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YouTube Review: Imagining Literacy in the Digital Landscape

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Digital artists have created a slew of literacy-themed texts using various combinations of photography, video, music, and writing. Creators of such forms regularly post these clips to online video-sharing sites like YouTube.com, where they provide audiences with diverse messaging about the significance and value of literacy. This review examines four such clips: “Literacy Empowers (Illiteracy Awareness Documentary),” “Bookwise Quotes: The Importance of Literacy,” “Reading Kills (Protesting Literacy at the RNC),” and “21st Century Literacy.” Each one addresses a different dimension of literacy and has been accessed several thousands of times. Whether these texts achieve their disparate purposes remains an open question, but what they argue and how they articulate their messages reveal how literacy is no less contested or open to (mis)appropriation in cyberspace than in more traditional cultural domains. While each begins with an implicit acknowledgement of the unrealized promises of literacies, none offer a coherent response to the enormous and asymmetrical challenges of creating critically literate global citizens.

“Literacy Empowers (Illiteracy Awareness Documentary)”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfQEC029caw>

Compiled by Singapore American School (SAS) high school students and posted to Youtube.com in 2007, the video documentary “Literacy Empowers” serves a message saturated with heavy if not lethal doses of pathos. The clip aims to raise awareness of illiteracy in Asian countries among SAS students and global audiences by promoting the construction of a “literacy wall” at their school. Apparently, the juxtaposition of still shots and short video clips scored to the tender ballad “Mad World” and narrated by a third-grader has led to rather remarkable success among global audiences: the clip has registered 14,000-plus hits from 2007-2009.

“Literacy Empowers” defines a literate person according to the United Nations standards: able to read and write a short statement about that person’s everyday life. Proponents of more critical approaches to literacy strenuously object to this starting point. If the person’s short statement about what she did that day leaves out an awareness of who controls her labor and what structures her meaning-making practices, then this person may not be more than a barely functional literate, a pawn in the economic schemes of others. In fact, the clip posits illiteracy as inextricably linked with poverty and underdevelopment. Images of children—sometimes smiling innocently, often bantering with

cameras, frequently playing with one another, and attending primitive schools with rudimentary supplies—suggest that money, development, and cleaner schools could give them the future they deserve. India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan are among the culprits specifically named in the text, and these countries also face condemnation for shockingly high illiteracy rates among girls. Developing countries are clearly on the hook while multinational corporations and global markets driven by the desire for cheaper products escape representational indictment.

After a two-minute onslaught of still shots and videos of children at work or hungry on the mean streets of Asian cities—spliced with PowerPoint-style soundbytes documenting the disproportionate illiteracy in Asia and scored to Western pop music about teenage angst—the clip prompts audiences with the question, “what does it all mean?” Here, “Literacy Empowers” resorts to a simple, didactic affirmation of its title by citing Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco: “Think about it: Every educated person is not rich, but almost every educated person has a job and a way out of poverty.” At this point, one might be too emotionally exhausted to clarify whether the context should be post-Katrina New Orleans or the caste-bound Indian subcontinent, and whether this difference matters. Surely it does, but merchants of hope like Blanco or other public leaders have local agendas fueled by provincial and national political ideologies. Why does she belong in this text, and by what authority does her rhetoric apply to the context of Bangladesh or Bhopal?

Some of the cynicism expressed here comes from the impetus to juxtapose art and image willy-nilly across cultures and contexts. “Literacy Empowers” may well have ended up raising scads of cash and publicity for a thought-provoking literacy wall on the SAS campus and even shaken thousands among its global internet audiences from their ignorant bliss. But assuming for purposes of argument that the high school students and others have gotten the message and infected the grassroots with a desire to teach sweatshop graduates to read, shouldn’t we also be asking, now what? The emotional singularity of “Literacy Empowers” makes for a moving message but actually conspires against closer examination of the forces that have created the disparities in wealth and literate capacities of people in Asian societies. While it may be tempting to ascribe this failure to the medium—and visual rhetoric does tend to sacrifice nuance, context, and interconnectedness for emotional impact—such a critique might be more than this particular digital artist was called upon or equipped to perform.

“Bookwise Quotes: The Importance of Literacy”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwDCuNTHddI>

This “high literacy” slideshow set to classical music illustrates a simple and sometimes underappreciated maxim: No law, code, or principle of file-sharing precludes the use of new media technology for old media nostalgia. Enter “Bookwise Quotes: The Importance of Literacy,” a five-minute montage of illuminating and pedantic quotes about books and reading, mixed with images

of intellectually edified and mostly white people of all ages cozying up with the print pages they love to love. Perhaps one day in the future, we will all unplug long enough to remember or discover the vanishing wisdom on literacy from canonical titans like Socrates, Erasmus, John Milton, Francis Bacon, Ben Franklin, and Mark Twain. If not, “Bookwise Quotes” at least offers the abridged version.

The clip moves from still shot to quote to express the joy and necessity of reading. Erasmus most nobly and romantically prefers books to food and shelter, and Socrates argues for the enduring benefits of knowledge over the ephemeral acquisition of wealth. In seemingly unintended contrast, quotes from Ben Franklin and others traffic in financial metaphors to promote learning and reading as an investment. In light of “Literacy Empowers” and its quest for global social justice, the words of British colonialist and man of letters Thomas B. Macaulay deliver what may be the most delicious irony of the compilation: “My early and invincible love of reading...[cut to a staged photo of a baby reading a book] I would not exchange for all the riches of India [cut to photo of a treasure chest filled with gold coins].” The Anglo-American successors of Macaulay who help to manage the flow of multinational labor and capital in Asia apparently share few such qualms. In “Bookwise Quotes,” the message is clear: loving books is essential to a life worth living. Yet somehow this sentimental slideshow fails to demonstrate how a love of reading and a passion for cultural literacy translates into any meaningful sort of socio-political change.

“Reading Kills (Protesting Literacy at the RNC)”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riWyOgt6j1U>

If the promise of a highly literate and thus richer life does not convince audiences to change their facile ways, there is always parodic nihilism. Perhaps the young men responsible for “Reading Kills (Protesting Literacy at the RNC)” were served a few too many doses of “Bookwise Quotes” in the course of their formative years in US schools and culture. The clip, which features under three minutes of video footage by a street comedy troupe called Hammerkatz, was taken during their romp about the streets of New York during the 2004 Republican National Convention. They exhort people they meet (and accost) to stop reading. Now. Or else they will die. In the recent traditions of guerrilla comedy popularized by Sasha Baron Cohen and others, the butt of the joke can be anyone, which in this case includes Republican convention attendees, left-wing protesters, media scribes, and other street characters swept up in the commotion of American political theater. All are treated to variations on a theme: you’re wasting your time by reading. They carry signs with written words, which they insist are done with an awareness of their own irony. One personal favorite is the placard that implores readers to “Wait for the Movie.”

In a crowded and chaotic public forum, the Hammerkatz have found their way, and it is a path to inanity. Who can afford the luxury of such cultural irreverence on the eve of an election that provided the country with a second

term for George W. Bush? The perpetrators are unsurprisingly young, articulate white men whose performance may well make you laugh the first several times through the clip. Could be they do not stand to lose too much by disavowing themselves of the literate activity they mock.

“21st Century Literacy”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9ZRDRPqoXo>

The text for this video comes from a report entitled “Beyond the Three Rs: Voter Attitudes toward 21st Century Skills.” A not-for-profit educational group provides the funding and ideological infrastructure to lobby for research and policy changes that will lead to wider and smarter distribution of technologies in the classrooms of US schools, colleges, and universities. The aforementioned report was funded by educational stakeholders with a vested interest in supporting the proliferation of technology in the schools of tomorrow, such as the National Education Association and Blackboard. Unlike the texts reviewed earlier, “21st Century Literacy” implores US audiences to complicate their notions of literacy by incorporating new media technology into teaching practices. Like “Literacy Empowers” and “Bookwise Quotes,” the clip uses multiple shots of children to make its point about how the future of US society depends on how we configure what a young person needs to be literate.

The text begins with the following question: “What does it mean to be literate in the 21st century?” and it follows with its own series of textual and visual responses. Mainly, “21st Century Literacy” posits that people do not communicate the way they used to; global audiences can be reached instantly with new technologies, and failure to respond to these new conditions will leave US youth unprepared for life in a globalized world. From here out, the black-and-white color scheme, modular interior office landscapes, and smiling faces of successfully wired youth work to offset its underlying scare tactics. Yet for all its hyperbole and emphasis on technology, the clip seems to speak directly to the people most likely to access the message. It claims uncontroversially that “visual, aural, and textual elements—in combination—are the norm.... Literacy requires fluency of each element. To be literate requires rapid decoding of print and non-print text—pictures, music, sound, and written text.” All true, at least partially. But doesn’t literacy also mean being able to decode not just the diverse media used to construct the text, but also the context, the rhetorical situation, and the materiality of its production? In its defense, this clip urges engagement and a tantalizingly rhetorical approach to literacy when it claims that “the language of 21st century literacy encourages interaction with an audience.” But this point gets dropped no sooner than it is raised, in favor of data taken from voters surveyed about their desires for tomorrow’s youth.

According to the clip, US voters want to see their school children better trained to “compete in a global economy.” Americans believe children should be taught “critical thinking and problem-solving skills, computer and technology skills, and communication and self-direction skills” lest our country lose out to

its competition in global markets. But is that really the main reason why we need to change our approach to literacy?

Just as the earlier clips suffer from myopic worldviews, “21st Century Literacy” could use some helpful reminders that we need to help as many people as possible find communities worth living for before we ask everyone involved in education to regroup, retrain, and retool. Besting global competitors, after all, may mean doing nothing to address the global poverty and illiteracy so pointedly delivered in the rhetoric of “Literacy Empowers.” The Hammerkatz comedy troupe may not win high marks among earnest opponents of illiteracy, but at least their efforts invite audiences to question what exactly we are supposed to be reading for. Noting the exigencies of new media literacy provides a powerful rationale for new approaches to learning. But if this change ultimately cannot be sold with arguments better than, “we have no choice...this is the future, after all,” then that future may not be as liberating as its celebrants on YouTube.com like to promise.