

IDAT 104

ESSAY Brief 2005/2006

---

*Vertov's goal is to seduce us into his way of seeing and thinking, to make us share his excitement, as he discovers a new language for film. The gradual process of discovery is film's main narrative, and it is told through a catalogue of discoveries. Thus, in the hands of Vertov, the database, this normally static and 'objective' form becomes dynamic and subjective. More important, Vertov is able to achieve something that new media designers and artists still have to learn – how to merge database and narrative into a new form.*

(...)

*Along with Greenaway, Dziga Vertov can be thought of as a major 'database filmmaker' of the twentieth century.' Man with a Movie Camera' is perhaps the most important example of a database imagination in modern media art.*

[excerpt from the prologue to *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich, 2003]

Paying particular attention to the concept of 'database cinema' and key principles of new media proposed by Lev Manovich, discuss the relevance of these statements as a way of understanding 'the language of new media'.

According to Lev Manovich, there are three fundamental components to new media; the printed word as a set of conventions which have developed over many centuries and are shared by many forms of new media, the Human Computer Interface (HCI) which has a far shorter history but a historical record of development nonetheless, and Cinema with its associated conventions, methods and terminology. But of these three he outlines from the very beginning of *The Language of New Media* that Cinema alone is the most influential and clearly the most important for understanding and analyzing what is happening in the new media revolution. And in particular he chooses Dziga Vertov's *A Man with a Movie Camera* 'as our guide to the language of new media' (Manovich 2002: VI).

To begin appropriately then by discussing the relevance of the first statement and why Vertov and his experimental use of cinema is so important we must examine what makes Vertov stand out so much to Manovich. It seems that the term Cinema is too broad to be applied cleanly to new media, so instead he refers to the far more specific term, "database cinema". Cinema itself is concerned with a narrative structure generally involving a sequence of events that must be experienced in the order defined by its creator, while the computer, and therefore new media, is inherently a database format which features none of a traditional narrative's linear constraint. This is why the phrase used in the second statement arguing that Vertov's *A Man with a Movie Camera* is possibly 'the most important example of database imagination in modern media art' is highly important and relevant to Lev Manovich's understanding of new media. He chooses cinema because of its chronological closeness to new media, cinema being the most important cultural form of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the potential for new media to be the most important of the 21<sup>st</sup>. He explains that 'cinema is a cultural form also heavily based on technology' (Palmer no date: 1) and this means to him that the technology and cultural influence are the most similar to the present, thus new media is simply the natural progression of media as a whole from cinema.

I would say that new media has unquestionably inherited many aspects of cinema and the statements certainly go as far as to highlight this. They both have a similar progressive history of experimentation that Manovich explains people have failed to record adequately, despite their phenomenal importance and impact on human culture. Although the changes within new media that are fresh and within people's memory now are clear and understood, the lack of record will almost certainly have the same effect as it does when we attempt to look at the early development of cinema to those of the future attempting to study the development of new media. Manovich also believes that 'the evolution of film language is closely linked to the technological developments and changes in cinema's industrial mode of production' (Palmer no date: 1), much like the way in which new media's development is highly dependant on the progression of its own technology, primarily the digital computer.

Due to its historical closeness and the similarity of development, much of the convention and terminology used in cinema has been transferred to new media just as cinema has inherited from previous 19th century forms, particularly the novel. But unlike the novel, or the written word, cinema it seems is well suited to being adopted into the meta-medium concept and applied to any form of media. Manovich claims that cinema is 'on its own way to becoming a general purpose cultural interface, a set of techniques and tools which can be used to interact with any cultural data' (no date: 1) and thus is a convention applicable to any form to be found in new media.

This transference seems especially prominent in the realm of computer games as a form of new media. In the example that Manovich uses himself, of the 1995 computer game *Dungeon Keeper*, half of the new features hailed as important exciting and new on the back of the CD case pertain to cinema terminology: 'Dungeon Keeper lists four key features of the game, out of which the first two concern control over the camera: "switch your perspective," "rotate your view,"' (Manovich 2002: 91).

Of course, even though he speaks of software from 1995, there are very few games that do not incorporate the use of a 'camera' as the player's primary way of viewing and experiencing the game. However *Dungeon Keeper* only enthuses about these features so much is because unlike many other games, (especially of its time being so early on in the production of modern computer games) it uniquely mixed two different points of perspective during game play whereby a player can either view their 'dungeon' from the standard top down perspective, or from a first person point of view. Games that do not involve multiple modes of perspective however would barely give the camera features a glimpse in the manual, let alone advertise it as one of its strengths. This being said, it could be a suggestion as to how natural and integrated the language of cinema really is when it hardly needs to be explained to a new user of a piece of software.

Because of their similarity, it could be predicted that the future course of new media will be inherently parallel with the development of the emerging new language of cinema in the 1990's which is what Manovich proceeds to do. We are to expect and understand from the statements then, that new media is yet to take its stable form and structure as cinema did in the following years up until the 1930's. However, understanding the similarities between new media and the computer, and cinema and Vertov's use of database cinema, can also allow us to see the differences and hence I believe truly understand what makes new media what it is. Unlike cinema where everyone can interpret its language but only a few create it, new media interacts with the user in such a way everyone is required to, as Manovich puts it, 'all computer users can "speak" the language of the interface' (Manovich 2002: 87) as well.

Manovich also sets out 5 key principles within *The Language of New Media*, numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability and transcoding, each of which describe the properties of new media, but only some are made relevant by exploring the connection between new media and cinema. And when compared to those set by Ken Jordan we find concurrencies that are the most likely to be relevant to the understanding of new media.

He starts with numerical representation, which refers to the way in which a digital computer stores and treats all the various types of media within new media. It is because of this that no particular media form at its purest level within the system is different from any other. This can be viewed as being the same as Ken Jordan's key principle of Integration, described as the 'combining of artistic forms and technology into a hybrid form of expression' (2002: 1) whereby the computer is a meta-medium that allows the manipulation of all media forms on the same platform or basis.

And this naturally leads onto the concept of modularity, which is effectively the manner in which new media objects are stored, and the way that even within a large and complicated cultural object, each single piece of media can stand alone and retains its individual features. In this way, database cinema is certainly similar and the best example of new media to compare it with could be the internet, where 'every item has the same significance as any other' (Manovich 2002: 194) and basically put there is no hierarchy or linear order in which the objects necessarily need to be experienced or stored. This also wholly corresponds with Ken Jordan's key principles he sets out in *Defining Multimedia*, especially concerning the points Hypermedia and Narrativity. Hypermedia Jordan explains is about enabling a more natural exploration of media 'making it more like the experience of consciousness encountering the world' much like the way in which Vertov discovers and explores a new language for cinema.

Manovich's initial principles of numerical representation and modularity provide the basis for his following principles, starting with Automation which is the ability to automate many of the actions that can be performed within a computer system and in media production.

Variability is the concept that new media objects can in theory exist in an infinite number of versions and may be manipulated in any number of ways. I don't feel that cinema applies to this since the while the work can be reproduced over and over again, an end user can do nothing to change their version, however cinematic material that has been 'digitized' ultimately will apply.

And finally, transcoding is effectively a new media object's ability to exist at multiple levels, and particularly the distinction between the cultural level and the machine code level. Database cinema is perhaps compliant with this concept by virtue of the fact that an audience's experience of a film is far different from that of the film's director. Just as with new media a user may be used to using or experiencing the cultural level, they would not necessarily be concerned with the printing of a magazine or the programming of an application.

I think it is fair to say that the statements introduce us to an aspect of new media, one that is undoubtedly important, but not so much that new media is invariably like its predecessor cinema, and will follow exactly in its footsteps of discovery and formation. When all previous forms of media are brought together into the meta-medium of the digital computer, converted into the same language of binary data and treated equally, as in have algorithms of precisely the same nature as any other performed on them, why is it suggested that a particular set of rules or form of manipulation and implementation may be more significant and important for understanding the nature of new media than others. In this sense the statements are only as relevant as far as one of the three aspects or cultural interfaces Manovich sets out originally. I am currently word processing this document and while I might be able to 'zoom' using this computer application, most prominent is my ability to 'scroll', the use of serifs in my 'font', leading in my paragraph; all terms that have been inherited from the Printed Word and although this might not be the greatest example of new media or new media art, the same certainly applies to website layout, image manipulation, newspaper and magazine production, instant messaging and email. And when it comes to printing these, all of the terms are rooted within previous printing techniques; we print documents of certain sizes including A4, 'letter', 'tabloid', and can set gamut, saturation and even set the colour to black and white or sepia, forms that were important to the development of cinema as well.

So in conclusion, I would say that these statements are very relevant to understanding Lev Manovich's interpretation of New Media and his exploration of the "parallels between

cinema history and the history of new media”, but I also believe that Manovich’s exploration of the influence of cinema in new media should not be the only way of understanding it.

These statements definitely emphasize the idea that new media has foundations in much older media forms all the way up to cinema, and I would say that understanding the origins of new media is key to understanding new media itself so in a sense the statements are the first step back chronologically into new media’s past.

Word count:  
1972

Sources:

Bibliography

Manovich, L., *The Language of New Media*, MIT Press 2002  
Jordan K., *Defining Multimedia*, Nettime postings 1-4, 2002.

Filmography

Peter Greenaway and Tom Phillips, *A TV Dante: The Inferno*, 1989  
Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929

Netography

Palmer, D. (No date) *Lev Manovich: how to speak new media* [online] Available:  
<http://www.realtimearts.net/rt44/lev.html>

Manovich, L. (No date) *Cinema as a Cultural Interface* [online] Available:  
<http://www.manovich.net/TEXT/cinema-cultural.html>