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Lovink, G.

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THE ART OF WATCHING DATABASES INTRODUCTION TO THE VIDEO VORTEX READER

GEERT LOVINK

Die Zeit: Do you concern yourself with new media and technology?

Jean-Luc Godard: I try to keep up. But people make films on the Internet to show that they exist, not in order to look at things.

If we're all watching cats flushing toilets, what aren't we reading? What great writer are we missing? What great story are we ignoring? This is societal, it's cultural, I can't change it. Like everybody else, I can burn an hour on YouTube or Perez Hilton without breaking a sweat. And what have I just not paid attention to that 10 years ago I would've just consumed? - *Brian Williams*

This reader brings together recent critical research into the rapid-growing field of online video. Even though this technology was already there around 1997 with platforms such as RealVideo, it was only in 2006 that millions of users got familiar with the small video screens when YouTube reached a critical mass of short video clips. The video-sharing website YouTube, founded early 2005 as one of the many Web 2.0 start-ups, was sold to Google in late 2006. Soon after, the first students approached our Institute of Network Cultures with the request for titles of YouTube publications. We can have a laugh at such a naïve demand for instant theory, but the question seemed legitimate: is it possible to develop a critical theory of real-time developments? Can concepts be developed that go beyond the uncritical fan culture, as promoted by Henry Jenkins, and question the corporate PR management rhetoric, without downplaying the creative-artistic and social-political use of online video? That's what fascinated us when we initiated the Video Vortex project early 2007, resulting in a Brussels conference (October 2007), an exhibition in Amsterdam (Fall 2007, organized by The Netherlands Media Art Institute), and a two-day conference in Amsterdam (January 2008). The project is now about to travel the world and the seven seas, with Video Vortex 3 scheduled in Ankara, Turkey, in October 2008. But before we turn global, it is good to present here the original ideas behind the event concept.

The Database Turn

We no longer watch films or TV; we watch databases. Instead of well-defined programmes, we search one list after another. We are no longer at the mercy of cranky reviewers and mono-cultural multiplexes. What we run up against is the limitations of our own mental capacity. Which search terms will yield the best fragments? What was that title again? Does anyone know that director's name? What was that band called? What category was it under?

Does he know someone else with interesting tastes? Was that reference blogged anywhere? Does she know the URL? Was it under pets or entertainment? Welcome to snack culture: watch a clip and move on.

Searchability

At this point, the far-reaching implications of database-watching are somewhat uncertain. The technological character of the search process deserves more attention. The hunt for (and among) moving images is becoming just as important as looking at the search results. But we're all too happy to integrate YouTube into our busy daily lives so we don't have to think about the implications of watching the computer 24/7. It's already a cultural fact that we take TV everywhere with us and watch a quick clip while we're waiting at the bus stop. What does it mean that our attention is being guided by database systems? Is searching really more important than finding? Why has searchability become such an essential organising principle? Why is our personal relationship to the relational database being pushed? Who will show us around and tell us which keywords will find us something interesting? And are we really in dialogue with the Machine? Cultural awareness of how the algorithms work is still a long way off. Are the answers to our questions really democratically determined by users, as is often suggested, or are there editors in the background recommending the 'most popular videos'?

WWW-ADHD

But cultural pessimists complain all too gladly about the fall of the Grand Narrative. Not only do we read too few books, we now also watch too few films and too little TV. Like small children, we are unable to sit still and pay attention while Father Cinema reads us a story. The 'modern neurosis' Freud spoke of now manifests itself in the way we scatter our attention in cyberspace. Attentive watching and listening have given way to diffuse multitasking. When we sit down at the computer, we all get ADHD. During video clips, which last an average of just 2 ½ minutes, we jump up and down, sing along, play air guitar. We behave like hyperactive children receiving too little attention, and if we don't like something, we scream at the drop of a hat, or immediately turn to something else, conclude psychologists who study online behaviour.

Collective fun

Automatic infantilisation occurs because Authority is nowhere in sight. Power definitely exists but remains invisible and unnameable. Google permits everything, from porn to politically incorrect jokes; no one notices anyway (or so it seems). In this danger-free communication zone, which is itself barely out of diapers, we relive our childhoods, aware that unknown companies are watching over our shoulders. The power that controls us is just as anonymous as we believe we are. As long as we have not yet internalised the Network as authority, there's no problem. So it's important to extend the naïve phase as long as possible and avoid spoiling the collective fun. This is the dilemma of radical YouTube criticism: why spoil the fun of millions of people who have long known how intimately they are being watched?

A baby boy dancing on YouTube has wound up tangled in a legal dispute with pop star Prince and one of the world's biggest record companies. Stephanie Lenz shot a video of her toddler bobbing to Prince's 1980s hit 'Let's Go Crazy'. In the video, the little boy is

running around the kitchen while the song plays in the background. After shooting the video, Lenz uploaded it on to YouTube so that friends and family could see it.¹

The camera as *stilo*

Old-media YouTube commentary usually goes no further than complaining about the Decline of the Occident in general and of copyright in particular. What users are searching for – and finding – we never find out. The popular YouTube videos with their lame entertainment character are not just random junk; they touch the essence of this cultural technology. Think of the 'happy slapping' category, which mimics Hollywood film violence for fun down the street. Or the Turkish band with offensive lyrics whose videos were banned. After the phase of entertainment as diversion, we are now being literally and figuratively diverted all over the Net. Every situation and thought is YouTube-worthy. The *cinéma-vérité* generation's wish for the camera to become a '*stilo*' has come true: the billions are scratching away with abandon.

Mirror

YouTube's slogan, 'Broadcast Yourself', is put into action by less than 1 per cent of its users. In this Long Tail age, we know that it's mainly about 'Broadcasting to Yourself'. The Internet is used mainly as a mirror. In a macroeconomic sense, it's about the millions of films watched every day, which provide Google (YouTube's owner) with a treasure trove of user data. What is your 'association' economy worth? Am I really aware of why I'm clicking from one clip to the next? If not, we can always reread our own history on YouTube. We can find out everything – but mainly about ourselves: what the most popular channel is, which friend has watched this video. And then, after a while, we get tired of all the mediagenic American college students with their mainstream rock-'n'-roll tastes, and we click away again.

Total Attention

As we watch YouTube material, other windows are naturally also open. One person is chatting or Skype-ing, sending an email or reading a blog; the other is playing a game or talking on the phone. Cultural studies researchers established long ago that we daydream while we watch films and do the washing up while the TV is on. The Total Attention ideal is achieved only in retirement homes. Online video has incorporated this discovery into its architecture. As a clip plays on the left, 'related videos' by the same uploader appear on the right. The computer interface is geared toward more of the same. Antagonistic or dialectical programming is still a long way off. Similarly to other social networks, which assume we have an incestuous desire to be just like our friends, online video sites assume I want to be exactly like you. The essential fact of postmodernity – namely that we seek difference, not similarity – has not yet got through to the Web 2.0 entrepreneurial class.

Teenage blues

The coded maxim here is: I want to see what you see. What are my friends watching? What are their favourite videos? Associative surfing is out. Getting lost in the teenage blues is for losers who don't understand what fun is. It's about brief peaks. Those who seek depth are

1. <http://www.ctv.ca/news>

simply barking up the wrong tree. Online video interfaces aren't about increasing the information overview. The many open programmes signify intensive engagement; they're not signs of a misspent life. Today, rather than an unintended side effect, multitasking is the essence of the media experience.

Time is the message

We must take database-watching seriously, not dismiss it as 'consuming video clips'. Watching videos online is something people occupy themselves with for hours – longer than the average feature film's 90 minutes. It is inherent in the interface that we keep going and going and the clip chain continues forever. Allowing oneself to be led by an endlessly branching database is the cultural constant of the early 21st century. The online dream trip must not end. The brevity of many online videos does not detract from this. Their short-lived character suits the meagre concentration people can muster for the average media product. Why watch when we already know the message in advance and figure out which one it is within a few seconds? Packed within a few minutes of video can be hours of material whose deeper meaning viewers can spend years deciphering. Have fun decoding the images. But no one will ever get around to that again. Time Is the Message: what we are consuming with online video is our own lack of time. And in all our haste, we forget to click 'clear viewing history'.