

The Star Wars Kid and the Bedroom Intruder

Panopticon or Subversion?

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The Star Wars Kid

With its relatively brief history the Internet already has a history with its own historical personages. One of these is the herostratically famous Star Wars Kid. A YouTube search of “Star Wars Kid” will bring you to the 1:47 minutes-long video and also to quite a large number of video responses and remixes based on the original video (YouTube, 1). In the video you can see the Star Wars Kid performing in front of a static camera. He is wielding a golf ball retriever as if he was Darth Maul, and as if it was a light sabre from George Lucas’s Star Wars film, *The Phantom Menace* (1999). During the video his performance develops into a kind of energetic, but ungainly dance towards and away from the camera, and whenever he gets close to the camera he pauses a moment to stare aggressively into its lens. This sabre wielding dance has its culmination or rather nadir when he stumbles and nearly falls in some yellow cloth lying on the floor in the bare video studio behind him. When you are watching this video you probably experience mixed feelings. You may laugh, and then be ashamed that you did so. You may be filled with the unsympathetic feeling of Schadenfreude, and then you may feel grateful that it’s not you or one of your kids in the video and feel sorry for the Star Wars Kid.

The actual person in the video was the 14-year-old Ghyslain Raza, a student at the Saint-Joseph high school in Trois-Rivières, Quebec, Canada. He made the film in 2002 in the school's studio, but unfortunately left the video tape there. It was found some time later by another student, it was circulated among his friends, and eventually a video file of it was uploaded to the Internet April 14, 2003 (Hourdeaux, 2010). In 2006 it was estimated to have had over 900 million viewings (*BBC News*, 2006). On YouTube the number of viewings is higher than 22 million. The family of Ghyslain Raza took legal action against the families of the school students who uploaded the video and made it public. The lawsuit claimed that "Ghyslain had to endure, and still endures today, harassment and derision from his high-school mates and the public at large." And that he "will be under psychiatric care for an indefinite amount of time" (Popkin, 2007). The case was settled out of court.

What is it then that the Star Wars Kid is doing in the video? There is a pattern of repetitions in the video as a whole. There are five takes, and you may see the jump cuts between them, and between some of them you even hear the sound of the recorder button being pressed. Apart from the real sounds from his movements you may also hear the Star Wars Kid imitate sounds effects as if it was a professional movie. The action of each take is similar to one another. Basically the Star Wars Kid fights his way towards the camera twirling the imagined light sabre. As he gets near the camera his gaze meets the lens aggressively, until he stops the recording. Understood in this way the camera becomes the opponent from the film, and this opponents is vanquished, his death symbolized by the switching off of the camera.

This video with its five takes, sounds from the recorder, and the Star Wars Kid walking in and out of the frame is metafictional, and it is also an intertextual project. The Star Wars Kid reads himself into the universe of the Star Wars films by his impersonation of a Jedi Knight or a Sith Lord. Through his performance in the video and the production of it he creates a narrative, which for a moment redefines his identity, and this imagined identity is mediated in two senses: It owes its existence to the media, Lucas' films, which are the hypotexts for this video, and it is an actual media production itself. The Star Wars Kid employs the media in an intertextual way to try to understand his own identity, which is not an uncom-

mon thing to do. E.g. in his "*Creator Spiritus: virtual texts in everyday life*" Ben Bachmair has described how media texts for young people are not just a question of mimesis of life, but that the media texts become active elements in a kind of everyday poiesis, in which young people use them to create personal meaning of their everyday lives (Bachmair, 2000: pp. 115-116). Yet the camera is not a mirror in which the Star Wars Kid faces himself. The intertextual project makes the video transcend the idea of the camera as a mirror. The camera is both. It mirrors the performer and it enhances him intertextually, so that he becomes the Star Wars Kid, and not just a Canadian high school student, though obviously he is also that. The conflict between the performer and the camera may indicate that the video is also a sign of a clash between the imagined identity and the real one.

Antoine Dodson and the Bedroom Intruder

Like the Star Wars Kid Antoine Dodson's rise to Internet stardom is based on invasion of privacy. However, in his case it was in both in an involuntary and a voluntary way. In late June 2010 a house intruder allegedly attempted to rape Kelly Dodson in her bedroom in a housing project in Huntsville, Alabama, where he climbed into her bed. A local TV station (YouTube, 2) brought the news in an item that started in the traditional way with the anchor person in the studio, a map of the area, a reporter live at the scene of the crime, but then unusual interviews followed. First with Kelly Dodson herself: "I was attacked by some idiot from out here in the project.", and then a little later in the news report her brother Antoine told the interviewer that he ran to help his sister to fight off the attacker. It is at this point that the item becomes noteworthy because Antoine Dodson's personal style transgresses the genre of news broadcasting. He uses his street vernacular, is totally unimpressed by the institution of television, and his modulation and body language are like music and dance. Antoine Dodson does not speak to the interviewer, but directly and passionately into the camera, in this way first addressing the local television audience: "Well, obviously we have a rapist in Lincoln Park. He's climbin in your windows, he's snatchin your people up, tryna rape em so y'all need to hide your kids, hide your wife, and hide your husband, cuz they're rapin rrbody out here." And then he speaks to

the intruder as he gesticulates into the camera and he bends forward so that the camera distance is closer than what you would expect in an interview of this sort: "We got your t-shirt, you done left fingerprints and all. You are so dumb. You are really dumb, for real." Dodson gesticulates into the camera: "You don't have to come and confess. We're lookin for you. We gon find you. We gon find you. So you can run and tell that, homeboy!" Dodson now looks away from the camera, and the picture is mixed to the reporter, whose style is official and poses a strong contrast: "If you have any information on this crime you are urged to contact the Huntsville police department..."

The bedroom intruder news report now went viral as it was uploaded to Facebook and to YouTube 29.07.2011, so that it has more than 35 million viewings on YouTube. This news video gave birth to numerous remixes, of which The Gregory Brothers' Auto-Tune or songification version has reached the staggering number of more than 85 million viewings on YouTube (YouTube, 3) since its upload 30.07.2010, and it was the most watched video at all on YouTube in 2010 (YouTube, 4).

We have seen that The Star Wars Kid's reaction to his unintended Internet stardom was unhappiness; when Antoine Dodson accidentally became globally famous because of an intrusion into his sister's bedroom, he turned the situation into his advantage as he became an Internet entrepreneur with his own websites that sold t-shirts and other merchandise (Dodson), and with the royalties from iTunes from the Bedroom Intruder Song he has bought his family a new house as reported by *US Weekly's* Celebrity News section (*US Weekly*, 2010). Dodson has appeared on talk shows, and he has shot a reality show pilot episode for Entertainment One about his family moving from the housing project in Huntsville, Alabama to Hollywood (*TMZ*, 2011). It seems that it does not make sense after all to view the story of Antoine Dodson as an invasion of privacy. Where, on the one hand, the attempted rapist's intrusion into the Dodsons' home was a criminal offence, which with good reason provoked Antoine Dodson's flamboyant and outspoken anger, the invasion of his privacy by the media, on the other hand, became a welcome opportunity to rise socially and become a celebrity. The concept of celebrity may in itself offer an explanation why this apparent contradiction is possible.

Celebrity and Authenticity

An explanatory model of why Antoine Dodson is famous and private at the same time may be found in a comparison between the concepts of stars and celebrities. A star as known from the Hollywood film industry has become a star because of her abilities as an actress and the way this ability has been represented by her films themselves and by the marketing of them. The audience well knowing that stars are constructed in this way, may want to know the star better in the sense that we want to know the person behind the star, or as P. David Marshall puts it in his study of the concept of the modern celebrity: "What is Marilyn Monroe 'really' like? Is Paul Newman 'really' the same person as he appears in his films?" (Marshall, 1997: p. 17). A celebrity, on the other hand, does not have so strong a tie to his or her professional functions, which are perceived by the audience as what they are, textual constructions. A celebrity is the combination of textualised stardom and the demand from the audience of the authentic person that embodies the stardom. In this way authenticity is inherent in the concept of celebrity, and audience performance includes the search for signs of this authentic person, which may be like themselves, and in this way may be a figure of identification in a democratic world picture.

Antoine Dodson is nothing but authenticity out of an Alabama housing project, and he has managed to turn this authenticity into some degree of mediated stardom, too, as he has been using the invasion of his home to mediate his private world into the public world of Internet entrepreneurship and fame. Dodson signaled authenticity in his initial appearance in the media. He was not in a fiction program, but in the news, and even there he was less staged than what one might expect because he was totally unimpressed in his language and his gaze into the camera. The contrast between Dodson and the reporter is also one of linguistic style. Dodson's style can be characterized as the one Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls signifyin(g) (Gates, 1988), i.e. an elaborate, Afro-American vernacular, here with word-play, goading and insult. Dodson so to speak broke through the camera lens and the television screen with this form of direct address to the audience, so that there was the simulation of unmediated and popular communication. The Star Wars Kid with his young age, on the other hand, as most of us

could not manage the professional functions as an intertextual version of a Jedi Knight well enough; but with respect to authenticity there was another problem. As a person he was real enough, and the video recording was obviously not professionally made. Yet, though the Star Kid used the technology and media to represent himself, his representation was not as closely connected to everyday life and reality as a demand for authenticity could wish for. The video was first of all intertextual, and it was also metafictional. In this case it was a question of the media invading the privacy and reality of the person as he represented himself as a fictional character from a film, and the location of this representation was an empty video studio. The opposite was the case with Antoine Dodson. Here it was his authentic reality and his social life that invaded the media.

Panopticon

Unfortunately for the high school student now known globally as the Star Wars Kid, the recorded, private moment of self-representation was stolen and made public. The camera, which was used privately, became a surveillance camera, when his privacy was violated, and the video was broadcast on the Internet. In one sense technology is to blame, as a camera was used and not a mirror. In another, this transgression between the private and the public may be viewed in a wider cultural context, the one of the Panopticon.

The concept of the Panopticon as a metaphor for a disciplinary societal construction goes back to Jeremy Bentham's design from 1785 for a prison building where the guards could see all the prisoners. They could not see the guards, but they had the feeling of being watched all the time. The building is round, and the cells are placed in its circumference. The cells are opening through bars to the center of the building where the guard is placed in his inspection tower with a full view of each well-lit cell and its solitary inmate. This prison design permitted cheap surveillance of the inmates, and its effects were believed to discipline them. Consequentially, the function of the Panopticon prison was correctional. The concept of power is inherent in the Panopticon principle as described by Bentham: "a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example." (Ben-

tham, 1995/1791: Preface) This correctional and disciplinary principle extends beyond the prison:

No matter how different, or even opposite the purpose: whether it be that of *punishing the incorrigible, guarding the insane, reforming the vicious, confining the suspected, employing the idle, maintaining the helpless, curing the sick, instructing the willing* in any branch of industry, or *training the rising race* in the path of *education*: in a word, whether it be applied to the purposes of *perpetual prisons* in the room of death, or *prisons for confinement* before trial, or *penitentiary-houses, or houses of correction, or work-houses, or manufactories, or mad-houses, or hospitals, or schools*. (Bentham, 1995/1791: Letter 1)

It is at this point that the Panopticon principle becomes more than architectural, and it becomes a disciplinary mechanism. Surveillance and the public, but unseen gaze directed towards the individual becomes an instrument of power, and Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish - The Birth of the Prison* develops Bentham's theory into a comprehensive societal system of power and subjection to power. Foucault writes in continuation of Bentham's arguments for his architectural design, that "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, 1991/1975: pp. 202-203). Surveillance is disciplinary, and when internalized it assures the power relations of society. This is the Panopticon principle.

One may then ask how the two viral videos discussed in this article relate to the Panopticon principle, surveillance and its disciplinary mechanism. Are the recording and publication of private moments, e.g. on YouTube, disciplinary and a cog in the wheel of societal control? Like many other viral videos these two are of a transgressive nature (Christensen, 2011). The viral videos tend to disobey common thematic, narrative and receptive structures and standards. Narratologically, they are often metafictional, they may for instance foreground their own production through their poor aes-

thetic and technological level. Thematically, viral videos may ignore or transgress the border between public and private, most often in the case of forays into the intimate sphere. It is also typical of many viral videos that their communication mode is ambiguous with regard to the identity of the sender.

When it comes to the reception of viral videos the uncertainty felt about the identity of the sender of the video is paralleled by an uncertainty of how to respond to the video and its characters. Both the Star Wars Kid video and the Bedroom Intruder video are transgressive in these ways. In the case of the former, its character transgresses his identity, he becomes an intertextual construction, and he behaves as a child, though he is too old for it. In the case of the latter, the intrusion is not only into a bedroom, but the video itself transgresses the format and codes of a news program.

Are the characters of the two videos and also their audiences then disciplined, and are their audiences warned not to commit the same undisciplined actions? The answer may be found in the mixed and ambivalent reception the audience has of the videos. One may be repelled, but one may also be enjoying the videos. The YouTube comments testify to these diverse emotions in the reception of the videos. Here is a sample of comments about the Star Wars Kid: "i LOVE the part where he swings the staff", "...is this guy really serious...?", and when one commentator is less than friendly, another answers: " In case you are unaware, this simple comment can be perceived as a serious threat. Cyberbullying can have an adverse effect on peoples lives. One nice comment could have a positive impact on someones life, where comments like this do not. In the future please try to treat others with greater sensitivity and be aware that your words can cause lasting damage." (YouTube 5). And these about Antoine Dodson: "hahahaha lmfa0(: i love this dude!!! hes sooo funny! HAHahaha yall need to hide your people hide your wife hide your kids and your husband cause they rapin everyone out here!! Lol", "Vigilante justice/mockery at its best!", " HEY! i'm the rapist 8^(" and " My favorite gay person in history = Antoine Dodson" (YouTube 6). Though these uploaded videos are instances of surveillance, they are not simply Panoptic in their significance. They also celebrate the unguarded and undisciplined moment, and as the viral videos they are they show an ability to transgress the Panopticon and to be partially subversive.

Culture of Confession

The ability of these viral videos to be understood as both Panoptic and subversive with their transgressions of particularly the border between the intimately private and the public can be viewed in the light of another of Michel Foucault's concepts, namely his culture of confession as he describes it in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*. By moving the argumentation from the societal mechanisms of Foucauldian surveillance and Panopticon in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* to the search for truth and its discourses in *The Will to Knowledge* the hypothesis of this article that viral videos may be disciplinary and subversive at the same time can be tested.

In the first half of *The Will to Knowledge* (Foucault, 1990/1976: pp. 1-73) Foucault proposes a historical exposition of a double, but connected movement in Western attitudes to sexuality. During the last three hundred years sexuality on the one hand has been made into a plurality of discourses, where Foucault sees the point of departure of this development in the Christian confession, in which carnal or sexual actions and behaviour of a so-called sinful nature were given words or turned into words. Later sexuality was categorized and regarded in a societal context, e.g. in a Malthusian perspective or as conjugal sexuality – or non-conjugal, and sexuality was inscribed in the power mechanisms of society with their disciplinary measures. Sexuality also became a rational, scientific discourse, e.g. psychoanalysis in its various forms where it, perhaps as perversions, could be interpreted, again turned into words, in a search for knowledge and the truth. As it can be gathered, sexuality was not denied, hidden away or repressed, and in the will to knowledge about it, there was intertwined a lust for pleasure. Power and pleasure were combined in a perpetual spiral: "The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it." (Foucault, 1990/1976, p. 45) It is Foucault's point that power and pleasure reinforce one another in this way, and he states that since the period of the use of the religious and ritualistic use the confessional, we in the modern Western world have become "a singularly confessing society" and that "Western man has become a confessing animal" (Foucault, 1990/1976: p. 59). Types of discourses

and genres have arisen to satisfy this need: “interrogations, consultations, autobiographical narratives, letters; they have been recorded, transcribed, assembled into dossiers, published and commented on”, Foucault writes (p. 63). These discourses with their will to knowledge all share an ambition to be authentic so that the truth can be revealed. It seems tempting to update this list with new types such as the Internet social media with Facebook and YouTube, which are often based on ubiquitous smartphones, or with television genres such as talk shows or reality programs.

Conclusion: The double nature of the confession

The article about two of the most popular figures on the internet the Star Wars Kid and Antoine Dobson has used two of Michel Foucault’s theoretical concepts, the Panopticon and the confession, to explain the paradoxical nature of their fame, which is based on an invasion of their privacy. A comparison of the two has shown that their celebrity status is different after all with regard to the degree of authenticity they signal in their self-representation.

The genres of the two videos have migrated from respectively a private video and a news program into viral videos, which are often transgressive. The article has consequently discussed the question of whether the two videos and their distribution have functioned in a panoptical disciplinary way, or whether they are subversive. The answer suggested is that they are both at the same time, and the argument for this paradoxical answer is found in the double nature of the confession, so that both videos are instances of a culture of confession that both discipline and celebrate the pleasure of imagining that you a Jedi Knight or of exposing your personality in a news program. This answer can also be related to the popularity of the social media in general.

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