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## **Out of Hand: YouTube Amateurs and Professionals**

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## YouTube Amateurs and Professionals

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### Relative Differences

The video-sharing website YouTube has been dewily hailed by its admirers (and strenuously promoted by its marketing team) for democratizing the circulation of moving images. As one

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blogger and self-identified filmmaker attests in the title of his post, “The Democratization of Media” is “why [he] love[s] youtube [*sic*]” (Shea 2008); and as YouTube’s product manager has proudly declared in a press release, “One of the greatest aspects of YouTube is how it has democratized the way in which videos are discovered and promoted. [...] On any given day, a video from a top-tier content creator or an ordinary YouTube user can become the next big thing” (YouTube 2008a). But it is exactly this potential of YouTube (as a synecdoche for Web 2.0 technology more generally) to reshape the dissemination of images that has rallied its detractors, too—and with equal intensity. For example, in the polemic *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today’s Internet Is Killing Our Culture*, Silicon Valley entrepreneur-cum-pundit Andrew Keen describes a moment of literal queasiness at a 2004 business retreat sponsored by O’Reilly Media (nicknamed “FOO Camp,” for “friends of O’Reilly”), where “democratization” was the buzz word animating all conversation:

There was one word on every FOO Camper’s lips in September 2004. That word was “democratization.” [...] Media, information, knowledge, content, audience, author—all were going to be *democratized* by Web 2.0. The Internet would *democratize* Big Media, Big Business, Big Government. It would even *democratize* Big Experts, transforming them into what one friend of O’Reilly called, in a hushed, reverent tone, “noble amateurs.” [...] I had begun to feel seasick. [...] I had come to FOO Camp to imagine the future of media. [...] But my dream [...] had fallen on deaf ears; the promise of using technology to bring *more* culture to the masses had been drowned out by FOO Campers’ collective cry for democratized media. (2007:14)

As this passage and the title of the book itself make clear, Keen’s distaste for the prospect of democratized media hinges on his distinction between professionally produced creative content and its amateur equivalents (and, of course, the potential for the success of noncommercial production to erode the profits of the corporations in which he has invested). As Keen develops this distinction between amateur and professional, he equates the amateur, not surprisingly, with “mediocrity” (3), “inanity and absurdity” (5).

The criticisms of Web 2.0 that Keen advances can be all too temptingly turned against him. He laments, for instance, that the internet has “undermined our sense of what is true and what is false,” but his own unquestioning reverence for “facts” is undermined, in turn, by his willful manipulation of information about such internet icons as Wikipedia and YouTube (3). He decries the former for “perpetuating [a] cycle of misinformation and ignorance” (4), even though he misinforms his readers by failing to note that entries on the site are often vetted and include citations (or warnings for the entries that do not include citations); and he indicts the latter for “prosaic and narcissistic” content (5), even as he ignores many videos that would challenge this description. He opens himself to the same indictment by rehearsing, unimaginatively, a list of YouTube videos that renders his own account flat, and by proceeding to tell a personal narrative about his internet work that reveals his own considerable self-involvement (11–15). Ironically, Keen betrays his own “amateurism” as a writer incapable of constructing a persuasive and well-defended argument, and this irony is thickest when he attacks Wikipedia’s entry for *amateur* because it is not unilaterally negative, but allows for the complexity that might be associated—indeed, has been associated—with the word (39).

Keen’s “amateurism,” as I identify it here, belongs in scare quotes because I read against the grain of his prose precisely in order to interrogate his reductive opposition of the amateur to the professional. Indeed, his binary thinking might be productively submitted to the deconstruction performed by Marjorie Garber in *Academic Instincts* (2001), where she demonstrates convincingly

*Figure 1. (previous page) Top: Chris Crocker in the YouTube video “Leave Britney Alone!” (10 September 2007). Bottom: Seth Green parodies Crocker in the E! Entertainment Television video, also posted to YouTube, “Leave Chris Crocker Alone!” (14 September 2007). (Screen captures courtesy of Nick Salvato)*

the ways in which the terms *amateur* and *professional* “produce [...] and define each other by mutual affinities and exclusions” at the same time that they disavow—and acquire power as categories by disavowing—“the close affinity between them” (5). But Keen is an easy target, and he is worth citing less because he is subject to such a critique than because he brings into bold, even hyperbolic, relief the assumptions that color the thinking of much more subtle and responsible writers who take up the terms “amateur” and “professional.” To delimit scrutiny to those of us who engage with the subjects of theatre and performance, even a cursory glance at recent issues of our journals reveals that when we use the qualifiers “amateur” and “professional” to describe both contemporary and historical performance, we use them as though their meanings were transparent. I would submit that, in so doing, many of us repeat implicitly, and without sufficient critical distance, the premises of the American commercial theatre, where “professional” means, quite simply, theatre in which actors are paid for their work; where all Equity theatre is “professional,” but not all “professional theatre” is Equity (as in the cases of non-Equity touring companies that also pay actors, or the renowned Wooster Group); and where “professional theatres” negotiate with the Actors’ Equity Association to determine how many non-Equity actors’ contracts they will allow for particular shows.

The moment we begin to examine activity that happens outside this narrowly circumscribed field, we see how inadequately the economic distinction between amateur and professional fits other modes and models of performance. As Ruth Finnegan observes in *The Hidden Musicians* (1989), a study of local music-making in the English town Milton Keynes, “neither payment nor amount of time provides,” in the cases under consideration, “an unambiguous basis for differentiating ‘professionals’ from ‘amateurs’; the difference is at best only a relative one” (14). Importantly, that relative difference is also an affectively and politically loaded one:

The label “professional” is used [...] as an apparently objective, but in practice tendentious, description to suggest social status and local affiliation rather than just financial, or even purely musical, evaluation. [...] Thus the emotional claim—or accusation—of being either “amateur” or “professional” can become a political statement rather than an indicator of economic status. (16)

Whether in Milton Keynes, in Silicon Valley, or at any number of other sites, such densely connotative rather than strictly denotative meanings of “amateur” and “professional” cannot be escaped; and while, as Garber notes, the connotations are contingent in such a way that one term is not always conceived as the dominant or superior one (2001:5), the overwhelming tendency in the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st has been to privilege the professional, especially in the evaluation of performance practices. In myriad cases, the designation “professional” has operated as an exclusionary principle and tactic that aims to delegitimize certain performance idioms along the lines of race, class, and gender, among others. (Why is the event that launched the careers of Billie Holiday and James Brown called “Amateur Night at the Apollo”? What does it mean to assess the achievements of various Chicano theatros on the basis of a “professional standard,” as does even such a sensitive and progressive chronicler as Jorge Huerta [2000:7]?)

This privileging of the professional over and against the amateur is, significantly, a tendency to which YouTube is by no means immune, despite its nomination as a democratizing influence by supporters and detractors alike. Indeed, the users whom YouTube invites to “broadcast [themselves]” regularly and consistently affirm the professional, produced and defined in tandem with and at the ultimate expense of the amateur; and the potent and credible alibi of democratization is precisely what allows such an affirmation. One index of this phenomenon is the extent to which performers with commercial ambitions—and, at times, corporate sponsorship—will use the cachet of the “homegrown” and the “grassroots,” predicated on their capacity to confer authenticity, to advance their budding careers. Occasionally, this manipulation of YouTube’s democratic image, in the service of a commercial agenda, will become a matter of public record,

as in the cases of Marié Digby, a singer-songwriter charged by the *Wall Street Journal* with “Feigning Amateur Status” (Smith and Lattman 2007), and the even more notorious creative team behind “lonelygirl15.”

Digby, an artist signed to the Hollywood Records label, gained recognition on YouTube by performing acoustic covers of radio hits. She would have arguably failed to attract the widespread attention of YouTube viewers if she had not covered songs whose videos were likely, because of the songs’ established popularity, to be sought by users of the site’s search engine. This reliance on predetermined commercial appeal and amplification of commercial hegemony was matched by a more covert strategy through which Digby depended upon and implicitly affirmed professional perquisites: the covers appeared to be improvised, but their selection, recording, and eventual distribution were, it has been charged, carefully orchestrated by Hollywood Records in consultation with Digby, who framed herself as an unconnected upstart and her growing stardom as spontaneous because she believed that viewers would respond more favorably to such a narrative (Smith and Lattman 2007). Tellingly, whatever controversy was generated by the *Wall Street Journal* article that first raised these issues has not impeded Digby’s success; her debut album, *Unfold*, released in April 2008, reached number 2 on the “iTunes Store Top 10 Albums” during its first week (Takishita 2008). In fact, the controversy—named as such in Digby’s Wikipedia entry—seems only to have helped the artist, operating in a context in which the blithe, mass acceptance of the adage that “all press is good press” has imbued it with awesome self-sustaining power (*Wikipedia* s.v. “Marié Digby”).

The actor Jessica Lee Rose has similarly benefited from such putatively controversial exposure. In 2006, Rose, a 19-year-old graduate of the New York Film Academy, personated Bree, a quirky, intelligent teenager who chafed against her parents’ strict religious views in videos posted to YouTube from an account registered to “lonelygirl15.” While some fascinated viewers—and there were many—initially assumed a simple and tidy coincidence of handle, age, affective state, and digitally imaged body (i.e., Bree is a lonely 15-year-old girl), intrepid bloggers discovered after several months that three filmmakers, working in league with an attorney employed by the Creative Artists Agency, had hired Rose to perform in their scripted videos, a serial prelude to a feature film that they may have hoped to make (Heffernan and Zeller 2006). Far from ending lonelygirl’s lease on life, the revelation of the series’ origins and production history brought it to the attention of even more millions of viewers than had originally watched it, allowed its uncloaked and thus less restricted creators to amplify its narrative and cast in subplots and eventual spinoffs, and landed Rose a number of other professional assignments, including her recurring role on the ABC Family TV series *Greek* (*Internet Movie Database* s.v. “Jessica Rose [VI]”).

In a *New York Times* article among the first to “out” the producers of lonelygirl15, Virginia Heffernan and Tom Zeller speculated that it was improbable that a home-schooled teen, as Bree was supposed to be, would be able to “[steal] time to upload video blogs of her innermost thoughts” (2006), but such circumstances were almost identical to the ones under which Chris Crocker produced his initial contributions to YouTube, including the infamous video, “Leave Britney Alone!” which has, at the time of this writing, been watched nearly 20 million times and parodied multiply. The relationship of Crocker and his parodists to the vexed discourses of amateurism and professionalization is more complex—and thus the focus of closer investigation in this article—than that of either Digby or Rose, et al., but what all of these figures’ efforts suggest is that YouTube’s most noted and noteworthy phenomena are best understood through the conjoined rubrics of “professional” and “amateur,” in which conjunction the validation and valorization of “professional” are routinely reinforced. In turn, the contemporary valences of these rubrics, as they pertain to Web 2.0 technology, can only be fully appreciated when they are placed on a historical continuum that includes so-called “amateur theatre” and “amateur filmmaking,” epitomized respectively by the Little Theatre movement and the emergence and rise of the home movie. Reading current web-based projects alongside these other, earlier media

will reveal, perhaps counterintuitively, a stronger contiguity between much digital blogging and theatrical performance than between such blogging and most noncommercial film and video. In particular, YouTube, as part of a broader regulatory regime, helps to sustain a powerful—and homophobic—model of sincerity, bodily stability, and self-control that has its roots in 19th- and 20th-century theatrical ideologies of amateurism and professionalization.

## Sincerity and Self-Control

During the 1850s and '60s, the performance of private theatricals in middle-class American homes enjoyed a surge in popularity that would persist throughout the subsequent decades (Meserve 1993:97–98), but it was only in the early 20th century that “amateur drama,” as it was described by the purveyors of 19th-century handbooks on “home amusements” (Arnold 1858:9), could conceivably—and did—move from the American parlor to the public stage. Drawing inspiration from such European models as the Théâtre Libre in Paris, the Freie Bühne in Berlin, and the Independent Theatre in London (Hewitt 1982:168), American innovators imagined alternatives to the commercial theatre that included the oft-discussed little theatres of major urban centers and the development of college theatre programs. But as Dorothy Chansky has vividly demonstrated in *Composing Ourselves: The Little Theatre Movement and the American Audience* (2004), the movement signaled by the emergence of the little theatres encompassed many other, related kinds of performance. Much of this theatrical activity was understood and labeled as “amateur” by the early historians and educators who chronicled its development and wrote manuals to shape its contours and encourage its spread; it included performances on “high school, grade school and townhall stages” (Mackay 1915:iv) as well as by civic clubs and church groups (Crafton and Royer 1926:6).

One might imagine that some, if not much, of the energy that fueled this self-identified amateur theatrical activity would have been siphoned into noncommercial filmmaking after the standardization of the 16mm format and the mass marketing of certain film equipment in the early 1920s. But as Patricia Rodden Zimmerman notes in *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*, “mass” marketing only produced about 70 amateur motion picture cameras in this period, compared to the thousands of mechanisms, so to speak, in place for theatrical expression (1995:17–19). Throughout the 1920s and '30s, the more widespread development of amateur film technology allowed a greater number of consumers, increasingly organized in clubs (71), to produce film independently, but they still lacked the means to distribute or exhibit their work on a large (or even modest) scale, limited to work produced professionally in the 35mm format (84). By the 1950s, a handful of avantgarde filmmakers who had ties to the film industry began to show their work publicly, at least on the “college circuit,” because of the rise of 16mm educational filmmaking and the concomitant availability of 16mm projectors at universities (128), but, as Zimmerman argues persuasively, a powerful domestic ideology steered the majority of noncommercial filmmakers—specifically, the vast number of Americans with no ties, even semi-professionally, to the film industry—to produce home movies that emphasized the ideal (fantasy) of “togetherness” and that circumscribed the filmmaking activity as “a leisure-time commodity erased [of] any of its social, political, or economic possibilities” (113).

The development of video technology in the last decades of the 20th century—and the new editing possibilities that it entailed—meant that many more creators could follow the paths trod by such filmmakers as Maya Deren and Kenneth Anger at mid-century and later. At the same time, video cameras remained more expensive than VCRs, “accent[ing] consumption over production” (Zimmerman 1995:150); and a renewed emphasis on so-called family values in the national politics of the late 1980s and early '90s, coupled with the emergence of such television programs as *America's Funniest Home Videos* (1990), urged most video makers toward familialist undertakings analogous to those formerly captured on film. Even for the adventurers who sought goals other than making Bob Saget laugh or coo, the demands of exhibition and distribution remained challenging, if not prohibitive—until the very recent advent of digital video and

web-based video sharing programs, which can accommodate everyone from bored children and eager parents to emerging and established artists of many genres and disciplines. In the meantime (significantly, most of a century), noncommercial, largely community-based theatre remained the most viable outlet for the majority of those who wanted to produce creative work and/or perform for a public audience. Even the film industry, or at least its independent branch, has acknowledged the staying power of noncommercial theatre, in the form of *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), a film that owes no small part of its success among millions of viewers to the fact that a significant percentage of those viewers have performed in the real equivalents of its fictional playhouse. As a once prominently featured commentator on the Internet Movie Database writes of the film, with perhaps insufficient reflexivity: “The reason why I love this film is because of all the parallels to my own experiences in community theater. [...] I can identify with EVERY single thing that has happened in this [film]” (snakeguy76 2008).

It is still too soon to tell what impact web-based performance will have on noncommercial theatre and what percentage of individuals who might have formerly sought a local stage will now turn instead to such sites as YouTube. But if we consider, rather, the impact that theatre—and ideas about theatricality—have already had on internet culture, what emerges strikingly is the extent to which earlier eras’ notions of sincerity, pervasive in the literature on self-described amateur theatre, have been reincarnated to shape attitudes toward and evaluative standards for the “new” kinds of amateur performance. The affirmation of sincerity has been remarkably enduring in American culture; as Karen Halttunen observes,

Repeatedly throughout American history, the sentimental impulse has returned to convince middle-class men and women of the hypocrisy of their social lives and to stress the importance of establishing sincere social forms as a way of restoring confidence to the entire American social order. (1982:190)

Halttunen points to the moment of the parlor theatrical’s mid-19th century popularity as one in which the grip of sincerity loosened, allowing participants in home amusements to recognize, enjoy, and gently parody the theatricality of their own social lives “with a high degree of self-consciousness” (178); but I would posit, with a small but significant difference in emphasis, that such performers deployed their self-conscious theatricality precisely to expose the limits of that theatricality and that Halttunen misperceives the affective cast of the self-consciousness under investigation. If, indeed, “[t]he most significantly self-conscious [parlor] charades [...] ridicul[ed] the melodramatic posturings of stagestruck characters” (181), then it would seem that the American middle classes were still firmly in the thrall of a sentimentality that prohibited them from giving themselves over to theatricality without *embarrassment*—and when that embarrassment self-consciously announced itself as such, it guaranteed for the parlor performers an escape from what they perceived to be the worst excesses of histrionism. Nina Auerbach suggests that those excesses, against which Victorians had to guard themselves because they were just as likely to erupt in the performativity of everyday life as in performances on the stage, were the index of a “volatile self” that could undermine the status and worth of “sincere emotion” through its susceptibility to the “bestial” and the “spectral.” More specifically, Victorians had to repudiate the possibility that such volatility might be involuntary and uncontrollable and thus expose “the potential of good men and women to undergo inexplicable changes” (1990:114).

Sincerity—and the (fiction of a) stable subject required for its (ostensibly) transparent production—are emphasized with remarkable consistency in the various handbooks and guides for the amateur theatre-maker. In *Costumes and Scenery for Amateurs* (1915), Constance D’Arcy Mackay praises the Irish Players for the “the beautiful sincerity and simplicity” of their work (6) and holds them up as a model for the American amateur who seeks to produce theatre that is neither “glaring” (8) nor “fussy [and] over-elaborated” (11). Roughly a decade later, Allen Crafton and Jessica Royer applaud the “hundreds of communities and school directors of inspiration and determination and true humility” who presented work that was “sincere and

pertinent and dramatic” and who sought “to train their actors to convincing, unaffected characterizations” (1926:10); and they underscore that one chief prerequisite for the achievement of sincerity and the avoidance of affectation onstage is a tractable body, “one which is not defective, which is responsive to [the] will, [...] which can be brought under its control,” and which has no “marked, fixed mannerisms which cannot be thrown off” (174–75). Sincere emotion does not, in this account, emanate spontaneously from the performer, but emerges through careful regulation: “The actor should be keenly attuned to emotion, should feel emotion and should express it; but he should never let it control him” (190). In tendering this advice, Crafton and Royer expose, at least to the careful reader, the artifice required to produce sincerity, but that exposure makes sincerity no less powerful for them or for future commentators on amateur theatre. In *Amateur Theater: A Guide for Actor and Director* (1961), Van H. Cartmell, who wrote on this subject as early as the 1930s, cautions the amateur actor to “avoid being ostentatious” and to abjure “the dreadful manifestation of facial acrobatics known as ‘mugging’” (21), with the unmistakable implication that such acrobatics compromise sincerity when they sacrifice simplicity.

The sincerity that the 20th-century amateur actor is asked repeatedly, and ironically, to generate—and which earns the special commendation of Frances Mackenzie in *The Amateur Actor* because its expression is a “rare [jewel]” (1966:22)—continues to be a signal measuring stick by which amateur performance, especially on such sites as YouTube, is judged in the 21st. We seem to be squarely in the middle of one of those moments, described by Halttunen, in which the manufacture of sincerity is meant to restore confidence in the American social order, as evinced by such phenomena as the opprobrium heaped on memoirists who fictionalize (J.T. Leroy, James Frey) and the admiration lavished on politicians who turn the race for office into a campaign trail of tears (Hillary Clinton). Importantly, the tears that Clinton cried in January 2008 could be so admired because they were simultaneously produced and restrained, alerting us to the fact that hers is a genuinely feeling but also controllable body, like the ones idealized in the amateur theatrical handbooks. A body that cries too much, too often, or too extravagantly is not eligible for interpellation as a sincere body; it is abjected from the magic, inner circle of regulated sentiment. This abjection is often marked specifically as a queer abjection, and the latent homophobia of earlier generations’ imperatives—coded in the advice to the amateur actor to avoid performance that is fussy, affected, mannered, or ostentatious—is now manifest in hostility aimed at openly gay, putatively amateur performers, among whose number YouTube sensation Chris Crocker is a prominent example.

## Out of Hand

In a 1977 article in which he seeks to draw distinctions between amateurs and professionals, sociologist Robert A. Stebbins theorizes that the amateur is typically inferior to the professional in the expression or embodiment of five “attitudes”: confidence, perseverance, continuance commitment, preparedness, and self-conception (596). Alongside these five attitudes, Stebbins assesses the amateur, by way of aside, on another axis, the capacity for self-control. He writes:

Another aspect of marginality is the tendency for the amateur’s avocation to get out of hand, the tendency toward uncontrollability. For instance, having spent himself the evening before playing soccer or performing in a play, he finds he is in less than optimal condition to work at his occupation the next day. And, there is always the temptation to add time to amateur interests by subtracting it, where possible, from work or family obligations. “Rachel—never marry an amateur violinist!” a professional violinist counseled his daughter. “He will want to play quartets all night.” (1977:599)

Despite his general overtures toward social scientific objectivity, Stebbins lapses here, in his invocation of anecdote and humor, into language not remarkably unlike that which recurs in amateur theatrical handbooks as they describe the amateur’s “uncontrollability.” Perhaps more

significantly, the amateur who is “out of hand” emerges inadvertently—uncontrollably?—as a queer figure in Stebbins’s account. Once the joke, which Stebbins quotes from Catherine Drinker Bowen’s *Friends and Fiddlers* (1935), is out of his (and her) hands, the wayward musician described therein becomes available for willful but productive rereading as a man whose amateur “tendency” is an erotically non-normative one, as it wrests him from the prescribed marital bed and launches him into a proscribed session of all-night harmonizing with three other male delinquents. The amateur is out of control because he can’t be made to conform to domestic ideology and the relationship to labor that it helps to coordinate.

A power like the one that inheres in this amateur’s defiant “marginality”—a power that makes both Stebbins and me want to repeat his story—is also at work in the insouciant performances of Chris Crocker, who inspires a similar repetition compulsion in the myriad viewers who have watched, re-watched, and referred to others (who have watched, re-watched, and referred to others) his “viral” YouTube videos. The first commercial publication to discuss Crocker’s life and work was the Seattle alternative weekly newspaper *The Stranger*, which ran a long profile of Crocker by Eli Sanders in May 2007. Sanders explains that gay friends had recommended Crocker’s videos, his “nakedly furious” assertions of effeminacy and homosexuality and rants against “Bible belt” intolerance of same; and that he, like many of Crocker’s viewers (who, at that time, were approaching a million), couldn’t decide whether or not the videos’ “waify” young performer, with blond highlights and heavily made-up eyes, was enacting a fictional persona:

I’d guessed Chris was an art student, young looking but not actually that young, who was lying about his age [stated as 19] and living somewhere in Manhattan [...] The Chris Crocker fans I know were divided on their initial guesses about him, and this divide mirrors the divide in experience between gays who had the bad luck to be born in intolerant parts of rural America and those who did not. The gays I know who have never lived in a small, conservative town (people like myself) thought Chris must be an ironic urban art-fag with something to say about the absurdity of fagginess and race relations. Those who have lived in rural America pegged him immediately as a type they know well, or once were themselves—the seething gay kid, trapped in a place that can’t tolerate homosexuality and punishes flamboyance. (2007)

In a certain sense, the latter type of fan described here was correct: as Sanders established during the course of his journalistic investigation, Crocker was, then, a 19-year-old living with his grandparents in a small town in Tennessee, where he had been home-schooled by his grandmother because his immutable effeminacy had made him the target of violence during his adolescence; the aggression that continued to be directed at him whenever he left the house to go to a restaurant, store, or mall was only palely approximated by the sometimes homophobic writing posted in response to his online videos. But none of these facts, once known, obviates the most crucial parts of Sanders’s initial speculation about Crocker, namely that the work that he produces for sites like YouTube involves irony and artistry. No less a persona because rooted in lived experience, the self that Crocker presents in his carefully calibrated performance pieces is just one among several in his repertoire, including, as Sanders notes, a character named Earl Annie Edna, “a Bible-believing older woman who seems a thinly veiled parody of [Crocker’s] grandmother [and who] has a television show [on which his] grandmother is the only guest, ever,” and an imitation of “flaming black men, black drag queens, and trannies from Compton” whom Crocker befriended on a telephone party line run out of Los Angeles.

When Sanders’s piece first appeared, Crocker had already signed a contract with Glenn Meehan, an LA-based producer, to develop ideas for a television series, one index of the extent to which his videos figured as part of a plan to “escape Real Bitch Island” (Crocker’s designation for his isolated and isolating town) and to do so with professional bona fides and cachet; but at that time, neither Sanders nor Meehan could have anticipated the quantum leap in popularity that Crocker would experience in fall 2007 and just how prescient their interest in him would

turn out to be. After pop star Britney Spears was lambasted for a performance at the MTV Video Music Awards, widely regarded as an “atrocious” (Breihan 2008), Crocker posted a short video called “Leave Britney Alone!” in which he lashed out at those criticizing Spears:

And how fucking dare anyone out there make fun of Britney after all she has been through. She lost her aunt. She went through a divorce. She had two fucking kids. Her husband turned out to be a user, a cheater, and now she’s going through a custody battle. All you people care about is readers and making money off of her. She’s a human! What you don’t realize is that Britney is making you all this money and all you do is write a bunch of crap about her. She hasn’t performed on stage in years. Her song is called “Gimme More” for a reason, because all you people want is more, more, more, more, more! Leave her alone! You are lucky she even performed for you bastards! Leave Britney alone! Please. Perez Hilton talked about professionalism and said if Britney was a professional she would’ve pulled it off no matter what. Speaking of professionalism, when is it professional to publicly bash someone who is going through a hard time? Leave Britney alone, please! Leave Britney Spears alone! Right now! I mean it! Anyone that has a problem with her, you deal with me, because she is not well right now. Leave her alone! (2007a)

A transcript of Crocker’s words, even one replete with exclamation marks, cannot begin to convey his affective state in the video. When it starts, Crocker, in close-up in front of a strung-up sheet, is already crying, as he does throughout most of the two-minute-plus clip. On the word “human,” the first one that Crocker shouts, his high voice enters an even higher register; then he pauses dramatically as he wipes one of his eyes, thick with mascara, with the back of his hand. As he repeats the word “more” five times, each iteration is louder than the preceding one, and by the time he screams the last “more,” his crying has reached an intense pitch. The video’s most heightened contrast, and arguably its most memorable effect, comes from the long pause between his first imperative to “[l]eave Britney alone!”—screamed more loudly than any of his previous screams—and his quiet, plaintive utterance of the word, “please.” He then cries for several full seconds before beginning to speak of Perez Hilton. The second time he says, “Leave Britney alone, please!” his crying and screaming, rather than punctuating each other, as they do in other parts of the video, are fully integrated; similarly, his crying is not just visible but audible as he sobs after he says, “[S]he is not well now,” brushes back the dyed blond hair that hangs over his brow and contrasts strikingly with the dark brown hair on the sides of his head, clutches at his shirt, and places his hand over his heart.

I describe “Leave Britney Alone!” thickly but as dispassionately as I can in an effort not to parrot the myriad judgments that have been made about the video, which was watched over two million times within the first 24 hours of its appearance (Manjoo 2007), has generated more YouTube user comments than any other video on the site (YouTube 2008b), and garnered Crocker interviews on CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, *The Today Show*, *Maury*, *The Howard Stern Show*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, and Ryan Seacrest’s KIIS-FM morning show, as well as commentary on *The View* and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. The overwhelming majority of these viewers, famous and anonymous alike, have responded to the video with ridicule, sometimes gentle but more often strident and cruel, and this ridicule is predicated on two assessments: that Crocker’s emotional display is exaggerated and disproportionate to the objects and events that have ostensibly inspired it; and that Crocker’s effeminacy is extreme. Of course, these assessments, both focused on Crocker’s supposed excesses, are intimately intertwined ones, as Crocker is effeminized not just by his appearance, particularly his hair and makeup, but by his “hysterical” outburst. Meehan was interested in Crocker because of what he dubbed his “virality,” which is, in Crocker’s case, not just a linguistic but a performative distortion of “virility”—and one whose condition for spreading is the spreading of contempt (Sanders 2007). The attraction, even desire, that Crocker occasions manifests itself as revulsion.

Along with that revulsion and contempt, the question of whether or not Crocker was acting arose extremely quickly on the heels of the video's posting; in his interview with Maury Povich, Crocker sought to distinguish "Leave Britney Alone!" from the stylizations of his previous performance pieces and insisted that his tears and the distress that incited them were genuine and unbidden (Crocker 2007b). But even if Crocker was believed (and many skeptics doubt his claim), the possibility that the video is, in his words to Povich, a "blog from the heart" is ultimately moot, because, according to our cultural logic, the body that contains his heart cannot be reckoned as a sincere one. If the sincere body must, ironically, be a well-controlled one, then Crocker's body, deemed so wholly out of control in its production of fluids, movements, and sounds, is fundamentally ineligible for the genesis of sincerity (whatever may be the status of its authenticity). Nor is it a coincidence that the performance produced by this kind of body, one that entails what most viewers would call "exaggerated or melodramatic behaviour, [...potentially] with manipulative intent," is typically described by the phrase "amateur dramatics" (*OED Online*). As if sensing that his own display would be evaluated and circumscribed as amateur, Crocker lashes out specifically at gossip blogger and television personality Perez Hilton for his indictment of Spears's lack of professionalism on MTV. In her VMA performance, Spears, described by one journalist as "out of shape [...] mov[ing] tentatively around the stage, getting totally outgrooved by her backup dancers and badly lip-syncing her way through [her] song," experienced the body coming apart, its lack of controllability, and thus a descent from professional to amateur (Maynard 2007). In turn, Crocker's identification with Spears does not just find expression in a bodily performance that is out of control, but hinges in the first place on his and others' sense of his body as uncontrollable, specifically because it is uncontrollably effeminate. Even when that body, once "picked [...] up by [its] neck and held [...] against a locker until [Crocker] turned blue in the face," is subjected to phobic violence so that it can be brought in line and normalized, it resists involuntarily (by changing color), and that involuntariness merely amplifies the animus of the abusive, would-be regulator (Sanders 2007).

When other means fail, one way to control the amateur body is to make it disappear. This tactic was masterfully deployed by the producers of Spears's 2007 album *Blackout*, which she was promoting with her MTV appearance. The irony of the album's title, given its release in a moment of wide speculation about Spears's drug and alcohol abuse, hardly needs further commentary; what is far more interesting is the extent to which the album does not thematize the idea that Spears is blacking out so much as it blacks out Spears. As the *New York Times* review of the album notes, "Spears has finally managed to become a spectral presence—on her own album," an effect achieved by her conspicuous absence both from the album artwork ("the booklet is padded with pictures of empty chairs") and from the tracks themselves: "[T]here are times when [*Blackout*] scarcely sounds like a Britney Spears album at all. Even when not buried in electronics, her distinctive singing voice sounds unusually vague, and sometimes it's hard to be sure it's hers. It isn't always" (Sanneh 2007). *Blackout* denies the embarrassment of the body falling apart, turning amateur, by heavily filtering its emissions and at times erasing it entirely (a strategy used, too, in the video for the track, "Break the Ice" [2008], which features an animated blond superhero, who can effortlessly leap buildings, in place of Spears, as she tries in real life, and with contrastingly great effort, to stop drinking and crashing cars); though released under Spears's name, the album and related material do not appear for but instead of her (figs. 2 and 3). And this substitution generates, ironically, Spears's most professional release to date, where "professional" signifies slick, glossy, untroubled, and untroubling. "It's brilliant," says the above *Times* review of the album, an assessment shared by many other mainstream publications that celebrate, in particular, the "consistent" and seamless quality (Lim 2007) achieved by smoothing out and over Spears's rough crossings.

That Spears's failure to duplicate this professional flawlessness in live performance should be critiqued by Perez Hilton—and that this critique should be singled out, among many similar ones, by Crocker—is worth some attention, given Hilton's own knotty relationship to the



*Figure 2. Britney Spears (center) at the MTV Video Music Awards (2007), directed by M. Pink Christofalo and Mark Stepp. (Screen capture courtesy of Nick Salvato)*



*Figure 3. An animated version of Britney Spears in the music video “Break the Ice” (2008), directed by Robert Hales. (Screen capture courtesy of Nick Salvato)*

category of the professional. As a gossip blogger who was initially unpaid for his online posts but whose popularity among readers—and successful ingratiation with many of the celebrities about whom he writes—earned him eventual corporate sponsorship for his website (and a TV deal with VH1), Hilton might be called, to redeploy a term introduced by Garber (2001:19), an “amateur professional”: he figures himself as a journalist despite a lack of training or any institutional affiliation that would corroborate this self-fashioning (Phillips 2007). The status of Hilton (born Mario Armando Lavandeira, Jr.) as an amateur professional is made more complicated by the fact that he has christened himself, in a queer, Latino resignification, after Paris Hilton, the consummate “professional amateur,” famous for being famous and, as a “dabbler” and “dilettante,” for “glor[ying] in amateur status” (Garber 2001:20). Professional amateurism is a luxury that Paris Hilton can—quite literally—afford, whereas for the more precariously famous and remunerated Perez Hilton, every exuberant and provocative challenge that he makes to the conventions of newsgathering and entertainment (and the ever more blurred line between them) must entail its obverse: an anxious and shameful insistence on his right to be on our computer and television screens. His place on our computers, moreover, depends routinely on the scapegoating of others, like Spears, whose spirals downward fuel the hot air that Hilton blows and with which he rises, tenuously. Fearful of the amateurism by association that might be engendered by his prominent mention in Crocker’s video, Hilton responded with a YouTube video of his own, “Britney, Leave ME Alone!” (2007) a jab at Crocker’s tearful identification with Spears that stages a disidentification from Crocker, at the level of parodic form, and from Spears, at the level of cheeky content.

Hilton disavows winkingly his role as a gossip and implores Spears to stop “giving [him] more” material for his blog. This parody is one-dimensional and incredibly brief, but its posting, within a day of Crocker’s own, paved the way for more sustained parodies of “Leave Britney Alone!” the elaborations and complexities of which Hilton would leave, as it were, to the pros.

## Tangibility and Evanescence

In *A Handbook for the Amateur Theatre*, Peter Cotes writes:

Too frequently the amateur and the professional theatre view each other with distaste and contempt. As each of the two worlds are peopled by a few intelligent beings who respect the drama sufficiently, steps should be taken to bring them together, thereby strengthening the position of both. (1957:xv)

The new fora for public performance, typified by YouTube, have indeed brought the amateur and the professional together, but not with the outcome, utopically imagined by Cotes in a related context, of “strengthening the position of both.” Rather, established professional performers have used such sites to strengthen their own positions at the expense and even through the punishment of amateurs; in the case of Chris Crocker, the punitive energy directed at him took the form of professional parodies of “Leave Britney Alone!” that cemented that one video’s ability to define Crocker—as an amateur—and to eclipse thoroughly his earlier (and later) efforts. Crocker asks in said video, “Speaking of professionalism, when is it professional to publicly bash someone who is going through a hard time?” and we might ask in turn, and in sympathy with that question, What are the status, implications, and effects of professional parody that ridicules the amateur, of the relatively powerful mocking the less enfranchised? In an essay that Elin Diamond praises, in a headnote, as a piece that “every academic you know should [...] read” (2003:247), playwright and performer Deb Margolin defines parody as “the direct result of an attempt to make room for oneself within an airtight, closed, or exclusive social, cultural, or theatrical construct”; “a kind of aria of the poor”; “the brashest and most heart-rending voice of the outsider looking in” (248). But what happens when this potential of parody, so richly and thrillingly described by Margolin, is inverted, with the result that the aria of the poor becomes a ballad of the rich?

In answering this question, and in continuing to explore the exemplary status of Chris Crocker on YouTube and in our culture, two video parodies deserve particular attention: “Leave Chris Crocker Alone!” (E! Entertainment 2007), a short Web exclusive for MySpace and YouTube sponsored by the E! television series *The Soup* and starring the television and film actor Seth Green; and “Meet the Casting Directors” (Whitty et al. 2007), a YouTube narrative feature in three parts, starring and directed by Jeff Whitty, the 2004 Tony award winner for Best Book of a Musical for *Avenue Q*. In the former video, just under two minutes, Green follows extremely closely the language and rhythms of “Leave Britney Alone!” as he implores his viewers to stop judging Crocker, because they “haven’t walked a mile in his sneakers. Or his platform shoes. I don’t know what he wears, but whatever it is, I’m sure it’s stylish.” Whatever approval is implied by Green’s affirmation of Crocker’s queer style is undercut by the occasional pauses, breaks from his sobbing, in which he grows suddenly calm and steady and reapplies thick eyeliner painstakingly with a pencil. The effect of these rapid-fire transitions is not overwhelmingly to suggest that Crocker’s display is inauthentic (though it has that ancillary effect, too), but rather to remind the viewer of Green’s own professional control and skill as a performer, which cannot, it is implied, be achieved by an amateur like Crocker. More generally, the tendency of the video, as in so much parody that uses irony in the service of satire, is to signal that Green means precisely the opposite of what he claims; his defense of Crocker as someone with “opinions and ideas that are important,” for instance, registers Crocker’s thoughts and feelings as negligible and insubstantial—and that his insubstantiality is further manifested on and in his very body, or as its lack. “If you want to make fun of [Crocker],” Green cries, “you’re going to have to go through *me*, and I am tough to go through, because I am tangible.” This line may earn a laugh because of its seeming overstatement of the obvious, but its less obvious, though no less significant, implication is that where Green is tangible, Crocker is immaterial; and where Green can wipe off the makeup in whose application he invests so much mocking care, no amount of scrubbing can wash the queerness off Crocker. The metatheatrical cues that alert us that this

performance is not deep but casual play culminate in an absolute breaking of the frame, when Green stops crying and speaks very fast, as if time were running out, to remind his viewers to watch *Robot Chicken*, the Emmy award-winning animated series of which he is a creator, executive producer, director, writer, and voice actor. Green can get away with such shameless self-promotion not only because, in its alienation effect, it announces itself as shameless, but also because his video's professionalism, as a commercially branded and well-crafted parody, earns him the right to declare to us, tautologically, his professional credentials.

The mockumentary "Meet the Casting Directors" approaches the question of professional credentials with more complexity. In the video, the casting directors whom we meet are Jeff (Jeff Whitty) and Jenn Blimpkin (Jenn Harris) of Blimpkin Casting; and the narrative is based on the comical fiction that, far from produced by amateurs (largely) in their homes, YouTube's most viral videos have actually been professionally cast and shot by the Blimpkins. The two explain, as if to a documentarian interested in their work:

JENN: We don't do live shows. We don't do television. Uhh, what else is there?

JEFF: Soaps? That's television.

JENN: We don't do soaps.

JEFF: There's theatre, film—we don't do any of it. There's this new medium—

JENN: YouTube.

JEFF: And we are *it*. Right now. I mean, we are at the top of our game.

JENN: That's our number.

JEFF: And you know, we're doing well.

JENN: Making real entertainment. (Whitty et al. 2007)

Proud of their monopoly on YouTube casting, the Blimpkins boast that the "real entertainment" that they have produced includes what they deem the best YouTube videos, which they name with privileged asides about the business of casting: "Fat Kid Gets Hit by a Paintball Gun" (which, they claim, features a trained dancer portraying the eponymous target); "Mom Laughs at Fat Kid on Ride" (whose star was, alas, typecast as a result of his incredible ability to personate an obese child terrified by a roller coaster); and "Miss South Carolina" attempting incomprehensibly to answer a question at a pageant (who had to be taught her lines phonetically and of the creation of whose face, made entirely of prosthetics, Jenn says, "Our people are so good"). The video focuses attention on the new spot for which the Blimpkins are trying to find the perfect actor: "Leave Britney Alone!" which Jenn describes as "the most difficult YouTube to cast to date" and as "one monologue, one page of text that comes from...from *here*," as she points to her heart. Jeff, similarly moved by the script, finds that language breaks down and that he must fight back tears when he tries to speak of it: "And this, just, this piece, I just... It's really special. [Cries hard, then, to the camera operator:] I'm sorry. Turn it off. I just—I care about it so much." Positioning "Leave Britney Alone!" alongside the most trivial, but highly viewed, YouTube clips, Whitty and Harris, improvising their lines around a premise that Whitty conceived, convey the absurdity of the idea that any real professional would take interest in or seek to create the kind of "entertainment" that YouTube constellates, when compared to the legitimacy and rigors of producing work for theatre, film, or television; even the debased soap opera, in the satirical logic of the piece, figures as a more valid—because more professional—genre than those emerging in the "new medium."

Of course, in using YouTube to disseminate the video, Whitty (the director and producer of the piece, under the rubric of the Mingus Park production company) is having his Web 2.0 and eating it, too—or perhaps eating it as he spits it out. On the one hand, he enjoys the cachet of staying cool, on the cutting edge, and of announcing his sensitivity and adaptability to the challenges of a new medium. On the other, he uses his capital, both professional and economic,

to emphasize by contrast the shortcomings of the relative amateurs who typically generate material for the site: unlike them, he can pay to shoot on location (the Actors Connection in New York City, where professional casting calls are actually held); he can use three cameras; he can exploit his personal connections in the theatre world, alongside the services of a casting company (Calleri Casting), to help him find professional actors to play versions of themselves, the actors seeking the role of Speaker of “Leave Britney Alone!”; and he can do it all without a legible trace of effort—indeed, with the seamlessness so admired on *Blackout*—and upload the three parts of the video within a week of Crocker’s posting.

As the Blimpkins engage with the hopeful auditioners, Whitty’s multidirectional satire indicts bad casting directors and bad actors as well as the pretensions of YouTube to offer “real entertainment”—but in no way does the satire of the business of theatre undo, finally, the hierarchizing assumptions upon which the video depends. Rather, “Meet the Casting Directors” flaunts the fact that Whitty, Harris, et al. know how bad casting directors speak and behave (“Shake it up. Have fun with it”; “Can I give you just a little thought? You’re not starting the car in the parking lot and then driving it, and then going up to 100 miles an hour. You’re starting *at* 100 miles an hour”; “I’m gonna crack you”) because they, unlike the multitude of “fat kids” whom they facetiously laud, have been at actual casting calls (some conducted more professionally than others). Likewise, the humor that actors like Susan Blackwell and Hunter Bell (from “Meet the Casting Directors,” Part One) mine from their “failed” auditions derives from their admirable ability to act like bad actors. The skill that it takes to show the audience both the citation of bad acting and the comical, critical distance from it affirms the professionalism of the performers and congratulates us for our capacity to recognize it.

The video also congratulates at least a portion of its audience and validates that audience as a “professional” one for recognizing Blackwell, Bell, and other actors, including Saidah Arrika Ekulona and Jenn Harris herself, as prominent players in off-Broadway and downtown New York theatre. Indeed, the video came to my attention through a network of New York and Los Angeles-based actors, directors, and casting agents whom I know, as a theatre scholar, both personally and professionally. The virality of “Meet the Casting Directors” may be much more limited than that of “Leave Britney Alone!” (several thousand compared to several million hits), but the video acts as a calling card for its participants among an elite circle of viewers who have the ability to open—or, perhaps more often, keep open—crucial doors in theatre as well as in film and television. At the same time, most of these doors remain shut to Crocker. The overnight celebrity and new, if limited, means of income begotten by “Leave Britney Alone!” enabled Crocker to move out of his grandparents’ house and into an apartment in LA, but that movement seems, thus far, merely to represent another kind of enclosure. Instead of encouraging the production of more performance pieces of the sort that Crocker was making before September 2007, television executives, fixated on “Leave Britney Alone!” want him to appear in his own reality TV series, a potentially humiliating move that would confirm Crocker’s status as a (professional) amateur and limit his palette as a creator (Adalian 2007). And because, according to one of Crocker’s most recent YouTube posts (at the time of this writing), the hypothetical “reality” TV series and affiliated website would come with certain restrictions even more confining than the dismissal of reflexive performance art—among them censorship of so-called profane language—Crocker claims that he will refuse the deal: “I’m not doing it. [...] I’m the captain of this ship” (Crocker 2008a).

The ship may be sinking, and the reasons are surely more numerous and complex than indicated by Crocker’s complaint that he wouldn’t be allowed to curse. Indeed, because the video quoted above is juxtaposed spatially on YouTube with another recent video in which Crocker kisses a man who wears even heavier makeup than he (Crocker 2008b), it is hard not to speculate that Crocker’s professional ambitions are being stymied, in part, not so much by his avowed homosexuality as by its expression through pronounced effeminacy (fig. 4). If, as “Meet the Casting Directors” encourages us to do, we compare Crocker and Whitty, another openly gay

man, Crocker's extremely slender frame and cultivation of prettiness must strike, for many, a discordant note alongside Whitty's muscular build and conventional handsomeness. To return to Seth Green's language, Whitty appears more tangible—and tangibly—than Crocker, a fact that “Meet the Casting Directors” highlights when a caption informs us that Jenn Blimpkin, who turns out to be histrionically (if not physically) perfect for the role of the Speaker, undergoes extensive plastic surgery in preparation for her performance, and an image of Crocker flashes briefly onscreen. In the video's previous scene, Harris, demonstrating the necessary capacity for amateur dramatics, has socked Whitty with an audible *pop*, and the contrast between Whitty, who can take a punch, and Crocker, too spec-



Figure 4. Chris Crocker in the YouTube video “Britney, This Is for You” (3 September 2007). (Screen capture courtesy of Nick Salvato)

trally fey to come fully into focus, could not be more impactful. Underscoring these scenes is Spears's 2001 song, “I'm Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman,” whose lyrics comically corroborate, and thus deflate the liminal threat posed by, Crocker's effeminacy. Moreover, that Whitty's video should equate Crocker's material intangibility with temporal evanescence suggests that Crocker will be a flash in the pan precisely because his body is not conventionally castable. Altering her body monstrously for a single role, Jenn Blimpkin cannot, we are meant to understand, appear in any other—and so, too, will Crocker, the original possessor of the body that is now recast, as it were, as a bad copy, fade.<sup>1</sup>

If all performance may, in some way, be understood as evanescent, then YouTube performance is especially so because of its failure to yield tangible rewards. Where Crocker has the unfulfilled promise of a television series and a score of videos that exist in virtual space, Whitty

1. Seth Green, who is himself exceptionally short and slight by Hollywood standards, may project onto Crocker anxiety about his own intangibility and potential to fade; while Whitty, a gay activist who has publicly condemned the homophobia of such celebrities as Jay Leno, may not perceive or wish to promote the homophobia evident in his treatment of Crocker. Thinking about Green's possible unconscious motivations and Whitty's likely conscious intentions may complicate my account of their parodies, but neither complicating consideration undoes, finally, the videos' shared reification of the professional performer.

has ticket sales, an award statuette, and a country house, pictured prominently on his website (Whitty 2008), to show for his ability to adhere to more traditional media and narratives (indeed, to adhere to realist narrative itself, which his nearly 30-minute YouTube feature unfolds in pointed contrast to the celebration of ellipsis and fragmentation at work in Crocker's short performance pieces). Of course, YouTube, while no longer in its infancy, is still young enough that its long-term effects cannot yet be predicted with any accuracy. It may still make good on its promise to democratize artistic production and circulation, but so far its ability to deliver has been amateur at best.

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