What Is New Media?: Ten Years After The Language of New Media

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A frank assessment to begin: There are very few books on new media worth reading.¹ Just when the nay-sayers decry the end of the written word, bookstore shelves still overflow with fluff on digital this and digital that. And even as a countervailing chorus emerged that was more skeptical of the widespread adoption of new media—in France Jacques Chirac once spoke disparagingly about “that Anglo-Saxon network” (for, as anyone knows, in the beginning there was Minitel)—it was evident that the Internet revolution had already taken place in the US, in Europe, and elsewhere. Like it or not the new culture is networked and open source, and one is in need of intelligent interventions to evaluate it. In the years since its original publication in 2001, Lev Manovich's The Language of New Media has become one of the most read and cited texts on the topic.² It is a key entry in the disciplines of poetics and cultural aesthetics, and has helped define the new field of software studies. The book is not without its limitations, however, and perhaps today one may begin to look again on the text with the fresh eyes of historical distance, and through it reassess the rampant open-sourcing of all aspects of cultural and aesthetic life, from our tools to our texts, from our bodies to our social milieus.

The Language of New Media comes out of the first generation of Internet culture. What this means is that the book is the product of specific sliver of history when the conditions of the production and distribution of knowledge were rather different than they are today. What was once a subversive medium is now a spectacle playground like any other. The first phase of web culture, one must admit, carried a revolutionary impulse; call it the Saint-Just to today's imperial era. Manovich's book is a product of that first phase. Walls were coming down, hierarchies were crumbling, the old brick and mortar society was giving away to a new digital

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universe. On the one hand, new virulent ways of looking at the world were forming with unprecedented ferocity—sometimes conveniently labeled the “California ideology”—coalescing around the neoliberal impulse to open source everything (information wants to be free, desire wants to be free, capital wants to be free) and the promise to liberate mankind in ways only dreamed of by our forbearers in the new social movements of the 1960s. On the other hand, amid this process of leveling, a new Republic of Letters began to form using email and bulletin-board systems that seemed to offer a real intellectual and social community devoted to the exploration and critique of new media. *The Language of New Media* is a product of this community. Discussed and refined in online forums like Nettime, and partially previewed prior to publication on the email list Rhizome (a web site named enthusiastically, if naively, after the emancipatory topology described in Deleuze and Guattari), *The Language of New Media* was written for, within, and against the new Internet culture of the late 1990s.

This is not to suggest that Manovich’s book has nothing more to say to us today, nor that we should look backward with nostalgic yearning for a simpler time. On the contrary, the simple premise of the book—that new media may be defined via reference to a foundational language or set of formal and poetic qualities identified across all sorts of new media objects, and indeed across historical and social context—suggests the opposite approach: we are required to think critically and historically because of the very fact that the digital is so structural, so abstract, so synchronic.

The strength of the book lies in its description of digital technologies as poetic and aesthetic objects. It aims to be a kind of general textbook on new media. Manovich begins from his own experience with software, then he extends his observations so that the “telling detail” becomes a piece in a larger system. Is Manovich’s view on the world a modernist one? I think so. His is a modernist lens in the sense that he returns again and again to the formal essence of the medium, the techniques and characteristics of the technology, and then uses these qualities to talk about the new (even if he ends up revealing that it is not as new as we thought it was).

This is illustrated most vividly in the conceptual heart of the book, part one entitled “What Is New Media?” Here Manovich offers a number of defining principles for digital technology, and at the same time debunks several of the myths surrounding it. The five principles—
numeric representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding—are not to be understood as universal laws of new media. Rather, they describe some of the aesthetic properties of data, and the basic ways in which information is created, stored, and rendered intelligible.

Later, and throughout the book, Manovich advances a number of aesthetic claims that have become commonplace parlance in the discourse on digital media, including the idea of a “logic of selection,” the importance of compositing, the way in which the database itself is a medium, the emphasis on navigation through space, the reversal of the relationship between syntagm and paradigm, the centrality of games and play, the waning of temporal montage (and the rise of spatial montage), and many other observations. All of these concepts and claims are now taken for granted in the various debates that make up today's discourse on new media.

Of course it is one's privilege to offer a dissenting opinion. Given that the operative question is “What Is New Media?” we should remember that more than one response exists. It is clear where Manovich puts his favor: new media are essentially software applications. But others have answered the same question in very different ways. There are those who say that hardware is as important if not more so than software (Friedrich Kittler or Wendy Hui Kyong Chun), or those who focus on the new forms of social interaction that media do or do not facilitate (Geert Lovink or Yochai Benkler), or even those who focus on networks of information rather than simply personal computers (Tiziana Terranova or Eugene Thacker). Perhaps because of the wide degree of latitude afforded by the topic, Manovich's book has elicited a healthy stream of dialogue and debate since its original publication. I for one consider his claim about “the myth of interactivity” (55) to be misguided: yes, the term “interactive” is practically meaningless due to overuse, but that does not mean the term should apply willy-nilly to static works of art. But such quibbles are neither here nor there.

There are two issues of more profound significance lurking within the book that are worth addressing. The first has to do with cinema, the second with history.

The dirty little secret of The Language of New Media, and the detail that reveals Manovich's first passion, is this: cinema was the first new media. New media did not begin in the 1980s in
Silicon Valley; it began a hundred years prior at Étienne-Jules Marey's Station Physiologique in the outskirts of Paris. The reason for this is that cinema is the first medium to bring together techniques like compositing, recombination, digital sampling (the discrete capture of photographic images at a fixed rate through time), and machine automation, techniques that, of course, are present in other media, but never as effectively as the singular synthesis offered by the cinema. Thus, the technique of layering inside Photoshop is simply the same technique used in the color key effects afforded by video, or the cinematic convention of shooting actors standing in front of a rear-screen projection backdrop. Or to choose another example, the binary zero-and-one samples of a digital music file are also present decades earlier in the on and off regularity of a single film frame transiting across the projector's beam, stopping for a split second, and then moving again. For Manovich the flicker of film was always already a digital flicker.

On this point, Manovich has been confronted directly, perhaps most notably by Mark B. N. Hansen in his book *New Philosophy for New Media*. Hansen acknowledges the influence of *The Language of New Media*, writing that “Manovich’s depiction of digital technology is undoubtedly the most rich and detailed available today.” Yet he also argues that Manovich's book is tinted by an over investment in the cinematic. Manovich's position “extends the sway of the 'cinematic' in the narrow sense, and in particular serves to ratify cinematic immobility as the default condition of the human-computer interface.” (Yet Hansen's subsequent claim, that Manovich cannot think beyond the rectilinear cinematic frame, is unconvincing, given Manovich's argument in the book about the waning of temporal montage and the rise of spatial montage, or what is often simply called “windowing.”) In short, Manovich’s greatest trick, the cinema, is also, in the eyes of some critics, his greatest vulnerability.

The second large issue looming in the book is that of history. Would it be entirely correct to say that this book has no interest in the social, that it has no interest in the political, that it is blinded (by poetics and formal structuralism) from seeing history itself? As with anyone who gravitates to pure poetics, Manovich is not immune to such questions. Like some of his critics, I too am concerned by the emphasis on poetics and pure formalism. One might think of

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4 Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, 34.
Manovich as the polar opposite of someone like Fredric Jameson and the commitment to what he calls the “poetics of social forms.” One sees the poetics in Manovich, but one loses the social forms. So there is something to be said for the argument that Manovich is participating in the tradition of those media theorists, like Kittler or Marshall McLuhan, who, while they may discuss the embeddedness of media systems within social or historical processes, ultimately put a premium on media as pure formal devices. (Kittler’s politics are complicated, but in general he falls prey to some of the same traps of nostalgia and Hellenistic longing as his romantic forebearers; McLuhan knew which way the wind was blowing in his public persona, but in private was a good traditional catholic who was more than a little unnerved by the social upheavals happening around him.)

Manovich opens the book with Dziga Vertov. Featuring the Soviet filmmaker so prominently did not go unnoticed by the intellectual establishment. In the following passage he is held at arm’s length by the editors of the journal *October*, a publication known to have a special relationship to the avant-garde as well as poststructuralism and continental philosophy:

> It is thus with some interest that we witness the usage of a crucial avant-garde film such as Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* as the opening device of a recent text on the "language of new media," just as it once provided the signal image some years ago for the very first issue of this journal. And it is also with some doubt that we listen to these same theoreticians of the new digital media proclaim that cinema and photography--with their indexical, archival properties--were merely preliminary steps on the path to their merging with the computer in the über-archive of the database. Much of what was most important to cinema and photography is wiped away by such a teleology. And much of what seems most critical in contemporary artistic practice reacts to just such an erasure.  

Or perhaps Brian Holmes best represents this wing of dissent, as he bemoans what he sees as Manovich’s “smug insistence that the new media were essentially defined by a certain kind of rhythm, a certain multiplication of screens, a certain connection to databases, etc.--in other

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words, that the new media were essentially defined by the dominant trends of contemporary capitalist society.”

Yet here too I am not entirely convinced, and perhaps against my better judgement wish to offer something of a defense on his behalf. Yes, Manovich refuses a specific kind of American or European politico-historical critique of media technologies, the kind we might associate with any number of theorists on the left, from Louis Althusser, to Jean Baudrillard, to Guy Debord, or even today with Giorgio Agamben or Bernard Stiegler. But to understand Manovich, one must understand two important aspects of his work.

The first is that Manovich harbors a deep-seated phobia of political ideology, due largely to his youth spent in the Soviet Union. In an important short essay from 1996, “On Totalitarian Interactivity,” Manovich admits that he sees digital interactivity as a type of political manipulation:

As a post-communist subject, I cannot but see [the] Internet as a communal apartment of [the] Stalin era: no privacy, everybody spies on everybody else, [an] always present line for common areas such as the toilet or the kitchen. Or I can think of it as a giant garbage site for the information society, with everybody dumping their used products of intellectual labor and nobody cleaning up. Or as a new, Mass Panopticon (which was already realized in communist societies)--complete transparency, everybody can track everybody else.

Passages like this should put to rest any murmurs over whether or not Manovich has a knowledge of history. By the early 1930s, Stalin had made socialist realism the only possible style in the Soviet Union. During this period the Russian formalists were criticized for not paying enough attention to social and historical issues, in essence for being apolitical. The power of the Stalinist machine eventually forced many of these formalists to the margins, or worse, into exile or death. Of course Manovich is no exiled enemy of the state, but because of

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this history he considers it intellectually dangerous to deny questions of form, poetics, and aesthetics. The irony is that, in making this gesture, which Manovich would classify as a gesture of political independence in the face of state power, he has been accused of overlooking the political sphere entirely. What worked one way in the Eastern Bloc, apparently works another way in the contemporary West.

His apparent abdication of the political (and his taking up the question of poetics), then, must not be measured against an Americo-European leftist yardstick, but as a kind of glasnost of the digital. Manovich is saying, in essence: okay, the technological infrastructure may or may not have dubious politics, but let us put the old hobbyhorse of the critique of state-driven ideology behind us and dive into the semiotics of software so that we may first understand how it works.

So one must admit--and this is the second aspect--that Manovich's political gesture exists, even if it is a counter-intuitive one. He is not a politicized western intellectual in the Sartrean mold. But that is the point. In other words, when he writes on Vertov, he slices Vertov free from the grasp of traditions such as “The Dziga Vertov Group” and other red-flag comrades wishing a neat and tidy equation between radical aesthetic experiments and radical politics. In Manovich a medium is never a dispositif. (Mind you, I am not endorsing this myself, merely attempting to offer a charitable description of it.) Manovich would rather make the argument that new media are first and foremost aesthetic objects. His proof for this is, ironically, a profoundly historical one, that Vertov simply does not have the same status today as he did during the early and middle twentieth century. In an age when Vertov's cinematic principles are embodied in code and bundled as mere filter effects for desktop movie-making software, as they are today, the revolutionary power of radical aesthetics seems rather deflated. When Jean-Luc Godard becomes a plug-in, we must look beyond the Nouvelle Vague. Manovich understands this. His book thus serves as a provocation to those who still think that formalism is politically progressive. It is not, for new media at least, and that is the point.

In the end this is a book that seems to be doing two things at once. On the one hand it tries to outline the specificity of new media, the particular qualities of the medium that should be understood as absolutely new. But on the other hand Manovich insists that new media are
essentially cinematic, suggesting that we must look not to the new, but backward to the various media that have come before. “To summarize,” he writes in the middle of the book, “the visual culture of a computer age is cinematographic in its appearance, digital on the level of its material, and computational (i.e., software driven) in its logic” (180). The use of a layer metaphor is telling. At one layer is cinema, at a second layer are bits and bytes, at a third algorithm. Manovich’s new media thus follow the same structure of the mise en abîme: an outside that leads to an inside, which leads to another inside, and on and on. This too shows how Manovich's methodology is implicitly historical, for the media landscape changed fundamentally after the invention of cybernetics in the late 1940s. Today all media are a question of synecdoche (scaling a part for the whole), not indexicality (pointing from here to there). This assumption is absolutely central in The Language of New Media, and it helps explain why Manovich is prompted to look within, to cinema, in order to look to the present.

The open-source culture of new media really means one thing today, it means open interfaces. It means the freedom to connect to technical images. Even source code is a kind of interface, an interface into a lower level set of libraries and operation codes. Thus, when Google or Facebook “open-sources” resource x, it provides an API or “Application Programming Interface” granting managed access to x. Let us not be fooled: open source does not mean the unvarnished truth, but rather a specific communicative artifice like any other. And in this sense one should never celebrate a piece of source code, open or closed, as a bonafide original text (whatever that might mean). The interesting question is not so much whether open source is “more open” or “less open” than other systems of knowledge, but rather the question “How does open source shape systems of storage and transmission of knowledge?” If one is willing to assent to a synecdoche model for media systems, then it follows that sources (or partial sources) will play a more important role, since the system/subsystem or whole/part arrangement necessitates that one think about the innards of things as one scales from outside to inside.

The bad news, or good depending on one's proclivities, is that this “source” has almost nothing to do with concerns around sources and essences from a generation or two ago, particularly the concerns native to that intellectual movement so thoroughly gauche today, poststructuralism. The general open sourcing of all media systems, including the human form
as the most emblematic media system, has almost nothing to do with the lingering phenomenological anxiety around presence and truth fueling poststructuralism’s long obsession over sources. What was once an intellectual intervention, is now part of the mechanical infrastructure. And so goes the dialectical machine, cooping critique as fuel for the new spirit of capitalism.8 Instead one sees that the open sourcing of media systems (information wants to be free, desire wants to be free, capital wants to be free) is really about the migration into a new way of structuring information and material resources, which as Rancière might say also has its corresponding regime of art. But as in previous times one is still free to read the truth of social life through such structures--as Jameson does with his perennially useful methodology known as “cognitive mapping”--provided of course that one is not dazzled by the short term candy of openness as such.

Hence what appears to be a dual move--both to the past and to the present--is in fact a single gesture, for the grand argument given in Manovich is really one about media in general, that to mediate is really to reframe, that mediation in general is just repetition in particular, and thus that the “new” media are really all the artifacts and traces of the past coming to appear in an ever expanding present.

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