urban Tribe, a female Norwegian dance group whose most popular YouTube video shows them performing Congolese ndombolo dance with recorded music by Werrason, one of the Congo's most popular bands. Clad in short shorts and bikini tops in an Oslo park, the young women are mirroring the costumes of Congolese dancers, who were themselves originally mirroring American fashion. It is interesting that most videos featuring ndombolo dancers in Africa generally take place in urban settings, while Urban Tribe intentionally sets their dance performance in the more bucolic setting of a park, among fields and flowers. Perhaps what is demonstrated to YouTube audiences is the extent to which Urban Tribe is 'in the know,' by being capable of physically moving like urban African women they see in YouTube dance videos. Dance — in this case, YouTube dance — has the potential to kinetically assemble multiple spaces at once.

Conclusion

In this article I have posited that YouTube has become a wellspring of culture, one which that merits further attention. Dance videos posted on YouTube represent a virtual terrain where the urban imagination is embodied. On YouTube, people demonstrate their mastery and knowledge of popular culture around the world. It is also a site where scenarios of urban-ness are played out,

and where travel, both real and virtual, contributes to the ongoing negotiation of urban identities among youth around the world. YouTube is a new public sphere where this ‘urban’ ideal is expressed and disseminated. Furthermore, it satisfies a yearning to better understand urban-ness and to be ‘in the know.’ Finally, it allows people to immerse themselves in, and even embody an urban otherness through dance expression.

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