

# Self-Disclosure As a Political Strategy in Confessional Times

Raun, Tobias *Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube*. New York: Routledge 2016 (228 pages)

**WITH OUT ONLINE:** *Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube* media and trans scholar Tobias Raun contributes to the expanding field of trans studies with one of the first studies of trans vlogging (video blogging). *Out Online* takes its departure in what Raun describes as a broader cultural shift toward an increased trans visibility, in popular culture, mainstream media, scholarly work, and participatory media platforms like YouTube.

Raun stresses the need for more empirically based studies in the field of trans studies, and the basis for *Out Online* is fieldwork, done as part of his PhD project, in the form of extensive nethnography, following eight trans vloggers. The study also relies on semistructured interviews with five of the vloggers. Raun uses what he calls a rhizomatic method of jumping from vlog to vlog through links, suggested videos, references, etcetera. Vloggers are selected based on criteria that favor perseverance and dedication to the format of vlogging, and focus has been put on those that have posted extensively on transitioning as a theme.

The first chapter, "Trans Meets Screen Media," sets the stage for the empirical study with its focus on stereotypes and common narratives

in mainstream media, medical research, and practice. A broad picture is sketched with both historical and contemporary examples spanning from the pathologization by sexology and psychiatry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that resulted in the insidious inversion theory, to modern popular culture and films like *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), and *Transamerica* (2005). In dialogue with trans scholars like Susan Stryker and Jay Prosser, Raun discusses how tropes like “the deceptive transsexual” and “the pathetic transsexual” need to be accounted for in studying trans subjectivities since they often are the only representation of trans experiences around. The fleshing out of trans stereotypes, functions as contextualization to the vloggers’ self-expressions, since they actively negotiate the tropes, but simultaneously it sketches the complexity of cishnormativity. Raun does not use the concept *cishnormativity* in his study; however, it seems to be the effects of cishnormativity – a system of discourses and material practices that uphold the assumption that all humans can be divided into either of two binary categories in terms of sex and gender and that gender mirrors sex – that he describes. When Raun points out that although trans narratives have become more visible in mainstream media this does not necessarily mean that a democratization has occurred. He shows that the technics by which cishnormativity is sustained is not limited to brute force in the form of transphobic violence or stereotypical representation, but can be much more elusive and even at first seem affirming. The description of how the autobiographic imperative has had huge impact on how trans people have had to navigate both media appearances and medical encounters – expanding on one’s own life story as a private universe and never mentioning the structural context of discrimination, hate and marginalization – also describes one of the core functions of cishnormativity, the stabilizing of the assumed neutral position of cisgender people. Non-trans readers or viewers can be moved by the trans person’s courageous fight without ever having to question their own privileges within cishnormativity.

The sensitive reading of the empirical material is the backbone of the study, and Raun’s thick description of the vloggers, expanded in chapter 2, “Looking Man Enough,” and chapter 3, “Sisters Are Doin’ It for

Themselves’,” serves the purpose of letting the vloggers’ stories “breathe” (Raun 2016, 12). In consideration of ethical aspects of studying intimate, personal narratives Raun treats the vloggers as experts or “folk theorists” (9) and develops an extensive discussion on how his own identity as a trans man has had an impact on the fieldwork and analysis, blurring the distinction between insider (research subject) and outsider (researcher).

Chapters 2 and 3 aim to “enrich the vloggers’ self presentations” (19), and hence go into details about the content in their respective YouTube channels, documenting audiovisual as well as narratological aspects of their material. Themes like transitioning, access to medical care, self-medication, sexual identity, relation to and communication with viewers, and experiences of discrimination and marginalization structure the chapters. They display polyphonic narratives, from using humor as a tool to deconstruct stereotypical tropes, to challenging the construction of the respectable trans subject and creating alternative ideals of beauty in an image-centered world. Following Julia Serano, Raun focuses on so called “conditional cissexual privilege” (54), concretized in the vloggers’ discussions about exposure to violence and their negotiation of safety in terms of choosing if and when to come out as trans. He also explores economical austerity as an effect of cisnormative bureaucratic and medical systems, and argues for depathologization as a necessity in combating economic discrimination of trans people.

In chapters 4, “Screen Births,” 5, “DIY Therapy,” and 6, “Web 2.0,” Raun explores the political potential in mediation of trans narratives. Stating that vlogs compensate for marginalization and invisibility in the non-virtual everyday, Raun describes how the vloggers negotiate the hypervisibility of the format and weigh personal drawbacks against the possibility to reach out to other trans people and to educate non-trans viewers. Vlogging is framed as a political act, politicizing the personal through sketching the cisnormative nation as a background for their life narratives.

Raun discusses affect as a mobilizing force to social action, and challenges the idea that the trans vlogs could be reduced to mere expressions of a foucauldian culture of confession. Arguing that we ought to

read the vlogs like testimonials, he stresses the communal, didactic, and therapeutic aspects of the vlogs, creating coherent narratives through technologies of the self. Given the fact that Raun is relying on a Foucauldian analysis of biopower and discipline in other chapters, I expected a more elaborated discussion about subjectivation processes and hence a deeper analysis of the conditions for and effects of cisnormativity. Can we for example understand trans vlogging as outside of cisnormativity?

I also wish Raun would have developed the analysis of why his material shows that the YouTube trans community is fairly homogenic in terms of race and class. One of the vloggers – the only black trans woman in the material – describes her experiences of race stereotyping and blunt racism in what Raun with Sara Ahmed characterizes as a “sea of whiteness.” These discussions harken back at a discussion in the introductory chapter about the selection process for the material. Perhaps the selection criteria underlined this whiteness bias? If so, what does that mean?

However, these are minor remarks on a much-needed study that with its empirical depth and theoretical ingenuity is a very valuable contribution to gender studies, trans studies and media studies alike.

**ERIKA ALM**  
**UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG**