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## Appropriation, Parody, Gender Play, and Self-representation in Preadolescents' Digital Video Production

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### Abstract

The authors discuss their participant observation study with the 10-year-old boy and 8-year-old girl who collaborated on making digital videos at home. Major themes that emerged from this research include appropriation of popular culture texts, parody, gender play, and managing self-representations. These themes highlight the benefits of video production for children and youth, which allows them to take on the roles of writers, producers, directors, actors, and editors in their own right and understand the inner workings of new media enterprise. It also offers them an opportunity to respond to and rework popular images, scripts, and characters; try on and enact multiple identities; and make important decisions about their self-representations.

## **Appropriation, Parody, Gender Play, and Self-representation in Preadolescents' Digital Video Production**

Increased access to new technologies such as digital photography, video, computer applications, and the Internet has rapidly expanded the territory of children's self-directed artistic exploration beyond the conventional medium of pencil and paper. Contemporary children and youth are eager to pick up a digital camera to snap a picture or record a video, or manipulate a mouse to doodle in a computer drawing program. The sociocultural and individual significance of traditional children's art (mainly drawings) produced with little to no adult intervention has been previously explored by a number of art educators who sought a glimpse into children's motivations behind art-making via ethnographically-informed inquiries (Duncum 1986, Ivashkevich, 2009; Pearson, 1993; Thompson, 2003, 2009; Wilson, 1974). Yet, to date, only a handful of studies look into the meaning and value that the new media art has for children, particularly for those of younger and preadolescent age (McClure, 2010, 2011; Orr Vered, 1998; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002). It is also important to note that most research in this area focuses on youth's participation in social networking sites such as blogs, MySpace, and YouTube, where they circulate pictures and videos, seeking peer feedback that ultimately creates new possibilities and extensions of their projects (Burgess & Green, 2009; Cayari, 2011; Ito et al., 2009).

However, this new creative space of "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2009) largely excludes children and youth of color and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who don't have access to the Internet at home and/or can't afford the new technology tools, as well as young new media-makers who don't circulate their productions on the web due to parental restrictions or self-censorship, which was the case in our study. As ethnographers, we had a unique opportunity to enter the process of creating videos that never made it to the web, and witness how children reenact various identity roles in front of the camera and then respond to and manipulate their own representations via re-viewing and editing. The process of video production struck us as highly performative and fluid, one that evokes multiple identity explorations and invites participants to subversively play with and transform popular scripts and representations.

In the summer of 2010, we—a professor-student team—embarked on the participant observation study of two neighborhood friends: Alan, 10, and Anna Beth<sup>1</sup>, 8, both from white middle-class families, who have previously worked together on a short video film. Our

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, we use creative pseudonyms chosen by our research participants.

research has been supported by the Magellan Scholar Grant available to undergraduate students at the University of South Carolina, as well as Alan's father and step-mother, both USC professors, who graciously opened the doors of their home to us. Alan and Anna Beth's collaborative video-making began about a half-year prior to our research, when Alan's step-mother gave him a Flip video camera as a Christmas gift. This relatively inexpensive (ranging from \$70 to \$130), pocket-size digital camera is marketed mainly towards younger children and preadolescents, but is also often used by youth due to its high-quality video. This user-friendly camera has an embedded USB port and can be directly connected to the computer to upload videos. It also comes with simple editing software (although our research participants preferred using iMovie for editing). During the course of our 5-week research period, Alan and Anna Beth agreed to meet twice a week for 3-hour video-making sessions and allowed us to take on the roles of their apprentices. Our meetings were informally dubbed the "movie camp." None of the videos (either edited short films or unedited episodes) produced by the team have been shared on the web, mainly due to Anna Beth's parental concerns regarding privacy as well as Alan's view that most footage is not sufficiently professional.

Methodologically, our study has been informed by the hermeneutic paradigm of ethnographic research, which assumes that research evidence is not impartially gathered but rather co-constructed by the researcher and research participant (Schwandt, 2000, 2005). The method of participant observation fits this framework very well as it welcomes researchers' involvement in the process of generating data, as opposed to a more objectified observer stance (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Therefore, we are fully aware that our taking part in Alan and Beth's video production may have influenced how they approached it, and even sparked a more purposeful and regular video-making by Alan who, according to his step-mother, created his own YouTube account shortly after our movie camp finished to post short films that he made without Anna Beth's involvement. It is important to note, however, that our role as apprentices who either held the camera, played an assigned role, or assisted with the props based on Alan or Anna Beth's directorial requests, significantly equalized the adult/child power relationships that have been mainly defined by children's own interest in particular plots, characters, roles, and editing techniques. Due to the format of this article, we were not able to include a discussion on our own subjectivities as researchers who were involved as children's collaborators, but we plan to pursue this in our future writing.

We kept detailed notes of our observations and used a small digital voice recorder to document the entire process—including preparatory decision-making conversations, scene rehearsals, and the trying-on of props—revisiting and commenting on the recorded footage, and editing, which helped us later revisit significant episodes. We also copied and revisited all produced 175 video segments and 3 edited films. As we generated our records, we looked for the big themes that recurred throughout our observations. We will explore each of these

highly overlapping and interdependent themes—appropriating popular culture texts, parody, gender play, and managing self-representations—in the subsequent sections of our paper. It is important to note that while we found all of these themes to be essential in the movie-making process, the gender aspect was often most dominant in our participants' actions.

### **Appropriating Popular Culture Texts**

Like other children their age, Alan and Anna Beth were interested in drawing from and appropriating popular narratives and characters in their video-making. While appropriation is considered to be one of most commonly used contemporary art strategies (Gude, 2004), it is often seen as limiting to children's creative abilities, which reflects the modernist views of children as innocent and pure (Buckingham, 2000) and children's art as original and not corrupted by outside influences (Fineberg, 1997; Lowenfeld, 1947). By contrast, those who study young people from a postmodern, sociocultural perspective believe that popular products and scripts provide a broad and "flexible terrain" for children's identity play and exploration (Buckingham, 2000, p. 165), however admitting a relatively limited repertoire of these consumer artifacts that are created by economic institutions "for their own benefit" (Duncum, 2002, p. 10). It also has been noted that contemporary children and youth who appropriate and remake popular culture narratives and artifacts in their new media art challenge the conventional boundaries between consumption and production (Buckingham, 2009). Agreeing with the sociocultural view, we were particularly interested in the complexities of appropriating popular culture material in our preteen participants' video production and how it evoked new readings and resignifications of the established scripts.

Alvin Schwartz's collection of oral folklore *The Scary Stories Treasury*, which is quite popular with preadolescents, was the primary source of inspiration for Alan and Anna Beth's video-making during our research encounters. Both children found the stories featured in the book nerve-tickling but also entertaining due to their fictional exaggerations. During our research, they worked on video adaptations of four stories: "The Bride," "The Babysitter," "The Ghost with the Bloody Fingers," and "Oh, Susannah!" (though the last one was never fully compiled and edited because some of the footage filmed in a dark room was dismissed by the children as being poor quality). Initially, Alan strongly wanted all the videos to be closely representative of the written material. His focus seemed to be on re-telling the stories, and he had developed a concrete idea of the characters and settings that he wanted to translate in the most literal terms possible on camera. As a result, he took a directorial position and oversaw the entire process of filming (although he also participated as an actor). Anna Beth, on the other hand, was more interested in acting and enjoyed a playful approach to the story lines by exaggerating aspects of characters and introducing humorous and sometimes grotesque interpretations of the scenes, such as excessive wailing for humorous effect when acting as a village girl in search for the missing bride in "The Bride's" penultimate scene. She

also frequently made suggestions about how the stories could be made even “scarier” by changing the plot or extending it beyond what was presented in the book. For instance, while working on “The Babysitter” adaptation, she suggested that the stranger character could kidnap one of the children or even have a weapon to increase the “scary” effect (although these suggestions did not make it to the screen). Alan gradually grew to appreciate Anna Beth’s performance “slippages” (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1983, p. 362), and was later enthusiastic about turning the scenes that contained both intentional and unintentional acting missteps into bloopers at the end of each short film, which became a major tool of script resignification discovered by the team. We discuss this and a few other related instances in greater depth in the following section on parody.

During our second meeting, we suggested that Alan and Anna Beth could also use their toys to practice and explore the scripts from the book in a more informal way—essentially filming their impromptu play—as a break from a more structured rehearsal and filming of the plots from *Scary Stories*. The exercise proved to be very popular, and the children continued video-recording their own individual and collaborative play on most days of our movie camp. They often asked us to hold the camera so they could be able to manipulate their toys, which included action figures from the *Toy Story 3* movie owned by Alan and a few Barbie, Ken, and Liv Dolls brought in by Anna Beth. While during the first day of their filmed play with action figures they drew on some of the scenes from the *Scary Stories*, they quickly started deviating from the book scripts and developing their own story lines that recontextualized and rewrote the dominant meanings of the dolls. For instance, as a common occurrence in their sketches, Anna Beth and Alan manipulated the aforementioned action figures in a dollhouse that was much too small for them (see Figure 1). In one sketch, Anna Beth played Barbie and Ken as a grumpy couple, constantly arguing with each other while hitting the ceiling of the tiny rooms and trying to lie down on the tiny beds. The dolls ended up getting in each other’s faces, pushing each other, knocking over tiny furniture, and eventually falling off the house. By building upon an apparent size mismatch between the dolls and the dollhouse, Anna Beth reworked Mattel’s script, which habitually presents Barbie and Ken as a romantically dating couple.



Figure 1. *Dollhouse Play*. Video frame. July, 2010.

Eventually, the filmed doll sketches took the shape of episodic TV shows, complete with a cast of actors playing roles and series titles that Alan and Anna Beth announced on camera. The emergence of these self-constructed television series also showed their understanding of this particular form of popular culture, and essentially served as a meta-play where Alan and Anna Beth demonstrated concepts they learned about video-making through the toy characters they were manipulating. However, the children did not view their impromptu TV shows seriously (unlike the short films based on *Scary Stories*), and never attempted to edit them. That said, they took evident pleasure in watching and re-watching each recorded episode on camera, delighting in their own abilities to invent story lines and create unpredictable comedic situations with popular characters.

Yet another example of popular culture appropriation we witnessed emerge during our research had no direct connection to the previous two instances, but instead developed out of play between Alan and another friend of his who visited him outside of our movie camp time. Together they made a video that mimicked the Top 10 List format often seen on talk shows, performing on camera as both talk show hosts/commentators as well as actors. When Anna

Beth saw the footage, she was eager to make similar video sketches with Alan, and the children went on to produce a few videos in this format, which included playful mockeries of a few popular celebrities and the dating website Match.com (which we discuss in the subsequent sections of our article). Overall, we observed that all aforementioned popular culture sources provided a major creative platform for our research participants' video-making. Their appropriation of popular culture texts and artifacts led them to develop such effective representational strategy as parody, and triggered the transgressive gender play that helped them explore different gender roles via manipulating action figures and cross-dressing. Furthermore, their adaptation of the TV show and Top 10 formats also helped them gain a better understanding of how popular representations are being created, and therefore expanded their horizons as mindful and critical new media producers.

### **Parody**

Simon Dentith (2000) defines parody is a "cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (p. 9); while Gerald Genette (cited in Willett, 2009) clarifies that parodic response involves a transformation of the original text executed in a playful manner (as opposed to travesty, which transforms text in a satirical way, and pastiche, which is essentially an imitation of the original). Parody, then, can be placed somewhere in between the continuum of imitation – which celebrates a particular practice, narrative, or artifact – and satire – which involves an explicit critique of the original (Willett, 2009). When engaging with the new media on their own terms (both within and outside of the classroom), children and youth often produce playful mockeries of popular public figures, representations, and narratives (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Duncum, 2009; Grace & Tobin, 1998). As Paul Duncum (2009) argues, parodic practices are an essential part of children's culture that tend to undermine and transgress the established social order constructed by adults.

Parody was a central strategy discovered by Alan and Anna Beth during their video-making. Even with Alan's determination to film the *Scary Stories* as close to the original material as possible, Anna Beth's acting transgressions quickly led the team to pleurably embrace making "bloopers" that later comprised a considerable part of edited footage in two of the three films. The very first blooper was created (although never used in the edited film) while we were filming "The Bride," their first fully-completed story adaptation from the book. In one of the final scenes, where Anna Beth's character (the bride) has accidentally gotten locked in a chest (represented by a suitcase) while playing hide and seek and dies of starvation, Anna Beth plotted a parodic scene while Olga and Alan were out of the room doing costume preparations. She went into the kitchen, grabbed an apple, and zipped herself back into the suitcase in preparation for filming. When Olga, who played a maid cleaning the room, unzipped the suitcase, she discovered not merely a lifeless-looking bride's corpse, but Anna

Beth holding an apple in her mouth with her arms dramatically spread out; everyone's uproarious laughter was caught on camera. The parodic effect of the scene came from Anna Beth's playful mockery of the fact that someone may die inside the chest by mere accident, which highlighted the fictional nature of the "scary" story.

We saw the most extensive use of parody toward the end of our research project, in the celebrity videos that mimicked the Top 10 format. By the fourth week of their video-making, Alan and Anna Beth had become notably more comfortable with both acting in front of camera and our presence as adult collaborators. They also became very skillful at using props and costumes to create a particular image. In the very first video segment, they appeared as talk show hosts casually seated in armchairs in front of the camera: "Hi, it's Alan and Anna Beth. Do you know what stars bother us?" began Alan, introducing the sketch. "Marilyn Monroe, Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber, and Vanessa Hudgens," continued Anna Beth. "And here's why!" said Alan, wrapping up the introduction. The children then went on to produce video segments featuring the aforementioned celebrities. They used wigs, makeup, Halloween costumes, Alan's parents' clothing, and other props—as well as characteristic behaviors and gestures of each celebrity—as major tools for creating the parodic effect in their performances.

In the first celebrity segment, Anna Beth cross-dressed as a man with a black faux mustache wearing one of Alan's polo shirts and a beret. Her younger sister (who was visiting us that day) played the part of Marilyn Monroe in a blonde wig and a long red dress. In this very short video segment, Anna Beth-as-Frenchmen held "Marilyn Monroe" in a dramatic embrace and then demonstratively dropped her on the floor when "his" attention was turned away from the camera. Anna Beth remained in character, asking in an artificially deep-voiced, "What, Alan?" and walked away as "Marilyn" screeched upon impact. This video apparently mocked Monroe's typical media portrayal as a "girly girl" (something Anna Beth frequently spoke out against). Anna Beth also volunteered to play Lady Gaga, an already carnivalesque character, whom both children admired for her creative appearances. She exaggerated Gaga's facial expressions and gestures and turned her popular song *Telephone* into a joke about dialing the wrong phone number (see Figure 2). Anna Beth's performance went beyond the celebratory mimicry as she exaggerated Gaga's characteristic gestures even further, exposing them as fabricated and rather excessive mannerisms.





Figure 2. *Anna Beth's Lady Gaga Parody*. Video frame. July, 2010.

Justin Bieber, whom both children disliked, was parodied by Alan, with Anna Beth playing Bieber's DJ/producer mixing invisible turntables in the background (see Figure 3). In his performance, Alan emphasized the singer's feminine appearance and high-pitched voice, which then abruptly changed to a rough lower pitch that made him panic ("Noo!! I reached puberty!") and fall down in despair. Anna Beth as his DJ/producer then exclaimed, "Bieber, I'm not working with you anymore!" and left the room. This parodic sketch, therefore, seemed to challenge the temporality and perhaps even artificiality of the singer's fame.



Figure 3. *Alan's Justin Bieber Parody*. Video frame. July, 2010.

The final celebrity sketch featured Vanessa Hudgens (a teenage singer and actress who markets herself as innocent yet also seductive) played by Alan, with Anna Beth reprising her role as a DJ/producer in the background. Alan cross-dressed for this role, complete with a wig, hat, gloves, and blue silky shirt embellished with bows to tie up his sleeves. Before one of the takes (we had a few in this case to get the framing right), he also stuffed his shirt to create an illusion of breasts. He sang in falsetto and used a lot of elegant hand gestures to convey feminine appearance, and to portray a ditzy girl who forgets her lyrics and goes through a list of potential, yet humorously wrong, words and phrases (see Figure 4). Although this playful sketch obviously mocked Hudgens's rather unintelligent media image, it clearly involved not only parody of the singer but also parody of the feminine behavior in general – a hybrid act that Judith Butler (1990, 2004) defines as gender parody. According to Butler, gender parody reveals normative feminine (or masculine) behavior as a set of repetitive, stylized enactments and gestures that are socially and culturally constructed and learned. We saw this occasional collision of parody and gender play manifesting itself mainly via Alan's cross-dressing to play female roles, which we will discuss in greater depth in our next section.



Figure 4. Alan's *Vanessa Hudgens Parody*. Video frame. July, 2010.

### **Gender Play**

A number of researchers who have studied preadolescents from an ethnographic perspective note that 8-11-year-olds strongly associate themselves with their gender and can be rather rigid with maintaining sociocultural distinctions between boys and girls (Adler & Adler, 2001; Orr Vered, 1998; Thorne, 1993). On the other hand, they also enjoy playing with gender norms that they consider constraining or manifesting the social order constructed by adults (Ivashkevich, 2011; Paley, 1986). Because we worked with a rather unusual boy-and-girl team that required collaboration despite gender differences, we observed abundant instances when both Alan and Anna Beth transgressed the gender boundaries of typical masculine and

feminine behaviors, and challenged the rules of gender socialization that begin to strengthen in preadolescence. Furthermore, the medium of video production that required role-playing and acting out different identities also contributed to their transgressive behaviors. From the first day of our research, Anna Beth declared herself a “tom girl” who is sassy, assertive, and occasionally even physically aggressive toward boys in her school. Alan, on the other hand, exhibited some feminine behaviors like playing with his hair and elegant hand gestures, was soft-spoken and dreamy, and claimed to have a few friends who are girls. Alan’s feminine behaviors were even sometimes a point of concern for his parents, who, despite their support of his interests, worried that he may be bullied by his male peers as he moves on to middle school.

We observed one of the major episodes of gender transgression at the very beginning of our research, during Anna Beth’s doll play that was video-recorded by Alan. She had brought a number of dolls with her on that day, including two Barbies and a Ken doll that belong to her younger sister, as well as two Liv dolls of her own (another popular toy brand similar to Barbie, but with flexible joints, changeable wigs, and a more youthful look). She noted that she dislikes Barbie but enjoys playing with Liv dolls because they are “cooler” and “less girly.” Settling down on the bedroom rug, she began her very boisterous impromptu play by animating two Barbie dolls, abruptly crossing the boundaries of normative feminine behavior and venturing into the realm of adult sexuality:

Once upon a time there were two Barbies. One was called Barbie Boobs and the other one was called Vanessa. They were gay... until [she chuckles] a man called Kent came along. They [Barbie Boobs and Vanessa] were kissing, but when Vanessa peeked out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kent... So Vanessa threw down Barbie Boobs and went out with Kent.

Anna Beth’s narrative took a more normative turn for a while, then slipped once again into the gray area of transgressive gender performance. As Vanessa started going out with Kent, she demanded that he carry her on his back, and after Kent dropped her off, he went to see his “ex-girlfriend” in the “Liv Doll Land.” He took his ex-girlfriend on a date, carrying her in his arms, running into further successions of “ex-ex-girlfriends,” taking each one out in turn. Eventually, the original ex-girlfriend discovered his plot and smacked and body-slammed him for cheating. The story culminated as all of Kent’s ex-girlfriends went “out to dinner,” ran into Kent, and made a violent dog-pile on top of him with Barbie Boobs soon asking to join their “Tug-o-War game” called “Kill Kent.”

This doll performance was clearly intended for Alan, who held the camera and periodically reacted with giggling and even once intervened with some commentary (“That was caught on

camera!”), showing his slight discomfort with Anna Beth’s story line. He seemed to sympathize with the male character and interjected some of Kent’s lines, including several moaning sounds when Kent was slapped or body-slammed. Through her play, Anna Beth took an opportunity to strengthen her own image as a powerful, assertive, and cool “tom girl” who is eager to get physical and who has little respect for boys, who she sees as mean and untrustworthy. She was also unafraid to play and experiment with adult gender roles, even with two adult researchers present in the room.

Alan, on the other hand, was rather cautious engaging in the boundary-crossing gender play at first. During our first two meetings, he maintained that he was not interested in dressing up or playing with dolls. However, Anna Beth was well-aware of his very creative and feminine-looking Halloween outfits, like the Ice Zone costume which he himself designed the previous year and which consisted of a purple gown and long wig embellished with plastic icicles and snowflakes. In one of our preliminary brainstorming conversations about one of the *Scary Stories* that we never actually filmed (“The White Satin Evening Gown”), Alan took evident pleasure in imagining what the story’s titular gown would look like, but when Anna Beth suggested that he could actually dress up to play the main female role, he did not feel comfortable about it:

- Anna Beth: Maybe you should use your Ice Zone dress?  
 Alan: Uh-uh, that has... no. I don’t wear dresses.  
 Anna Beth: You said it looked like a dress, and it looked like you were a girl.  
 Alan: Oh yeah, we have... I’m not a girl!  
 Anna Beth: Aw!  
 Alan: (decisively) I’m not playing the part of a girl!  
 Anna Beth: Ye, well, you had long, white hair and I couldn’t tell the difference! You were... you had long, white hair with snowflakes [omitted material].  
 Olga: Hold on, what’s wrong with playing a girl? I played a boy when I was your age, and I was a prince...  
 Alan: Fine!  
 Olga: ...in a tale. I loved it! (laughs)  
 Alan: I’ll tell you the rest [of “The White Satin Evening Gown”].  
 Anna Beth: I was a president! In a play.  
 Olga: Really? That’s cool.  
 Alan: How ‘bout, um... [omitted] I’ll tell you, um, “The White Satin Evening Gown,” to get the idea.



With our positive encouragement, as well as given the demands of the video-making process that required role-playing, Alan gradually grew more open to the idea of trying on different identities, including female roles. At first, he enjoyed helping Anna Beth prepare for her bride's role by choosing and arranging her dress, brushing her hair, and embellishing it with a small cocktail umbrella. When we needed more dresses and wigs for filming, he took charge of finding them in his parents' closet. He also enjoyed brushing, styling, and trying on the wigs in between our filming sessions. By the time we started working on a second *Scary Story* adaptation, "Oh, Susanna!", Alan was ready to play his first female role as the titular roommate, enthusiastically donning a wig and using high-pitched voice and ample feminine gestures. This role was then followed by his other female performances as a Goth girl in the "Top 10 Reasons Not to Go on Match.com" sketch (which he later erased and which deserves a separate discussion in our following section on self-representation); a business woman in "The Ghost with Bloody Fingers"; and Vanessa Hudgens in the celebrity episodes. When playing the last two roles, he experimented with his female costumes more freely by wearing not only wigs but also dresses, hats, and gloves. In his collaborative doll play with Anna Beth, Alan also became apparently more open to gender experimentation toward the end of our movie camp, often playing the role of Barbie in a few of the video-recorded impromptu play sketches.

While Anna Beth was completely unafraid of enacting masculine traits in both her video-recorded doll play and short film roles, Alan's crossing of gender boundaries when acting in front of camera was a gradual process that required a safe and non-judgmental environment. Some researchers observe that masculine behaviors such as tomboyism are generally tolerated in younger girls until they reach puberty, which gives them some space to play and experiment with their identities (Halberstam, 1998; Jones, 2002). By contrast, the sociocultural expectations placed on boys are much more rigid and often limited to displays of physical strength, immediate action, and emotional toughness (Newkirk, 2002) that can stigmatize those boys who are artistically inclined. Hence, our movie camp provided both children (but particularly Alan) with a safe space to experiment with gender identities that seemed to be altogether liberating, empowering, and entertaining.

### **Managing Self-representations**

Contemporary children are bombarded by media portrayals that are almost exclusively created and managed by adults, including those that present children in a particular way. From toy-like naked babies pictured in the natural environment by photographer Anne Geddes, to a group of pink-dressed girls happily playing with Barbie in a TV advertisement, to rebellious underachiever Bart in *The Simpsons* TV show—these representations of children reflect adult fantasies about children and childhood rather than children's own views of themselves (Buckingham, 2000). Digital video provides a great outlet for children to respond to the flood

of representations they encounter in the media, as well as construct and manage how they view and want to present themselves to others. From more structured video appropriations of the *Scary Stories* scripts to impromptu doll play sketches, Alan and Anna Beth were able to both master their own representations via the specific roles and characters they sought to portray as well as become more aware of how others see them. They were able to observe, manipulate, and rework their fictional identities by taking on a variety of roles: actor, director, editor, and audience.

We observed three major ways in which the video medium was used by our participants: as a tool to revisit their own representations via re-watching; as a way to exercise self-censorship via deleting undesirable footage; and as a means to constructing deliberate aesthetic effects in their representations via editing. Both Alan and Anna Beth were fascinated by repeatedly watching the clips they had recorded of themselves on camera, most of which they never edited. They particularly enjoyed revisiting the transgressive moments of their gender play as well as humorous and parodic acting slippages. Through this seemingly trivial exercise, they appeared to gain an increasing awareness of how their self-representations are being constructed and how images function as a tool for projecting a particular identity.

Alan's assertion that "[he is] not a girl!" reflects his desired self-portrayal that he not be misinterpreted as feminine, particularly when working in collaboration with Anna Beth. Initially, he avoided wearing a dress or a wig because he felt that they would weaken his self-image. It was only after Olga and Anna Beth shared experiences of playing male roles that the dresses and wigs became part of the cinematic and theatrical ethos rather than symbols of femininity, this allowed Alan to embrace them as part of the film-making process and overcome the fear that dressing as a woman would be a misrepresentation of his identity as a boy. Similarly, Anna Beth's constant rejection of the hyper-feminine world of "girly girls" in her daily talk and actions, as well as her rambunctious doll play on camera, was her projected image of the "tom girl" she wanted to appear as in the context of a movie camp. Though we observed her occasionally enjoying, or at least being curious about, traditional feminine behaviors such as dressing up and trying on makeup, she would often quickly revert back to her tough girl attitude to maintain the image that she wanted to project both on and off camera. Importantly, even if the roles and characters that both Anna Beth and Alan performed on camera conveyed fictional and highly embellished identities, these constructed self-representations were closely related to and functioned as extensions of their ordinary selves.

Deleting the footage was yet another significant marker that indicated our participants' awareness and control of their own representations, although it happened on just a few occasions. The most memorable episode was Alan's deletion of his two parodic skits titled "Top 10 Reasons Not to Go on Match.com," a prominent example of gender parody that

involved cross-dressing (see section on gender play). He planned and executed both skits together with his male neighbor of a similar age who visited him on a few occasions, focusing on two different scenarios in which using an online dating site turned disastrous. Although these episodes involved impromptu acting, prior to filming Alan reminded his friend that he had to speak in a higher voice in addition to wearing a dress. In the first scenario, the boys acted out how “you might get signed up with a total idiot.” Alan’s friend played the role of a “total girly girl” who excessively fawns over “her” date, played by Alan. “Oh, you’re so cute! Come here, cutieeee!” the “girly girl” squealingly exclaimed, while pinching “her” date’s cheek from across the table. Alan’s character responded with a firm, “No thanks.” The second scenario showed the pitfalls of getting matched with “a total criminal,” where Alan played the perennial “Goth girl” character who displayed “what [she] stole from the bank” to her Internet date, resulting in a water bottle pepper-spraying in the restaurant booth.

While seemingly happy with these sketches at the time, at the next session Alan deleted most of the clips on his camera before Olga began her routine uploading of the footage to the computer. He was unable to articulate why he was dissatisfied with the footage, but from our systematic observations we can argue that his self-censorship may have two major reasons. First, because he knew that the footage may go public and be later watched by adults, including us as researchers, he wanted to make sure that his own (as well as his friend’s) transgressive gender play is not misread as inappropriate, particularly due to the mature topic of the skits. He was previously very keen to notice potentially risky representations (like in the case of Anna Beth’s doll scenario with two “gay” Barbies when he cautiously warned her that “This was caught on camera!”). Furthermore, Alan repeatedly disliked when his work appeared “too silly” and not professional enough to be considered a serious project. On several other occasions, he deleted short video segments that contained Anna Beth’s playful experimentations with the camera that she intended as a joke:

Alan: Don’t! You’re... Stop that!

Anna Beth: [unintelligible protests]

Samantha: Don’t delete the videos!

Alan: She keeps on like messing—she’s messing up the camera.

Anna Beth: I wanna see it!

Samantha: No, don’t delete it!

Alan: [unintelligible protests] They’re just gags! That’s not the one!

Anna Beth: I wanna see it!

Alan: But it... that wasn’t the one.

These instances demonstrate that censorship of their own representations, as well as representations created by peers, is an important tool that allows children to be in control of



their self-image and how they want to appear to others.

Yet another critical element of the video medium that our participants explored was editing some of the footage using a popular iMovie application (although the time spent editing was significantly shorter than the process of video-making). We observed Alan and Anna Beth working together to collaboratively edit three *Scary Stories* book adaptations and making important aesthetic decisions on how to enhance both visual representations and the narratives. For instance, in editing their very first film, “The Bride,” they worked on adding an opening credits sequence, including creating a name for their production company, to give it a more professional appearance that mimicked the traditional film medium. They also worked on deciding what particular font typefaces and title screen backgrounds to use in order to convey a particular emotional effect to the viewer. When choosing a font, they initially debated whether a “gothic” or a “vampire” style of typeface was best to convey the film’s atmosphere. But after eventually selecting the font that looked similar to blood splatters, they unanimously agreed that it should be red in order “to make it look like it was written in blood.” There was also a long debate regarding the background screen for “The Bride’s” title, with Anna Beth suggesting a solid red because “it looked like blood” and Alan insisting on the “starry night sky” because it was “eerie.” However, Alan was concerned about the red as an aesthetic choice. “I’m just worried about people walking up to me and saying ‘that didn’t make sense,’” he argued, and Anna Beth eventually agreed (see Figure 5). Adding specific sounds to enhance the narrative and dramatic atmosphere was another important thing that the children worked on. For example, they added the squeaking noise of the opening door to emphasize a sudden ghost’s appearance from the closet and an ambient sound to emphasize the hotel clerk’s explanation “It is haunted” while handing the room key to visitors in “The Ghost with the Bloody Fingers.”



Figure 5. *Stylized Title of “The Bride.”* Video frame. July, 2010.

Through the editing process, our research participants gained an important understanding of how visual representations (particularly films and TV shows) are being constructed and manipulated by the producers who make deliberate aesthetic decisions that enhance the script and generate a particular emotional response from the audience. Their mimicry of these decisions brought a more polished look to their productions, making them appear as a legitimate art that can be publicly shared, as opposed to a more casual reviewing of video footage on the Flip camera. Anna Beth was particularly interested in sharing their edited work with other peers on YouTube because a few of her friends also posted their videos there; this, however, never happened due to parental concerns regarding privacy. Both children also felt enthusiastic about hosting a movie night for their peer neighbors, but because we were not able to finish editing all of the films in the allotted time, this plan has not yet been executed. Nevertheless, the very idea of sharing their work with others was the major driving force behind the editing process of carefully crafting self-representations, which enhanced our participants’ sense of accomplishment as producers, script writers, directors, and actors in their own right. Much like Laura Trafi-Prats (2012) who worked with a group of urban preadolescents on making video self-portraits, we found that Alan and Anna Beth “used this opportunity of self-representation to carefully stage their subjectivities in relational ways to be encountered by others, connected, and shared” (p. 131).

### **Final Thoughts and Classroom Implications**

The four interrelated themes that emerged during our research (i.e., appropriating popular culture texts, parody, gender play, and managing self-representations) highlight the benefits of

children's collaborative video-making, which blurs the boundaries between consumption and production and positions children as visible players on the cultural scene. The process of video-making invites reworking and transforming popular products and narratives, thereby claiming ownership of these artifacts, as well as practicing creative skills as script writers, producers, and actors. It also offers a more embodied and engaging path to developing a critical understanding of the new media and its strategies and dominant ideologies. For example, our research participants' parodic performances and transgressive gender acts functioned as affective, embodied disruptions of the popular consumer scripts and characters and restrictive cultural norms, disruptions that are hard to achieve via the classroom dialogue alone. Also of great importance was our participants' involvement in crafting, staging, and controlling their own representations. Because the media industry is almost exclusively owned and managed by adults, children rarely have an opportunity to contribute to (as well as disrupt) the flow of imagery. Only recently, with the proliferation of YouTube and other social networking sites, have media produced by children and youth gained public visibility, but they are often viewed as mere play not worthy of serious attention. Nonetheless, even in the case of our study where children did not publicly share their videos, they still felt empowered by the process of creating and managing their own representations.

Admittedly, not all of Alan and Anna Beth's playful video-making in the home environment is transferable to the classroom. Children's unrefined, ambiguous art practices outside of school are often at odds with the structured, standards-driven school curriculum. Some educators even argue that bringing them into the school culture can co-opt and compromise the very nature of children's unsolicited creative pursuits that are mainly driven by transgressive pleasures (Wilson, 2005). While we indeed cannot picture our participants' impromptu doll play sketches in the context of school (as they originated from and belong to the informal and intimate world of the bedroom), their video adaptations of *Scary Stories* and even some of the parodies/mockeries of popular celebrities can be imagined taking place in the art classroom that centers around the principle of "playful pedagogy" (Buckingham, 2003; Duncum, 2009). The idea of playful (or post-critical) pedagogy that advocates teaching not about but *through* popular culture, was initially developed by British media educators and further reaffirmed by one of the founders of VCAE<sup>2</sup>, Paul Duncum. Its proponents believe that effective media education has "to engage directly with young people's emotional investment in the media and with their sense of agency" via the self-reflexive media production (Buckingham, 2003, p. 5), as opposed to a teacher-directed, abstract analysis of popular narratives and artifacts. In the playful pedagogy classroom, the students are asked to create

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<sup>2</sup> VCAE is a common abbreviation that stands for Visual Culture Art Education.

their own response to the popular texts they enjoy (just what Alan and Anna Beth did at our movie camp), which leads them to think more deeply and reflexively about the original as well as gain a first-hand understanding of how media texts are produced and marketed. Importantly, student-generated forms of playful critique such as parody or spoof are often welcomed in such classrooms, as they are considered valid forms of critical thought (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Grace & Tobin, 1998). Within this approach, however, critical thinking is understood as a complex, affective, and *lived* engagement with a particular artifact or idea, rather than an impartial, rational judgment.

Furthermore, we believe that the new media-based practices are even more important in the context of public schools than the home environment, because they can help students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who have limited or no access to new media and technologies at home, become active producers (and not only consumers) of media culture. Our research participants, who come from the middle class families, demonstrated a keen understanding and fluency with new media and technologies precisely because of the support they have in their homes. We see this unequal new media participation as a significant creativity gap. Contemporary children and youth increasingly use digital video, photography, and social networking sites as a tool for artistic expression and building creative peer communities that help them grow as thriving and mindful players in today's media-saturated culture. By bringing new media practices to the art classroom, we can help every student become an active contributor to our participatory culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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