Cultural Interfaces and the Aesthetics of (Dis)continuity – A Review of Lev Manovich’s *The Language of New Media*

Hmm. Another book about "new media". I’d like to think that one day I’ll be remembered as the scoffer who refused to use the term “new media”. It’s refreshing, therefore, to encounter a book that is not only judicious and prudent in its use of the term but rigorous and unrelenting in its attempt to disentangle and understand its locations. Lev Manovich’s *Language of New Media* is a timely book, timely in two senses of the term. First, in its detailed summary of how and in what contexts we should continue to invoke the notion of “new media”. Secondly, in its attempt to offer a "record and a theory of the present" (7), a "research paradigm" of new media during its first decade, before it slips into invisibility" (8). The first point is the motivation of the latter, in that the "invisibility" Manovich refers to is precisely the outcome of habitude, the relentless, unquestioned use of the term as an idiomatic part of contemporary speech. It is also an acknowledgment of the speed with which it has accelerated from an emerging cultural phenomenon to an established cultural formation. Invisibility is a measure of the degree to which the term and what it purportedly refers to have been taken for granted.

Manovich has two main, integrated strategies in *The Language of New Media*, each of which will be addressed in turn. The bulk of the text is devoted to theorising the language of new media as an extension and re-working of the language of cinema. Manovich’s goal, in this respect, is to demonstrate how "new media appropriate old forms and conventions of different media, in particular, cinema": grounding "new" media in cultural interfaces of the frame, as with cinema, as within the cultural logic of representation. New media may give rise to unprecedented, original aesthetic and re-working of the language of cinema. Manovich’s goal, in this respect, is to demonstrate how "new media appropriate old forms and conventions of different media, in particular, cinema": grounding "new" media in cultural interfaces of the frame, as with cinema, as within the cultural logic of representation. New media may give rise to unprecedented, original aesthetic and re-working of the language of cinema. 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Cinema, the major cultural form of the twentieth century, has found a new life as the toolbox of the computer age. The aesthetic strategies have become basic organizational principles of computer architecture. The window into a fictional world of a cinematic narrative has become a window into a database. In short, what was cinema is now the human-computer interface (86).

This, in short, is the essence of Manovich’s argument. Rather than having to find a theoretical language to articulate the language of new media, Manovich argues, on the whole convincingly, that what we understand to be the principles of new media aesthetics are already at work in older cultural forms such as cinema. Hence his talismanic use of Dziga Vertov’s 1929 film *Man with a Movie Camera* as a heuristic device.
throughout the book. Vertov's privileging of spatial over temporal montage represented a radical departure from what, even in the early days of the history of cinema, had become the standard structural means of organising time and space in a continuous sequence. As a mechanism for bringing together different images within the same moment, the same screen space, Vertov's spatial montage was doing something that would, in retrospect, seem very familiar to the age of discontinuity, of MTV, digital compositing, hypertext and databases. The artist, whether or not he or she is interested in telling a story, is first and foremost an information processor, a maker of databases, for whom discrete elements need not have any causal or contiguous relationship to each other. Manovich's argument here is convincing in as much as he restricts his attention to the structural logic of spatial montage as a diachronic poetic that has been privileged on a much broader, para-cultural scale at the end of twentieth century (he makes no claims for Vertov being the inspiration behind Tim Berners-Lee or David Blair). All the fuss over "non-linearity" is quickly dispensed with when we consider, as Manovich carefully prompts us to do, that the layering and superimposition of imagery within still or moving images dramatically re-defines the semiotic nature of what we are actually looking at; and moreover, that the aesthetic process of making a film becomes less one of narrative than of assemblage when we consider, as Manovich carefully prompts us to do, that the layering and superimposition of imagery within still or moving images dramatically re-defines the semiotic nature of what we are actually looking at; and moreover, that the aesthetic process of making a film becomes less one of narrative than of assemblage

Hans-Georg Gadamer may support such a fusion of horizons, making Vertov our contemporary and his time the digital as much as roaring '20s, such a strategy actually weakens the force of Manovich's more compelling argument about historical continuity. It is certainly interesting to invoke Vertov as a means of articulating the idea that assembling disparate things is akin to creating a database. But it is only useful in so far as it sustains the significance of what Vertov was doing in his own time and how this significance is relevant to understanding the digital vernacular of our time. Manovich's point is then well taken, that aesthetic values or poetic devices that were uncommon or even closed off at one point in time, can be revived, wittingly or otherwise, in another epoch and in the guise of an entirely different cultural form (in this case the meta-medium of the computer in the 1990s as a synthesizer of all media). It is for this reason that his re-iteration of a "language" of new media is most important, sustaining the idea, once again, of a pervasive and historical logic that underlies the cultural technology of representation.

In constructing his theory of "digital cinema", Manovich takes his lead again from Vertov, noting that the computerisation of culture has privileged spatial over temporal montage. Manovich's theory of digital cinema is at once responsive and reductive. It is responsive in the sense that it has incorporated the full potential of what digital technology has to offer the techniques of visual illusion. In this respect his discussion of the reality effect in late twentieth century Hollywood cinema is very impressive and it attests to the ascendance in cinema of a kind of super virtuality, an excessive real in which the filmic image can't compete with the reality effect in late twentieth century Hollywood cinema is very impressive and it attests to the ascendance in cinema of a kind of super virtuality, an excessive real in which the filmic image can't compete with the

What I do have some concern over is what I call, borrowing a phrase from Jorge Luis Borges, "the deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution". What I mean by this is Manovich's tendency – and it is a tendency often encountered in the search for digital precursors and pioneers – to re-define and characterise a historical figure or work of art using the nomenclature of the digital age. For instance, Man with a Movie Camera is described as Vertov's "dataset" (xiv); Vertov, along with Peter Greenaway, is regarded as 'a major' database filmmaker' of the twentieth century' (239). While the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer may support such a fusion of horizons, making Vertov our contemporary and his time the digital as much as roaring '20s, such a strategy actually weakens the force of Manovich's more compelling argument about historical continuity. It is certainly interesting to invoke Vertov as a means of articulating the idea that assembling disparate things is akin to creating a database. But it is only useful in so far as it sustains the significance of what Vertov was doing in his own time and how this significance is relevant to understanding the digital vernacular of our time. Manovich's point is then well taken, that aesthetic values or poetic devices that were uncommon or even closed off at one point in time, can be revived, wittingly or otherwise, in another epoch and in the guise of an entirely different cultural form (in this case the meta-medium of the computer in the 1990s as a synthesizer of all media). It is for this reason that his re-iteration of a "language" of new media is most important, sustaining the idea, once again, of a pervasive and historical logic that underlies the cultural technology of representation.

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As someone coming to this book as a media theorist, rather than a film theorist, I don't have as much of a problem with this trajectory as, I'm sure, many others will. It's impossible to watch films like Star Wars: Episode 3 without being preoccupied with the extent of its debt to computerisation. And this is a truism for much contemporary Hollywood cinema. What Manovich doesn't address, though, is the fact that there are still many films made – Hollywood or independent – that are not so reliant on digital effects and, indeed, even eschew them. Nor does he address the issue of film sound which has been just as profoundly affected by computerisation as the visual image. Indeed, there is a notable lack of attention to sound per se in
Manovich’s discussion of pre-digital cinema. Film is, as he does acknowledge, an audio-visual language. In constructing a "language" of new media, though, he fails to fully account for the signifying fullness of the cinematic channel: a channel, in Philip Brophy’s famous aphorism, which is “100% sound, 100% image”.

My other main reservation with _The Language of New Media_ is the perception within it that very little work has been done in this area, requiring Manovich to "build a theory of new media from the ground up" (10). He is quite correct in asserting that media studies or cinema studies alone are insufficient to construct an adequate theory of the language of new media. But in purporting to sketch the rudiments of this next stage of media theory, he neglects the work of some important precursors who have also been making significant forays into the emergence of a preliminary theory of the language of new media. I’m thinking here of the prodigious work of the late Nicholas Zurbrugg who, more than any other critic of the last thirty years, has focussed on the generative links between the avant-garde sensibility and the advent of electronic and digital media. Or the work of Donald Theall whose work, particularly on the writings of James Joyce, has outlined the foundations of a theory of post-media aesthetics highly apposite for much of what Manovich discusses in _The Language of New Media_. Or the work of Gregory Ulmer, whose impressive trilogy – _Teletheory, Applied Grammatology and Heuretics_ – describes the evolution of an audio-visual-pictographic culture akin to Manovich’s audio-visual-spatial culture. Just as Manovich argues, persuasively, that we can already see the work of what we are calling new media in the aesthetic objects of various old and residual media, he perhaps needs to be more vigilant in seeking out traces of the very theory of new media he is delineating in this book.

A final word on timeliness. Manovich draws a parallel between the moment when he is writing, when the "language of cultural interfaces is in its early stage" (93), and the time of early cinema, when its language, too, was still being articulated as a practice. What he doesn’t note – and this is not a criticism of him but more of an assessment of his achievement – is that he ha s written a similar kind of book to Edmund Wilson’s _Axel’s Castle_ (1931), or Herbert Read’s _Art Now_ (1933). Manovich, like Wilson and Read before him, has taken on the challenge of trying to theorise and periodise a phenomenon that is still taking shape around him: in his case the language of new media, in Read’s the modern movement in the visual arts, in Wilson’s the Anglo-American appropriation of modernist experimental writing. As attentive to his own timeliness as these notable predecessors, Manovich concedes, referring to the evolution of the language of new media, that

> We do not know what the final result will be, or even if it will ever completely stabilize. Both the printed word and cinema eventually achieved stable forms that underwent little change for long periods of time, in part because of the material investments in their means of production and distribution. Given that computer language is implemented in software, potentially it could keep changing forever. But there is one thing we can be sure of. We are witnessing the emergence of a new cultural metalanguage, something that will be at least as significant as the printed word and cinema before it (93).

Despite my reservations about the book, it is this note of cautious assertion that I most admire about Manovich’s approach. He is quick to concede that anything he has said about the current state and possible futures of new media, digital cinema and audio-visual-spatial culture, is contingent and subject to change. This is the provisional vision Manovich offers us in _The Language of New Media_: truth 800 by 600, or 1280 by 1024, pixels.

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