

Lev Manovich: how to speak new media

Interviewed by Daniel Palmer

[The following interview was originally published in the Australian arts newspaper, *Real Time*, Issue 44, August-September, 2001, p25.

<http://www.realtimearts.net/rt44/lev.html>]

Lev Manovich suggests that if it had one, the subtitle of *The Language of New Media* (MIT Press, 2001) would be: "everything you always wanted to know about new media (but were afraid to ask Dziga Vertov)." Indeed, cinema is especially privileged in his ambitious examination of the continuities of new media with 'old media.' Currently an Associate Professor in the Visual Arts Department at the University of California, San Diego, Manovich was born in Moscow and holds advanced degrees in cognitive psychology and visual culture. Working with computer media for almost 20 years as an artist, designer, animator, computer programmer and teacher, his work has been published in more than 20 countries, and he frequently lectures on new media around the world. While working on a new book, *Info-Aesthetics*, his current artistic projects include Software for the 20th Century, a set of 3 'imaginary' software applications, and Macro-Cinema, a set of digital films to be exhibited as an installation at Cinema Future at ZKM next year. Manovich will be in Australia at the end of November to speak at conferences in Sydney and Melbourne.

DP: Why the language of 'new media'-which would seem to be a historically variable term-and not, for instance, 'digital culture' (given that you suggest that your method might be called 'digital materialism')?

LM: I decided to use 'new media' because this term is a standard one used both in the field and in popular media. At the same time, the term is open enough, a kind of a placeholder, and I like this open character. Historically, I think it appeared around 1990. Its emergence marked the shift from understanding the computer as a tool in the 1980s to a new understanding that the computer also came to function as a new medium (or, more precisely, a number of mediums: virtual space, network, screen-based multimedia, etc).

DP: Your book starts with scenes from Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera*, ends with a chapter called 'What is Cinema?', and a spool of film appears on the cover. Why is cinema so central to your understanding of new media?

LM: There are a few answers to this question. Cinema has been the most important cultural form of the 20th century, so it natural that new media both inherits many conventions from cinema (similar to how cinema itself inherited conventions from previous 19th century forms, in particular the novel) and also contains a promise of replacing cinema as the key form of the 21st century. Methodologically, I find the theory of cinema is more relevant to new media than, say, literary theory, because, cinema is a cultural form also heavily based on

technology; and the evolution of film language is closely linked to the technological developments and changes in cinema's industrial mode of production. Finally, I was originally attracted to new media in the early 1980s (then called 'computer graphics' and 'computer animation') because I saw in it the promise of being able to create films without big budgets, lots of heavy equipment and big crews-something which tools like DV cameras and Final Cut Pro running on a Powerbook has finally made possible, although it took about 20 years!

DP: Why a formal analysis of new media?

LM: Artists, designers, as well as museums and critics, need terms to talk about new media work. We can talk about a painting using such terms as 'composition', 'flatness', 'colour scheme' and we can talk about a film using such terms as 'plot', 'cinematography', and 'editing.' With new media, the existing discourse focuses on 2 extremes: either purely industrial terms such as 'Flash animation' or 'JPEG image' (which all describe software used and don't tell you much about the work's poetics and the user's experience of it), or rather abstract theoretical terms created during the previous historical period (between 1968 and 1989, ie between the student revolutions of 1968 and the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Soviet Communism) such as 'rhizome' and 'simulation.' I would like to help develop a vocabulary that will fill in the gap between these 2 extremes. The focus of my work is on trying to come up with new terms, which can be used to talk about the works-both their formal construction and also the interaction between the work and the user. So, to be more precise, my analysis is not strictly formal as it is also concerned with what literary theory has called 'reader response', the user's experience of new media.

DP: One of the distinctions you make in the book is between the database and narrative as competing symbolic forms. What is the significance of this contemporary shift to the database?

LM: The shift to the database can be understood as part of the larger shift from a traditional 'information-poor' society to our own 'information-rich' society. Narrative made sense for cultures based on tradition and a small amount of information circulating in a culture-it was a way to make sense of this information and tie it together (for instance, Greek mythology). Databases can be thought of as a new cultural form in a society where a subject deals with huge amounts of information, which constantly keep changing. It may be impossible to tie it all together in a set of narratives, but you can put it in a database and use a search engine to find what you are looking for, to find information which you are not aware of but which matches your interests and finally to even discover new categories. In short, a narrative is replaced by a directory or index.

DP: In your archaeology of the screen, a central opposition that you arrive at is that the contemporary (realtime) screen alternates between the dimensions of 'representation' and 'control.'

LM: I think that the opposition 'representation-control' provides a practical challenge to artists and designers of new media. There are 2 dimensions, which can be distinguished here: spatial and temporal. Spatial: how do you combine controls with a fictional image flow? For instance, how do you integrate menus and hot

spots in an interactive film screen? (This is often done by not having any menus on the screen but by allowing the user to control the program through the keyboard.) Temporal: how do you combine immersive segments and control segments? Typically the way this is done so far in computer games and other interactive narratives (for instance, in a very interesting Blade Runner game from a few years ago) is that an immersive section is followed by an interactive section, to be followed by another interactive section. More successful are the games where the 2 modes co-exist, such as first-person action games like Mario and Tomb Raider. You are the character and you continuously control it through a mouse or a joystick. There is another way to think about this opposition since we are talking about computer games. Traditional 'non-interactive' narratives (books, movies) are more concerned with representation and narrative immersion, what can be called 'narrative flow.' In contrast, all real-time games, from tennis to Unreal require the user to exercise continuous control. So the challenge and promise of combining a traditional narrative form such as a movie with a game is how to combine the 2 logics of narrative flow and realtime control into a new aesthetics.

DP: At one point you suggest that the computer is the ultimate and omnipresent Other of our age, and you say that the space of new media becomes "a mirror of the user's subjectivity", but for the most part you do not theorise the subjectivities enabled by new media.

LM: In *The Language of New Media* I am more concerned with formal analysis of new media works and their historical formation than with users' subjectivities. I am hoping to deal with the latter topic in more length in my next book, where I want to think through the common types of behaviour/subjectivity in our culture-information access (for instance, web surfing), information processing, realtime telecommunication (talking on a cell phone, chatting online) and so on.

DP: Can you elaborate on the link you make between the post-industrial mode of production and 'variable media'?

LM: Post-industrial modes of production use computer-based design, manufacturing and distribution to enable massive customisation. This involves constant updates of product lines; large sets of models/variation for a single line of products (think of hundreds of different sneaker design as can be seen in Niketown and similar stores), and the idea that a given product can be customised for an individual customer. Manufacturing involves materials, ie 'hardware'; since new media is all 'software', in new media computers enable more radical and more thorough customisation than in manufacturing. For instance, the user of an interactive site can select her own trajectory through it, thus in effect automatically 'customising' a work for herself. Or, when you visit a commercial website, its engine can automatically pull the information about your previous visits and your location to put up a customised version of the site for you, including which language version you get, the ads displayed, etc.

DP: Are there any current directions in art or popular culture of particular interest to you?

LM: I am interested in all directions in popular culture and their interactions: dance culture, music, fashion, internet culture, computer games, graphic and

industrial design. I am trying to educate myself about electronic music because I am convinced that the logic of digital media historically has always manifested itself in music before visual culture. In part this is because visual culture, in particular popular visual culture, is often representational, ie, photographs, illustrations, movies, all represent visual reality which puts limits on how images may look like. So it is in music that many key new ideas of digital media revealed themselves first: algorithmic composition, sampling and mixing as a new form of creativity, and online distribution of culture (MP3s on the internet).

As far as new media art is concerned, I am very impressed by Lisa Jevbratt's software which currently forms the basis of the online exhibition Mapping the Web Infome (<http://www.newlangtonarts.org/netart/infome>). Lisa invited a number of people (including me) to use her software to create their own Net Crawlers and to visualised the data they collect. In her words, "Just as the Human Genome Project strives to map the mysteries of the body's DNA, Mapping the Web Infome develops ways of representing the master plan behind the codes that created the Web. The newly commissioned net art project deploys software robots as cartographers of the continually changing internet and the resulting images chart the hidden relationships that lie beneath the screen's surface."

DP: Is net art dead?

LM: If we understand net art as an artistic and cultural practice which focused on a modernist analysis of an early period of the web (1994-1998), it is dead. As an institutional label for new media art as a whole, it is very much alive and gaining more and more recognition. What I don't like is that museums, art galleries, media and other cultural institution often use the term 'net art' as a stand in for 'new media art' (or 'digital arts') as a whole. As a result, the attention goes to net projects while many other distinct digital practices such as interactive computer installation, electronic music, interactive cinema, and hypermedia are ignored. In short, a particular practice is used as a stand in for the field as a whole. It happens in part not only because net art is the cheapest practice for museums to exhibit but also because we still do not have any real alternative to an aesthetic theory based around the idea of mediums. So now along with painting, sculpture, art on paper, film, and video we now have 'net art', ie art which uses the medium of a network.