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## YouTube, MeTube: Israeli artist reveals the inner workings of the Internet video database

When we watch YouTube, YouTube watches us back. The artist and writer Boaz Levin explains why the first clip posted to the popular website could be considered the first 'selfie.'

By Ido Kenan | Jul. 8, 2013 | 6:00 PM

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Jawed Karim appears in a 20-second video filmed at the elephant compound of the San Diego Zoo. "All right, so here we are at the, uhh, elephants," he says to the camera. "Cool thing about these guys is that they have really, really, really long trunks. And that's, that's cool. And that's pretty much all there is to say."

And that's pretty much all there was in the first video ever uploaded to YouTube, which Karim cofounded. "Me at the zoo" has been viewed more than 11.5 million times since it was posted, in April 2005. But Boaz Levin, an artist and theorist who studied at Jerusalem's Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design and has a bachelor's degree from the Berlin University of the Arts, considers it a seminal work.

"Whether he was aware of it or not, Karim, the elephants from the San Diego Zoo and his website have changed the way we consume and think about moving pictures forever," Levin says.

Levin spoke Monday about on YouTube's metamorphosis from a video channel to a database, as part of a symposium associated with the Jerusalem Film Festival and titled, "Anatomy and Autonomy of the Moving Image: Video & Experimental Cinema in the Last Decade." The symposium, at the Jerusalem Cinematheque, continues through Tuesday.

In an interview before his presentation, Levin identifies in Karim's clip the early characteristics of the "YouTube medium" - short, low-quality videos in the standard 4:3 aspect ratio format. "In addition, and this is especially important, the website founder was filming himself; he was the protagonist and the director," Levin stresses. "The name of the video, 'Me at the Zoo,' signals to viewers that this is a platform from which, in theory, everyone can broadcast. When he says 'me' he really means 'you.'"

"Moreover, and this is a really major point, while this clip was the first it can tell us very little about the website in isolation from other clips. YouTube is a site that's based on a database," Levin continues.

"When we view this clip, we get a menu on the side suggesting dozens of other clips; there are algorithms that suggest videos to us according to different variables. Our search terms are one major variable, but no less important is who we are - our gender, our search history, the amount of time we spent watching different clips. All these variables and more generate a profile that determines the result we'll get. In this, YouTube is totally different than the cinema, television, a novel or the theater: Video on the Internet is based on the logic of a database." Levin sees a close relationship between the algorithms that manage YouTube (and the Internet in general) and the concept of self-documentation.

"It could be, without even realizing it, that Karim and his friends created the 'selfie,' an Internet self-portrait that has won unprecedented popularity since the advent of smartphones and social networks. I think the selfie is one of the most prominent visual genres of the past decade, and I would argue that it's a genre that echoes the basic logic of databases operating in the shadow world of the Internet, particularly in the so-called Web 2.0 era.

"These websites are not passive," Levin notes. "They don't only store information and make it accessible as-is to the viewer or user. His viewing and use habits are also being stored in the same databases. Google is not just a search engine that aggregates huge quantities of information and enables the user to sift through it easily, it's a website that is also storing information about the user, information through which it will decide what to show him and in what order. The selfie, in this respect, can serve as a symbol of this mutual feedback that always exists in contemporary databases."

Another seminal video clip, he says, is Korean singer Psy's "Gangnam Style," the most widely seen video in the history of YouTube, with 1.72 billion views.

"The video and the song follow the logic of the mash-up, another genre that is especially suited to the age of databases and online video," Levin says. "The musical and visual mash-up is a quote of a quote, a conglomeration of styles that change at a frantic pace. [Gangnam Style] is a clip that sort of competes for the viewer's attention, it's full of stimuli, catchy anthems and styles that change at a pace that don't allow him to browse to other content.

"YouTube is an ungrateful platform that does not enable the cinema or theater to maintain their exclusivity and moves away from the zapping of television," Levin says. "YouTube is the graveyard of duration, a market in which the hottest merchandise is the user's attention."

Levin says that in 2012 YouTube changed its algorithm responsible for recommendations to reflect this: Instead of the number of viewers being the deciding factor in the ranking of videos, viewing time became even more influential. "The 'attention economy,' as theorists call it, has thus gotten its most direct expression," he says.

He recalls that in 2010-2011 the German artist Martin Kohout created the "Watching Martin Kohout" series - hundreds of videos in which Kohout is filmed watching YouTube videos.

"Kohout demonstrates in the most literal way possible that this is a platform that watches its viewers, no less than the viewers watch it," Levin says. "He also plays the role of the typical Internet consumer who, since the Web 2.0 revolution, has become a producer no less than a consumer, or a combination of them - a 'prosumer,' as this hybrid is frequently referred to in the media and the world of theory."

He also refers to the 20th-century media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who said, "The content of any medium is always another medium." On YouTube, says Levin, the other medium is the "tube," television, for which it is named. But the future of YouTube is the self:

"If the last century was 'the century of the self,' the same subject that became the object of study for psychoanalysis and the object of desire for consumer culture, it could be, as director and journalist Adam Curtis has said, that we are on the verge of the selfie era; an era in which the subject provides the self-portrait from which facts and useful information are mined," Levin says.

"This is an era where probability theory and data mining are replacing psychoanalysis as the main tool for understanding and building a subject profile. The direction in which the technology is going clearly indicates this. The selfie on Facebook is being used as a tool to improve Facebook's algorithms for facial recognition, the user's browsing habits, his viewing, his consumption, his urges, desires and habits."

This future is not necessarily rosy, Levin says.

"It's hard to say how this will affect video, the way people tell a story. The Internet, which is supposedly a factory for democracy and lack of hierarchy, for revolutions and independent thought, could very quickly become a homogenous place whose taste has been engineered to meet the needs of the market down to the last millimeter or millisecond."