

Lev Manovich and The Language of New Media

A lecture by Lev Manovich and a work shop about *The Language of New Media*

Organized by

Modinet (Media and Democracy in the Network Society) and

The Centre for Internet Research

Aarhus, May 6th 2003

Brief Introduction to Lev Manovich

According to the Russian-American computer researcher Lev Manovich we have since the end of the 19th century developed cinematic ways of seeing the world. We see the world through a camera, or, more correctly: we see the world through its thousands of cameras.

To paint a picture implies seeing the world through a frame. What is inside, what is outside, what is the perspective? This is the view of the painting and the theater. But, it is also the view of the cinema, the TV-set and the computer. Through a frame we have access to a world.

With the birth of film, i.e. the moving image, however, the moving camera was born. In 1929 the russian film director created the avant-garde masterpiece *Man with a Movie Camera*. "Movie Camera" meaning film camera, yes,

but, it also means a mobile and polycentric camera. Pictures can be taken from rooftops, from ground level, from a chimney, and from the front of a fast moving motorbike.

The digital — and virtual — camera, digital editing and digital transmission has made this the general standard. Our view is not mono-centric, but polycentric. Everywhere, a camera is running. The input is not one view or one shot, but image databases. Even the fixed frame is dissolved into a split-screen of frames.

Perhaps the war in Iraq is the first war, which fully exemplifies this principle. Pictures come from hundreds or thousands of cameras. From the broadcasting corporations, from video telephony cameras, from webcams, from digital cameras mounted to the single soldier or the front of the equipment, and from Al-Jazeera's staff in Basra and Baghdad. Radar cameras, night glass cameras, infrared cameras. The war in Iraq is the war of (or through) thousand cameras.

In his already classical book, *The Language of New Media* (The MIT Press 2001), Lev Manovich offers the first systematic and rigorous theory of new media. According to Manovich, two fundamental principles can be identified: numerical representation (that all media objects are subject to algorithmic manipulation) and modularity (that any media object can be copied into or added to another object). From this a new computer culture, a blend of human and computer meanings can be extracted.

In his book Manovich particularly focuses at the interface (the language of the screen), the operations (e.g. digital compositing), the digital illusions and the forms (e.g. the database form replacing the traditional narrative form).

Lev Manovich has recently illustrated many of these observations in his art project Soft Cinema with a small book, a website, and several exhibitions, demonstrating the database form principle in different exhibition environments and in a Mondrian-inspired split-screen web format.

Registering:

The lecture "Metadata, Mon Amour" from 11-13 is open for everybody and no registering is necessary.

For the afternoon workshop (13:30-16:15) you have to register by sending an email to Bente Petersen (bep@imv.au.dk) *before April 25th*. When registering please include name, title, department and university, and email address (and if you are a participant in MODINET, please state this).

For further information, please contact:

Niels Brügger, nb@imv.au.dk or Henrik Bødker, hbodker@imv.au.dk

Metadata, Mon Amour

Lecture by Lev Manovich, followed by questions/discussion,

Åbogade 34, bygn. 5344, lok. 122, 11:15-12:30

Metadata is the data about data: keywords assigned to an image in a media database, a number of words in a text file, the type of codec used to compress an audio file. Metadata is what allows computers to *see* and retrieve data, move it from place to place, compress it and expand it, connect data with other data, and so on.

The title of my talk refers to the ongoing modern struggle between the visual data, i.e. images, and their creators and masters — the humans. The later want to control images: make new images which would precisely communicate the intended meanings and effects; yield the exact meanings contained in all the images already created by human cultures; and, more recently, automate these and all over possible image operations by using computers. The former can be said to *resist* all these attempts. This struggle have intensified and became more important in a computer age — more important because the ease with which computers copy, modify, and transmit images allows humans to daily multiply the number of images available.

Metadating the image is not, however, only the economic and industrial problem to be solved — it is also a new paradigm to *interface reality* and the human experience in new ways. This is already demonstrated by a number of successful art projects that focus on new ways to describe, organize and access large numbers of visual records. Importantly, these projects propose not only new interfaces but also new types of images, or, more generally, *records* of human individual and collective experience: film/video recordings embedded within virtual space (Sauter, Invisible Shape of Things Past; Fujihata, Field-Work@Alsace); photographs of people/objects organized into networks/maps based on their semantic similarity (Legrady, Pockets Full of Memories; Walitzky, Focus).

In summary, in terms of its creative and *generative* potential, *metadating the image* paradigm means following four related directions: (1) inventing new systems of image description and categorization; (2) inventing new interfaces to image collections; (3) inventing new kinds of images which go beyond such familiar types as *a still photograph* or a *digital video*; (4) approaching the new *super-human* scale of visual data available (images on the Web, web cam recordings, etc.) not as a problem but as a creative opportunity.

In short: new structure — new interface — new image — new scale.

A Work Shop about *The Language of New Media*

13:30-16:15, Studenternes Hus, Ndr. Ringgade, Richard Mortensen Stuen

13:30 *History and Method in New Media Conception*

This paper zeroes in on the relation between historiographic and conceptual strategies deployed in Lev Manovich's seminal book *The Language of New Media*. Considerable focus is directed towards the idea of time as an element — amongst others — in new media's "spatialisation" techniques. How does this spatialisation affects methodology and ways in which one may approach the "forms", "interfaces", and "off-springs" of new media? Might indeed this very spatialisation inherent in new media in principle "distort" the historiographic framework in which the "newness" of new media is analysed and validated?

Bo Kampmann Walther, Associate Professor, PhD, Dept. of Media Science, University of Southern Denmark

14:05 *Digital Aesthetics and Aesthetic History*

In *The Language of New Media* Lev Manovich discusses digital aesthetics from a historical perspective rooted in the historical avant-garde and the formal experiments that took place especially in the avant-garde cinema. This historical and cinematic perspective is interesting and fruitful, though it has some consequences for the understanding of digital aesthetics. In my talk I shall point to some of these consequences and point to other alternative perspectives, especially literary realism and 19. c. media, in order to open a discussion of the relations between digital aesthetics and aesthetic history.

Søren Pold, Assistant Professor, PhD, Dept. of Comparative Literature and Multimedia, University of Aarhus

14:40 Coffee break

15:00 *Spaces of Navigation on the Web*

The presentation will focus on the theme of digital spaces and navigation by taking a closer look at the notions of 'database logic' and 'navigable space' in *The Language of New Media*. Lev Manovich claims to identify a difference between the logic of new and old media forms on the basis of dichotomies such as database–narrative. Some questions will be raised as to the adequacy of the underlying premises supporting this conclusion, especially with regard to his 'reading' of the Web.

Rune Dalgaard, PhD student, MA, Dept. of Information and Media Studies, University of Aarhus

15:35 *Sound in digital media: Symbol or phenomena?*

One of the defining characteristics of digital media is numerical representation. As a consequence a new media object can be described formally and hence is subject to algorithmic manipulation Lev Manovich says. In the domain of music this leads to digital sound synthesis and to algorithmic composition. On the other hand digital representation of sound leads to another approach in music composition since the representation constitutes the recorded sound as a "physical" object. In my presentation I will discuss the aesthetic consequence of digital sound being both a string of symbols in the computer and an object for a phenomenological investigation.

Morten Breinbjerg, Assistant Professor, MA, Dept. of Music and Multimedia, University of Aarhus

Each presentation will be about 15 min. plus app. 20 minutes for discussion.