Film as Identity Exploration: A Multimodal Analysis of Youth-Produced Films

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Background/Context: Researchers have begun to document and understand the work youth do as they compose in multiple media including video games, online virtual worlds, participatory fan cultural practices, and in the digital media arts. However, we lack mechanisms for analyzing the products, especially when it comes to understanding the relationship between storytelling and identity.

Objective: In this article, I bring together prior research on youth-produced media, social semiotic analysis frameworks for analyzing these products and the formal analysis of films to construct an analytic framework for understanding youth-produced films as spaces for identity construction and representation.

Research design: The research reported on in this article is the design and illustration of an analytic framework for understanding how youth construct and represent their identities through the films they make. The framework design begins with Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) work on the analysis of visual design as a set of semiotic resources for describing how we make meaning with multimodal texts. However, this work does little to depict how the specific tools of film both cinematic (e.g., editing, cinematography) and filmic (music, action) (Burn & Parker, 2003) are used to construct and communicate identities. Therefore, I turn to film theory to develop a coding scheme that can assist in the meaningful interpretation of the phases and transitions of youth-produced films. I then illustrate this framework in action by analyzing one youth-produced film, Rules of Engagement, as a multimodal product of identity.

Conclusions/Recommendations: This analysis demonstrates how films like Rules of Engagement display the construction of a viable social identity primarily through the interactions among filmic elements. Specifically it is in the transition spaces between phases of the film where youth actively insert their understanding of how to represent complex portraits...
of how they see themselves, how others see them, and how they fit into their communities. Analyzing the products of a rich, complex literacy practice is a critical way to make sense of how youth engage with issues of identity through the media they create. This is especially important for youth who feel marginalized in mainstream institutions and do not have opportunities to explore a positive sense of self in traditional institutional contexts. Understanding how the construction of multimodal representation supports identity development processes can help us to bring these new media literacy practices to youth who are most in need of alternative mechanisms for engaging in positive identity work.

Storytelling has long been understood as a mechanism for people to construct public representations of themselves. Narrative theorists have argued that these stories represent identities; the primary mechanism we have for constructing identity is through the stories we tell. Recently, storytelling has been redefined as more than oral and written narratives: The age of multimodality has arrived. Storytelling by everyday people is no longer just about composing texts and oral narratives, but rather the expression of ideas through multiple media including print and digital text, still and moving images, music, animation, and games. And just as narrative theorists have argued for the inextricable connection between stories and identities, new media scholars have begun to identify these multimodal spaces as sites for identity construction. Willett, Burn, and Buckingham (2005) argue that “identity” features prominently in multimodal composition: “New media production is as much about producing identities and social spaces as it is about creating media. … Through different media forms young people are described as performing, defining, and exploring their identities” (p. 2). In fact, whether youth are creating digital stories about their popular culture hero (Hull & Katz, 2005; Schneider, 2005) or playing a video game (Gee, 2003), researchers seem to agree that identity work is going on. Jenkins et al. (2007) describe “the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery” (p. 28) as one of the core media literacy skills necessary for successful engagement in society. In this article, I propose an analytic framework for understanding youth-produced films as spaces for identity construction and representation.

Digital literacy, specifically the production of new media, has become an increasingly relevant and important form of participation in our 21st century society (Jenkins et al., 2007; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). As a result, education researchers interested in giving all youth opportunities to acquire and use new media literacies must understand the specific learning processes at work across these different media spaces. Researchers have begun to document and understand the work youth do
as they compose in multiple media including video games (Gee, 2003; Squire, 2006), online virtual worlds (Kafai & Giang, in press; Steinkuehler, 2006), participatory fan cultural practices (Ito, in press; Jenkins, 2006), and in the digital media arts (Fleetwood, 2005; Hull & Katz, 2006; Jocson, 2005; Soep, 2006). However, we lack mechanisms for analyzing the products, especially when it comes to understanding the relationship between storytelling and identity. Analyzing the products of a rich, complex literacy practice is a critical way to make sense of how youth engage with issues of identity through the media they create. This is especially important for youth who feel marginalized in mainstream institutions and who do not have opportunities to explore a positive sense of self in traditional institutional contexts. Sadly, it is likely these same youth who experience what Jenkins et al. (2007) call, “the participation gap—unequal access to the opportunities, skills, and knowledge that will prepare youth for full participation in the world of tomorrow” (p. 3). Understanding how the construction of multimodal representation supports identity development processes can help us to bring these new media literacy practices to youth who are most in need of alternative mechanisms for engaging in positive identity work.

In order to contribute to this conversation, I propose a new method for analyzing films produced by youth as a way to understand how adolescents use multimodal composition to explore and represent complex issues of identity. Researchers who study youth participation in new media practices have called for the development of such tools (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), describing them as crucial to understanding media products as powerful representations of youth identity. I have developed this analytic framework as part of a larger research agenda that seeks to understand how youth learn to engage in the digital art-making process and how this process facilitates positive identity development. My approach to understanding the digital art-making process is grounded in insights about the multimodal products that youth create. In this article, I bring together prior research on youth-produced media (e.g., Fleetwood, 2005; Hull & Katz, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2007), social semiotic analysis frameworks for analyzing these products (Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Burn & Parker, 2003), and the formal analysis of films (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004) to construct an analytic framework that takes films as representations of youth identities. This framework allows researchers and practitioners interested in youth-produced media to describe how youth use the tools for expression in digital media to construct self-representations for a public audience. It is my hope that this method can extend to other forms of multimodal production so that we can bring the of use digital media to construct and communicate
identities into the youth development conversation. In the next section, I provide the warrant for a connection between research in narrative, identity, and multimedia production as the foundations for an approach to analyzing youth films as representations of identity.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NARRATIVE AND IDENTITY

Narrative has been described as the key mechanism by which we understand our life course development (e.g. Bamberg, 2004; Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988). We construct narratives as a way to understand ourselves and our experiences in the world. Indeed, narrative appears to be a ubiquitous mechanism for sense making. According to Shirley Brice Heath (2000), “the narrative form of shaping the self, others and events, often with highly elaborated and specific detail, appears to be universal” (p. 125). Narrative, then, is a fundamental tool by which we construct our own identities. Roger Schank (1990) argues identity is not an abstract, psychological concept; rather, identity is concretized through the narratives we tell of our own lives. Given the role narrative plays in helping us explore who we are, narrative theorists have proposed a reciprocal relationship between narratives of personal experience and external presentations of identity (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 2001, 2003; Mishler, 1999; Polkinghorne, 1988; Schank, 1990). It is through telling the stories of our lives that we build our notions of who we are across a variety of social situations and interactions. In turn, the way we perceive ourselves to be in these social situations shape the stories we tell (McAdams, 2001). While there is not a direct correspondence between the content of personal narratives and sense of identity, the sharing of narratives of personal experience with others provides opportunities for interaction around personal assumptions, beliefs, and presentation of self. Keller-Cohen and Dyer (1997) note the importance of this relationship in social science research: “In contemporary scholarship it has become commonplace to observe that speakers use the site of narratives to construct particular identities … [where] each telling of a story [offers] the narrator a fresh opportunity to create a particular representation of herself” (p. 150).

The relationship between narrative and identity is especially important in adolescence when individuals first consider the relationship between the past, present, and future and how their life narratives make sense across these time periods (Cohler, 1982; Cohler & Hammack, 2007). In fact, Cohler and Hammack assert that, “the most normative feature of human development, particularly during adolescence, is its connection to discourses of identity through the formation of narratives that anchor the life course and provide meaning to conceptions of self-development”
Taking this perspective on the importance of narrative in adolescent development has led researchers to study the spaces where youth have the opportunity to actively work with their life stories in artistic storytelling processes (Halverson, 2007, 2008; Heath, 2000; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Wiley & Feiner, 2001; Worthman, 2002). This research has demonstrated that it is through the process of telling, adapting, and performing narratives of personal experience that adolescents engage in positive identity development. Specifically, this practice of constructing public performance pieces from true-life stories as a process facilitates the development of a “viable social identity” (Côté & Levine, 2002), a reconciliation of the way you see yourself, the way others see you, and the way you fit into the communities to which you belong. Positive identity development in adolescence demands that individuals acknowledge these multiple senses of self and actively decide how to accommodate them as a necessary component of moving into adulthood.

My research has shown that the adaptation of individual narratives of personal struggle into scripted scenes for personal performance is a powerful venue for the development of individuals’ viable social identities (Halverson, 2007, 2008). In the remainder of this article, I consider digital filmmaking as a specific instantiation of the artistic representation of narratives of personal experience and how filmic texts can be analyzed as multimodal representations of self that demonstrate the construction of a viable social identity.

YOUTH AS PRODUCERS OF DIGITAL MEDIA

In recent years, media educators and scholars have begun to focus on youth as producers of media, and more specifically on multimodal production as a new form of literacy. Jenkins et al. (2007) describe digital literacy as engagement in participatory cultures, where participation involves collaborative problem solving resulting in new cultural forms that are then put into public circulation. This shift from thinking about “literacy” as a print-based, consumptive practice to a multimodal, productive practice has its roots in earlier cultural criticism:

In the early 1980s, Raymond Williams argued, in a prescient essay, that an epochal change was about to occur in which technologies of media production would become so widely distributed that the resulting shift in power between producers and consumers of media would produce profound social change. (Burn & Parker, 2001, p. 178)
As Williams predicted, our current generation of youth is filled with “digital natives,” (Prensky, 2001) those who have grown up using digital media as both consumers and producers. Many of these youth are well on their way to becoming fluent in the “new literacies” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) that require the comprehension and creation of multimodal artifacts such as wikis, videogames, mash-ups, and movies. As researchers, we are always one step behind. While learners of all ages are already engaging in these new forms of literacy, we lack the tools to analyze what they are learning, how they are learning it, and what they are producing as a result of their engagement.

Just as in more traditional forms of storytelling, issues of identity feature prominently in youth-produced media. Hull and Katz (2006) describe how the production of digital stories facilitates identity development for youth: “Randy authored himself through his digital stories in agentive ways, representing himself as social critic, digital artist, and loyal son. His movies, we want to argue, were performative moments which resulted in especially intensive acts of self-articulation and self-construction” (p. 56). Positive identity construction is a key outcome of participation in their digital story program, as it is in other youth media organizations (Fleetwood, 2005; Mayer, 2000; NAMAC, 2003). In fact, participatory cultures have become such compelling environments for youth precisely because they afford youth the opportunity to engage in the trying on and representing of multiple identities over time (Gee, 2003; Jenkins et al., 2007). The capacity to engage with complex issues of identity seems to be one of the primary reasons youth are so attracted to digital media spaces.

YOUTH AS FILMMAKERS

While digital media scholars have demonstrated the importance of identity in digital production processes, work related specifically to youth as filmmakers is sporadic. Studies have focused on individual organizations that work with groups of marginalized youth to produce films that represent their voices, including Arab-American women in Chicago (Bing-Canar & Zerkel, 1998), Chicano Catholics in San Antonio (Mayer, 2000), Latinas in Durham (Vargas, 2006), and “racialized” youth in San Francisco (Fleetwood, 2005). A common theme across these studies is the relationship between the video production process and identity construction for these individual groups of youth. The challenge of representing self or selves in a way that “accurately” depicts their experiences but does not reify ethnic or racial stereotypes is discussed in many of these pieces. For example, Mayer (2000) describes the filmmaking process as, “double-
edged; the videos reinforced a Mexican American community based on mutual respect, tolerance, and self-esteem, while also unavoidably privileging certain identities over others” (p. 57).

This research has also highlighted film as medium that affords youth the opportunity to produce narratives of self. Fleetwood (2005) hypothesizes, “video presumably represents the ideal medium for accessing an unmediated relationship with the real” (p. 157). Research on digital story production has demonstrated how youth develop agency by merging words, rhythm, rhyme, music message and image to create personal narratives (Hull & Katz, 2006). Film as a medium of expression, adds an additional communicative tool to this mix—movement. The relationship between the elements described in the digital story work becomes dynamic in films, giving producers another tool for representing self (Baldry, 2006; Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Baldry (2006) argues that movement in film is a core tool for meaning-making:

Moreover, we need to access texts in an in vivo form that provides access to audio and video tracks and maintains their relationship intact, because a major part of the way in which a film text makes its meaning is precisely through the synchronization between visual and audio resources. (p. 180)

To date, none of the studies on youth organizations working with marginalized youth to build representations of self through film analyzes the films themselves as public proclamations of identity. If we are to understand this connection between youth filmmaking and identity construction, we need a principled analytic framework that connects the tools, processes, and products of filmmaking with identity development, construction, and representation.

A METHOD FOR ANALYZING MULTIMODAL PRODUCTION

Understanding how youth construct identity through the films they make requires a set of analytic tools designed to address these complex products as representations of self. Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) work on the analysis of visual design has given researchers a set of semiotic resources for describing how we make meaning with multimodal texts such as advertisements. But films are more than just text and pictures; the introduction of movement and sound gives filmmakers a set of dynamic tools with which to construct and express images of self. The analytic framework I present here combines social semiotic analyses of multi-
modal products (Baldry, 2006; Baldry & Thibault, 2006; van Leeuwen, 1985), analyses of multimodal products in the context of youth media arts interventions (Burn & Parker, 2001, 2003; Hull & Nelson, 2005), and the formal analysis of films (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004). Taken independently, none of these analytic approaches captures the unique features of filmmaking as a multimodal form of production and the way identity is constructed and represented using these features. The analytic framework I propose takes the features of a social semiotics analysis of a multimodal text and focuses on the specific affordances of film as the medium for meaning-making. The primary feature of social semiotic analysis relevant to my framework is the use of phases and transitions as the optimal units of analysis. The formal analysis of films (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004) guides the development of a coding scheme within these units of analysis. Following this tradition, films can be understood through the four key cinematic techniques employed by filmmakers: mise en scène, sound, editing, and cinematography. I elaborate on both the units of analysis and the coding scheme in the sections that follow.

**PHASES AND TRANSITIONS: THE CORE ANALYTIC UNITS OF YOUTH FILMS**

As with any qualitative analytic method where text is the data of interest, the first step in the analytic process is “chunking” the data into analytically useful pieces (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Where film is the text in question, the most basic analytic unit is the shot, “a filmed visual sequence in which there is no spatial displacement of the camera” (Baldry & Thibault, 2006, p. 187). However, dividing a film into individual shots leaves out a fundamental affordance of film as a meaning-making tool: the ability to hold certain elements constant while simultaneously introducing new elements. Unlike still images or flat text, which are typically read from left to right, what gives a moving image, sound, or shot salience is its newness in the context of what is already available. The introduction of a new element can occur within the same shot (e.g., a shot of a man walking alone is broken up with the introduction of a soundtrack) or across shots (e.g., a hard cut from the same man to the shot of another person). In both cases, meaning is made in the interaction of these elements, and not in their separation. Therefore, the relevant “chunk” or unit of analysis is larger than the shot: the phase. Phases are groups of shots that have “semiotic homogeneity,” that is, internal consistency across multiple modes, for example, the same music, voiceover, and shot type (Baldry, 2006; Baldry & Thibault, 2006). Hull and Katz (2006) refer to phases as, “multimodal couplings,” and Bordwell and Thompson
describe relevant analytic units as “sequences,” all of which refer to this same concept. In the analysis of youth-produced films, I begin by breaking the film up into phases and sub-phases, the core analytic units. These phases describe the temporal flow of the film and help to trace patterns in use of filmic elements across time.

Transitions are a specific type of phase that deserves special attention in this framework. Baldry and Thibault (2006) theorize that the points of transition between phases have unique features that play an important role in making meaning across phases to the film as a whole. Burns and Parker (2001) also emphasize the importance of transitions, describing them as “inscriptive choices,” explicit attempts by producers to construct meaning across phases. Transitions are typically conceived of as the spaces between phases, though they are also phases in and of themselves. As I will demonstrate through an illustrative example of this framework in action, transitions are places within youth-produced films where youth explicitly manage the construction of a viable social identity. Often, different perspectives on how youth see themselves, how others see them, and how they fit into their communities are juxtaposed side-by-side and integrated in the transitional phases.

FORM AND THE FOUR FILMIC ELEMENTS

While social semiotic analyses help me to figure out how to chunk films into meaningful data units, this work does little to depict how the specific tools of film both cinematic (e.g., editing, cinematography) and filmic (music, action) (Burn & Parker, 2003) are used to construct and communicate identities. Forceville (2007) points out in his review of Baldry and Thibault’s book, Multimodal Transcription and Text Analysis (2006), that there are many tools of the trade specific to individual media, such as the concept of “Hollywood continuity editing” in film and “gutters” in comics that are instrumental to an understanding of how meaning is made with these media. Therefore, I turn to film theory to develop a coding scheme that can assist in the meaningful interpretation of the phases and transitions of youth-produced films. While film theory is a tremendous field with many different lenses to view the analysis of film, Bordwell and Thompson’s formal analysis is commonly recognized as one of the leading methods for engaging in a structural analysis of films (Miller & Stam, 2004), and has already been used in the design of school curricula to help students learn to “read” films as a parallel to the way students read and critique literature (Muller, 2006).

Bordwell and Thompson define form as, “the overall system of relations that we can perceive among the elements in the whole film” (p. 49).
Formal film theory seeks to answer the question, what does this film represent? Films are broken down into four sets of cinematic techniques that help to answer this question:

- **Mise en scène** refers to anything within the frame of the camera. Aspects of *mise en scène* relevant to an analysis of short-form documentaries include subject-related elements (facial expressions, gestures, body movements, and clothing/makeup choices), setting, scripted features, and style.
- **Sound** refers to anything you hear in the film. There are three categories of sound: dialogue, sound effects, and music. Additionally, sound can be classified as diegetic (in the story world, as in dialogue), non-diegetic (outside the story world, as in music inserted during the editing stage), or internal diegetic (in the story world but not in the frame, as in a first person voice over).
- **Editing** refers to the work the filmmaker does after the shooting is completed in order to assemble the film and includes transitions, styles, devices (such as flashback and flashforward), and special effects.
- **Cinematography** refers to techniques used to alter the image seen through the camera lens such as lighting, focus, framing/composition, angle, shot types, camera movement, and duration of the image.

These four modes of representation serve as the basic coding categories for the youth films; they are parallel strands for my analytic framework. Using these categories to describe phases and transitions results in the creation of multilayered filmic transcripts that allow me to consider each mode individually, as well as how they connect to one another to help youth consider issues of identity in their films. For a full outline of analytic categories employed, see Appendix A.

THE “KINEIKONIC MODE”

A key feature of multimodal production is that meaning is constructed not just with individual modes, but also in the ways that modes interact with one another and what is created as a result of their interaction (Burn & Parker, 2003; Hull & Katz, 2006; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Burn and Parker (2003) refer to this as the *kineikonic mode*, “literally, the mode of the moving image” (p. 13). The analytic framework I have created captures the kineikonic mode. Coding phases and transitions for the four elements of film allows me to see how the elements work together,
and to determine which are strongest (most salient at a given point in
time) and how the elements impact one another.
Hull and Nelson (2005) describe the need for understanding the
typekonic mode in their analysis of digital stories produced in their
youth media arts organization, DUSTY:

As an irreducibly multimodal composition, ‘Lyfe-N-Rhyme’ is
not just a good poem whose meaning is enhanced because it has
been illustrated and set to music; rather, we would argue that the
meaning that a viewer or listener experiences is qualitatively dif-
ferent, transcending what is possible via each mode separately.”
(p. 251)

Digital stories use still images, coupled with words and music, to con-
vey a message. The analytic tool Hull and Nelson (2005) built, however,
focused solely on images and words and how these modes interact, leav-
ing music out of their analysis. This is problematic, given their assertion
that “the real task as we see it, was to understand both the individual and
combinatory semiotic contributions made to the synthetic whole by its
material components” (p. 234). Attending to the typekonic mode by
chunking films into phases and coding for the four filmic elements
addresses this challenge. Figure 1 depicts the relationship between
phases and transitions and the four filmic elements.

CONTEXT FOR WORKING WITH A FILMIC ANALYSIS

This framework has been designed within the context of a larger study
that explores youth filmmaking. In this study, we examine both the prod-
ucts of the youth filmmaking process and the process itself, what youth
learn through their participation, and similarities and differences among
organizations that work with youth to make films. Here, I look just at the
products of these filmmaking processes, by pursuing two interrelated
research questions:

1) What are youth making films about?
2) How can we analyze youth produced films as multimodal artifacts of
   youth engagement with identity?

To address the first question, my research team used an online data-
base of youth media organizations, ListenUp! (www.listenup.org), that
provides a network, as well as a public forum for the online presentation
of the youth-produced films. Initially, we conducted a content analysis of
the sample (Mayring, 2000) that focused on genre, subject, and theme. *Identity* emerged as a prominent theme through our iterative coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Among the 236 films my research team viewed in our initial analysis, we coded 33% with this theme. Drawing on Coté and Levine’s (2002) description of a “viable social identity” as a way to operationalize identity in youth products (Halverson, 2005), we labeled films as being “about identity” if there was explicit attention paid to how youth saw themselves, how others saw them, and/or how they fit into their communities in their films.

In order to explore films (and the filmmaking processes) that dealt explicitly with issues of identity in greater depth, we selected four case
study organizations from across the country that work with youth to make films about the stories of their lives. These ethnographic case studies (Stake, 1995, 2000) involved interviews with organizational leaders and youth, observations of the filmmaking process, and the collection of artifacts that trace the development of films over time including initial essays, oral “pitches” to professionals, initial and revised treatments, and the film itself in various stages of editing. A holistic analysis of these organizations has revealed a reciprocal relationship between the organization’s understanding of “identity” within the communities of youth with which they work, and a filmmaking process that supports the positive development of identity in that community (Halverson, et al., in press). It is the films made within the context of these organizations that I have used in the construction and demonstration of my analytic framework.

REEL WORKS TEEN FILMMAKING

One of our case study organizations is Reel Works Teen Filmmaking, a non-profit organization in New York City that supports teen filmmaking in an out-of-school environment. Reel Works is a non-profit organization founded in 2001 by two filmmakers interested in bringing the art of filmmaking to youth. Every participant enters Reel Works through The Lab, a 20-week program during which 12 adolescents write, shoot, and edit short-form documentaries about the stories of their lives or about issues that are important to them. The Reel Works executive director has described the films as either autobiographical, “or presented through an autobiographical lens” (Interview, 7/27/07). Participants are shepherded through the process by their own mentor, a professional filmmaker or editor who supports that participant at every stage. Once youth complete The Lab, they are invited to work with Reel Works staff, mentors, and peers to create other films of any genre of their choosing. By requiring each participant to work on an individual film that tells a story about their lives, the organization places the development of individual identity at the center of the process, while at the same time supporting learning about the art of film within the constraints of short-form documentary. I have chosen one such documentary, Rules of Engagement, as a prototypical Reel Works film that illustrates my analytic framework. The film is discussed in more detail in the analysis section.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The purpose of this paper is to put forth a new analytic tool for exploring youth films as products of identity. In order to demonstrate this tool
in action, I have analyzed a single film, *Rules of Engagement*. *Rules of Engagement* was produced by Reel Works Lab participant Noeman Samdani in 2004. *Rules of Engagement* is a short-form documentary, approximately six minutes long, a typical length and genre for Reel Works Lab films. Noeman describes his film on the Reel Works website as a way to introduce it to potential viewers:

> Sometimes I find it hard to be a good Muslim and an American teenager. My dreams for my future are so different from what my parents want me to do. They think they have better plans for me. Throughout the making of this film, I have learned what being a Muslim is truly about and have realized that I am not the only Muslim teen going through this struggle. ([http://www.reel-works.org/watch.php](http://www.reel-works.org/watch.php))

As I have made clear throughout this article, meaning is constructed with film through the interaction of its elements (Burn & Parker, 2003; Hull & Nelson, 2005). The first step in this analysis is determining how each individual element is used throughout the film. In the sections that follow, I will describe how Noeman uses the filmic elements within the phases and transitions of his film as tools to communicate complex issues of identity. In the final section, I will explore how these elements work together as a film where Noeman represents a viable social identity—how he sees himself, how others see him, and how he fits into the communities to which he belongs.

To conduct this analysis, I use Transana ([http://www.transana.org](http://www.transana.org)), video analysis software that allows you to create clips of video and analyze these clips as moving parts. With this software, I am able to explore individual clips, tag these clips with key words, and systematically explore analytically interesting relationships between clips. Transana allows me to analyze films as films, rather than extracting individual images or creating text-based transcripts independent of the moving images.

**PHASES**

Noeman’s film is divided into five phases, some with sub-phases. There are also explicit transitions between every phase, which I will discuss in more detail later on.

*Phase 1: Introduction to Islam from different perspectives.* In this first phase, Noeman introduces all of his interview subjects through their short takes on the meaning of Islam and being a Muslim.

*Transition 1: “I love my faith, but …”* Noeman turns the camera on him-
self as we see him walking and wondering about the tension between his faith and his hopes for the future.

**Phase 2: Arranged marriages.** This is the longest phase of the film, where Noeman’s parents and peers reflect on the Muslim tradition of arranged marriages, whether it is the right thing to do and how it will affect Noeman’s life. This phase has three sub-phases: In the first sub-phase, Noeman’s peers and parents give their opinions on arranged marriages. In the second sub-phase, Noeman changes the cinematography and sound of the film thus far, and himself reflects upon arranged marriages. In the final phase, Noeman returns to his mother and they have a dialogue (with him off-screen) about how he should simply trust her and agree to an arranged marriage.

**Transition 2: “That other problem.”** Switching topics, Noeman moves from the discussion of arranged marriages to his, “other problem,” which we know has something to do with movies, based on the images of a Bollywood film and an American film that bump into each other onscreen.

**Phase 3: Career path.** In this phase, Noeman’s parents and peers discuss his career options. He wants to be a filmmaker, while his mother wants him to be a doctor.

**Transition 3: “Pursue my own path …”** Noeman again turns the camera on himself for an extended shot of him with a video camera as he reflects in voiceover about the possibility of pursuing his own path.

**Phase 4: Follow my own path.** In the final phase of the film, Noeman’s peers and parents discuss whether or not Noeman should pursue his dreams despite his parent’s wishes.

**Phase 5: Credits.** The credits in this film have dynamic meaning; Noeman uses them as an occasion to introduce the audience to the film’s “characters,” their ages, and whether or not their marriages have been (or will be) arranged.

Even without a more in-depth microanalysis of this movie, it is clear the film is about identity. More specifically, it is about struggling to fit together different aspects of self across multiple communities and representing the social identity category, “Muslim American teenagers.” I have chosen this film for analysis specifically because the connection to issues of identity is apparent—in the sections that follow, I will demonstrate how the medium of film specifically affords engagement with these issues.

**MISE EN SCÈNE**

Noeman uses *mise en scène*, the elements in front of the camera, in several different ways, to address issues of identity. First, he uses the physical set-
ting of the filmed space to highlight the multiple worlds he must navigate. The interviews with Noeman’s parents are conducted in their home, while interviews with peers are conducted in several settings, outside, in a library/classroom and in front of a brightly colored mural. The mural setting is particularly interesting, since the person who is least associated with Islamic values, a girl whom Noeman deeply admires, is shot in front of a vibrant, multicolored mural. In addition to the settings used for filming, Noeman employs several visual tropes, images that provide an easy reference to a particular racial or cultural group (Fleetwood, 2005). These visual tropes include a Middle Eastern-style mural, a painting of a Mosque, and three men praying. These images help us to locate Noeman as part of a traditional culture.

More interesting than the use of these settings and visual tropes is the way they interact with other filmic elements. For example, Noeman often illustrates the differences between his parents’ world and the world of his peers by using hard cuts—a term used in editing to refer to fast, seamless transitions between different shots—between interviews with his parents and those of his peers. For example, a shot of Nisha, the least traditional of Noeman’s subjects, stands in front of a brightly colored background advocating for the importance of independent choices. A hard cut to Noeman’s mother juxtaposes this image with a woman, seated and wearing a traditional sari, explaining to Noeman the consequences of breaking with tradition. Table 1 demonstrates the differences between these two settings and how the settings are integrated with other filmic elements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mise en scène</th>
<th>Nisha stands in front of a brightly colored mural, wearing Western clothes</th>
<th>Mom sits on a couch in front of a mirror in a living room, dressed in traditional sari.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>I think that you should definitely pursue your own dream. I mean, you’re not going to be happy in your life if you follow what your parents say, and, uh, you’re never going to be able to wake up in the morning and say, oh, I like going to my job, I like doing what I do, and I feel that that’s just the worst punishment ever.</td>
<td>Mom: Oh, you will not, you will not listen to me? Noeman: No Mom: Then forget it. You will never get a penny from us. That’s it, goodbye. I will donate all my property to the mosque.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinematography</td>
<td>Handheld shot</td>
<td>Static shot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hard cut</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The choice of settings and interview subjects highlights the tensions between a traditional household and a Muslim American youth culture that is diverse in its opinions about specific issues (some support arranged marriages while others oppose it) but united in its Westernized, modern look. The communities to which Noeman belongs (one aspect of the development of a viable social identity) are highlighted through these choices and make clear the tension between belonging to a traditional Muslim family and living in the United States as Westernized Muslim.

SOUND

There are two key ways that Noeman plays with sound to represent issues of identity. The first is his use of different sources of sound, what Bordwell and Thompson (2004) call spatial dimensions: internal versus internal diegetic and non-diegetic. According to Bordwell and Thompson, “internal diegetic sound is that which comes from inside the mind of a character” (p. 368); it is how the audience knows what a character is thinking. Noeman employs internal diegetic sound three times throughout his film—each of these is in a transition between phases and gives him an opportunity to give his personal reflections on the issue previously presented. For example, following the section of the film on arranged marriages, Noeman asks through internal diegetic reflection, “Why can’t I be with someone that I personally admire?” Noeman questions the wisdom of arranged marriages and represents himself as someone who wants a life partner that he feels strongly about.

Noeman also blurs the distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic sound by making his off-screen voice heard in several scenes in which he is behind the camera. Noeman uses this technique often—six times throughout the film. The result is that, while the camera is focused on the interview subject, the audience is always made aware that Noeman is the person to whom they are talking and that their responses are directed specifically at how they see him. For example, during an interview with Noeman’s mother, they have the following exchange about his arranged marriage:

Mom: You will love that girl. Why not?
Noeman: I don’t even know her, how will I love her?
Mom: She’s pretty, beautiful. She’s from a highly educated family. And, uh, when you see her I bet you will love her.
Noeman: Did you ever show me any of her pictures?
Mom: You don’t need. You don’t need to. You should trust me.
While his mother’s opinion—the way she thinks Noeman should be—is foregrounded through her presence on screen and her responses to his questions, Noeman’s use of his off-camera voice reminds us that he is still struggling with the idea of himself that his mother has constructed, even pushing back on it.

EDITING

I have already discussed the way Noeman employs hard cuts as a method of contrasting the divergent elements of his life, for example, his mother juxtaposed with a modern, Muslim American young woman. This is prevalent throughout the film as a mechanism to communicate the vastly different ways that the people in his life interpret Noeman’s dual identity. Noeman also uses slow motion twice throughout the film to highlight his point of view. In one instance, Noeman slows down a shot of the modern young woman who speaks out against traditional values. In this shot, she is seen flipping her hair away from her face, smiling in the direction of the camera and walking away. This image is juxtaposed with Noeman’s internal diegetic voice, following the section on arranged marriages, which wonders, “Why can’t I be with someone that I personally admire?” It is clear from the connection between the choice of mise en scène (the young woman), editing (the slow motion shot of her), and sound (internal diegetic reflection) that Noeman sees himself as a part of his family (asking “Why can’t I?” rather than asserting “I will”), but wanting to make changes to these traditions at the same time.

CINEMATOGRAPHY

Noeman makes a consistent choice in cinematography throughout the film to use static shots when filming his parents and handheld shots when filming his friends. These shots are often tightly juxtaposed against one another, conveying the difference between the static nature of his parents’ interviews and the more fluid, relaxed feel of the interviews with his peers. In one instance, Noeman walks with the camera, following his interview subject as he walks, conveying the feeling of a casual conversation between friends. Again, as audience members, we are made to feel that Noeman navigates both these worlds, and perhaps acts differently given the circumstances he finds himself in.

Throughout the film, Noeman often uses cinematography to insert his point of view—he uses the tilt movement of the camera, “as if the camera’s head were swiveling up and down,” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004, p. 267) to stand in for the nodding of his own head. We are reminded
that the camera lens is actually Noeman’s eye; he answers in the affirmative to a question as the camera lens moves up and down. This personalizes the interviewees’ responses in the same way that his off-screen voice does—he communicates that the interview subjects are referring to him, how they see him, and what that means for his sense of who he is.

Noeman turns the camera on himself at several points throughout the film—in Transition Three, “pursue my own path,” he chooses a low angle shot, by which the camera is beneath the focus of the shot, giving the impression that the audience is beneath the subject. The camera remains stationary while Noeman holds a video camera and is rotated 180 degrees (via an unseen platform) so that the audience comes to see him holding a video camera and looking off into the distance as if he is filming something. The low angle gives the impression that Noeman is larger than life, and as this version of Noeman comes into view, his voiceover says, “I wonder what would happen if I pursued my own path against my parents’ wishes.” It is clear that this is the way he sees himself, and that this is a position of strength; as a filmmaker, Noeman appears to be eight feet tall. Figure 2 is a screenshot of Noeman seen from a low angle.

Figure 2. Low angle screen shot of Noeman with video camera

COMBINATION OF FILMIC ELEMENTS: TRANSITIONS

As I have already discussed, one of the key features of multimodal products is that their modes work in connection with one another to produce
a unique set of meanings. It is not enough to say that youth filmmakers use the elements of film—*mise en scène*, sound, editing, and cinematography—to tell their stories; the real question is how these elements work together to produce this story. The clearest places in Noeman’s film where we can see filmic elements explicitly working together is in the transitions between phases. The Reel Works executive director confirmed the special attention transitions are given in the filmmaking process:

From a storytelling perspective, no one on camera is saying that we need to make this transition from here to there, and so basically in order to change the subject we have to say something … So we structure [the film] around these spaces where this voice over is going to be. (Interview, 7/27/07)

There are three transitions in Noeman’s film, one between each of the first four phases. Common across these phases is the function they serve in inserting Noeman’s first-person perspective of himself into an otherwise second-person perspective. These transitions are the primary space where Noeman (and other Reel Works filmmakers) directly explore the development of a viable social identity, a public presentation of self that incorporates how they see themselves, how other people see them, and how they fit into their communities. In the Reel Works filmmaking process, transitions are accorded special status, markers to return to during editing to tie the film together. What does, in fact, tie the film together is the filmmaker’s perspective, the “I”—“without the ‘I’ [the films] wouldn’t work” (Interview, 7/27/07).

The first transition is a good example of how filmic elements work together to represent a public presentation of viable social identity. This 14-second transition marks the break between the *Introduction* and *Arranged marriage* phases of the film. It features two shots and three sounds introduced at different times throughout these 14 seconds. Each time a new element is introduced, it acquires salience or newness, as the other elements remain constant. As viewers, we attend to the new element precisely because it changes within the context of otherwise stable elements within the film (Baldry & Thibault, 2006). The initial shot is a long shot of three Muslim men praying. Traditional music plays in the background, but as a non-diegetic sound, that is, inserted after the fact rather than actually playing in the setting itself. Then, while the music continues, a hard cut switches to a different shot, a medium close-up of Noeman. He is walking down the street, and the camera tracks him on a dolly, moving in parallel. His movement is slowed slightly, giving the
image a slow-motion feel. We know it is Noeman, because soon after this shot is introduced, the music fades and an internal diegetic voiceover says, “I love my faith, but it’s getting in the way of my hopes and dreams.” Throughout this continuous shot, the traditional Muslim music fades out, Noeman speaks, and then the music is replaced by a loud, modern beat and a rhythmic chant of, “Hey! Hey! Hey!” — a modern musical sound. The overall effect of this transition space is a demonstration of the tension between traditional Muslim family values and Noeman’s desire to be a modern Muslim American teenager, and that he sees himself as caught in between. Noeman represents himself visually, aurally, and in the mixing of these modes as he continuously shifts our focus from the traditional, to Noeman as an individual, to the modern.

DISCUSSION

The function of this analytic framework is to understand how youth filmmakers use the medium of film to address complex issues of identity, particularly the construction of a viable social identity. However, while Rules of Engagement is a film about Noeman, it is also a representation of Muslim American teenagers as a social identity category. In my previous work on adolescents’ construction of plays from their life stories, I describe the challenge of representation as constructing a balance between the story’s reportability and its credibility. Reportability refers to the story’s uniqueness, that which makes it worth telling, while the story’s credibility refers to the features that make it believable to an outside audience (Halverson, 2008). Youth organizations encourage adolescents to tell the stories of their lives precisely because they are reportable, but if there is no credibility in their public representations, audiences will not take their stories seriously.

In the case of documentary filmmaking, stories often gain credibility through their use of original, unplanned footage. While the filmmaker preplans where, who, and how they will shoot, they do not tell their interview subjects what to say or do in response to their questions. Once the footage is shot, the filmmaker is able to bring their perspective to bear on what their interview subjects have told them. Many of the authors I have drawn on for this analysis are interested in this relationship between the unplanned actions and words of subjects and the editing choices that bring the filmmaker’s perspective to bear on these actions and words (Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Burn & Parker, 2003; van Leeuwen, 1985). In fact, Burn and Parker (2003) take as their essential question, “How do preplanned and improvised aspects of design and production shape the kinds of representation made by the filmmakers?” (p. 13). One instance
of this interaction between unplanned actions and the filmmaker’s perspective can be seen in *Rules of Engagement*, in the final shot before the credits phase. In this shot, Noeman’s father reacts to the possibility of Noeman becoming a filmmaker. He tells Noeman he will “kick his butt,” and laughs, then finishes speaking. The shot lingers on Noeman’s father for four seconds, and he sits in awkward silence. Then he asks, “You can cut it, no? What’s the director about?” using hand gestures to emphasize the “cut” and his questioning of Noeman’s function in making the film. These questions are followed by a hard cut blackout, a transition to the credits phase.

This interactional space between subjects and filmmaker demonstrates where reportability and credibility are explored within the filmic storytelling process. However, even with explicit attention to this balance, there is no guarantee that the audience will read reportability and/or credibility in the film. In *Rules of Engagement*, Noeman’s parents come across as dynamic, strong personalities. His mother in particular chooses to wear traditional dress, and uses strong, almost accusatory language in her responses to Noeman’s questions. In her response to his claim that he will not listen to her, she says, “Then forget it. You will never get a penny from us. That’s it. Goodbye. I will donate all my property to the Mosque.” Noeman portrays her as a reportable character, uniquely his mother, and uniquely shaping his life and decisions. And, in fact, her character may prove both reportable and credible to some audiences, especially those who are not intimately familiar with Muslim American families. But to audiences who are closer and may share the social identity category, “Muslim American teenager,” his mother may read as a stereotype, and not at all as a credible representation of how they understand their community. While this article offers an internal framework for analyzing youth films as products of identity, it does not give us a method for considering how these films are received. This is a constituent challenge of any artistic process in which personal stories of identity are being represented. It is one that deserves more attention in the future.

There are several ways that I intend to continue to open up artistic processes where youth represent the stories of their lives. The analytic framework presented here is just one piece of a rich social, cultural, and historical picture of how youth learn to make films about the stories of their lives. The products themselves tell us a little about the process of filmmaking, but they do demonstrate the ways adolescents from marginalized groups actively represent a viable social identity. It is through case studies of the organizations themselves and the work youth do in these organizations that we can develop a full picture of how youth learn to
make films, what they understand about the filmmaking process, and the relationship between process and product. Youth are also making films about the stories of their lives independent of youth organizations. A comparison of what youth understand about multimodal composition and how to use these tools to represent complex issues of identity would be a powerful way to isolate filmmaking as a process from the work of organizations.

Notes

1. While “identity” is a prominent issue in youth filmmaking, it is not the only issue that youth media arts organizations address. Other prominent themes that emerged from our analysis include concerns affecting teens more generally such as underage drinking, teen pregnancy, and bullying, civic issues such as the environment and public school funding, and fictional stories.

2. “In the long shot, figures are more prominent, but the background still dominates” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004, p. 262).

3. “The medium close-up frames the body from the chest up” (Ibid).

References


APPENDIX

List of coding terms
Adapted from Bordwell & Thompson (2004).

Mise en scène
  Subject-related
    Facial expressions
    Gestures & body movements
    Clothing & makeup choices
  Setting
  Scripted features
  Style

Editing
  Transitions
    Hard cut
    Fade
    Dissolve
  Flashback
  Flashforward
  Special effects
    Freeze frame
    Reverse motion

Cinematography
  Lighting
  Focus
  Framing & composition
  Angle
    High (bird’s eye view)
    Low (upward tilt)
    Dutch angle (diagonal tilt)

Shot types
  Long
  Medium
  Close-up
  Static
  Zoom
  Eye-level
  POV

Camera movement
  Pan
  Tilt
Dolly (tracking)
Handheld
Steadycam
Duration of image
Long take

Sound
Dialogue
Sound effects
Music
Diegetic
Non-diegetic
Internal diegetic