

Self-interview by Lev Manovich for MIT Press

[3/03]

Q.

How long have you been working on this book?

A.

I can give a few different answers to this question. As it often happens with books, a significant part of the book relies on previously published articles; the earliest of these was published in 1992. So one answer would be seven years.

The term new media itself started to appear in press around 1990, but I actually began to work with computer graphics already in 1984. Subsequently, I worked as a computer animator, designer, illustrator and programmer; I studied computer vision and image processing as a graduate student; finally, I wrote a Ph.D. dissertation on the historical origins of digital media. So I can also say that I have been working on this book for fifteen years.

It is also so happened that when I was still a teenager in Moscow in mid 1970s, I was seriously studying art – and also attended a special high school, which had advanced courses in calculus and computer programming. Only later I made the connection between art and programming – but if I did not have this experience in Moscow, it is possible that I would never get interested in computer graphics and digital art later on. So in some way this book has been in the making twenty-five years.

A.

What is new media?

Q.

The short answer: read the book. More seriously, we can define new media as new cultural forms, which depend on computers for presentation and distribution: Web sites, virtual worlds, virtual reality, multimedia, computer games, computer animation. My book investigates continuities and discontinuities between these new forms and the old ones. What are the ways in which new media relies on older cultural languages and what are the ways in which it breaks with them? What is unique about how new media create the illusion of reality, represent space and time, and organize human experience? How do techniques of old media—such as the rectangular frame, mobile camera and montage—operate in new media?

But this is not all. The computerization of culture not only leads to the emergence of new forms; it redefines existing ones such as photography and cinema. I therefore also investigate the effects of the computer revolution on visual culture at large. How does the shift to computer-based media redefine the nature of static and moving images? What is the effect of computerization on the visual languages used by our culture? What are the new aesthetic possibilities, which become available to us?

Q.

Who do you see as the audience for this book?

A.

Everybody who works with digital media: Web designers, artists, filmmakers, photographers, architects, television producers, programmers, DJs. On a more academic side, everybody who studies culture: cultural historians, critics, art historians, literary scholars, media scholars. Finally, everybody, regardless of her or his background, who thinks that computerization and Internet are transforming our culture, will be interested in this book.

Q.

You seem to be different from a typical academic: you maintain your own Web site; you established your international reputation by publishing online rather than in traditional academic journals; and you obviously care about fashion, as can be judged from your personal appearance.

A.

This is all true. Growing up in Soviet Union in the 1970s made me distrustful of all official communication channels and taught me how to work around them. So when I saw Mosaic (the first Web browser) in 1993, a light bulb went in my head. I immediately set up my own Web site and also started to actively contribute to the emerging Web culture of mailing lists and online journals. I love real-time nature of Web discussions! Academics journals are fine; but you have to wait a year or two before your article appears in print; and just seven people read a typical academic article on the average. Instead, I can write something today, post it online and get feedback from the readers the same day.

As far as fashion is concerned, I am interested in tracking where culture is going. We can look at art, architecture or popular music, but I find that fashion is best in reflecting changing cultural sensibility quickly. Plus, I love to shop!

Q.

What are your favorite places to shop?

A.

I like Robertson and Melrose (around Fred Segal) areas in Los Angeles; in NYC, its NoLita and Soho. In fact, this is where I put this book together. I would sit in a coffee shop or a hotel lobby (such as Standard or Mondrian in LA) working on my SONY VAIO laptop; and when I felt it was time for a break, I would take a stroll through various boutiques. I would do that every couple of hours. This schedule worked amazingly well – I never wrote so quickly in my life before!

Q.

Your book contains no illustrations of new media art, software interfaces or computer technology; instead, you begin with a portfolio of still images from a famous Russian avant-garde film *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929). Why?

A.

This was a deliberate decision. I wanted to stress historical continuities between new and old media, to show how many principles of new media can be already found in older media arts such as cinema. In addition, I wanted to foreground the avant-garde

potential of new media, its promise to create new cultural forms and to re-define existing ones. So this is why I chosen not just any old media artifact but this famous avant-garde Russian film. I begin the book with a collection of stills from the film, which act as a summary of the book's main ideas. If I am to make a sub-title for the book, it would be 'Everything you wanted to know about new media but were afraid to ask Dziga Vertov.'

Q.

Your book stresses the continuities between the new media and the old, showing how new media activates creative possibilities, which were already articulated but not fully realized in the past. But what about the future?

A.

Most writings on new media are full of speculation about the future. My book analyses new media as it has actually developed up until this point, at the same time pointing to directions for new media artists and designers which have not been yet explored. I hope that the theory of new media developed in the book can act not only as an aid to help understand the present, but also as a grid for practical experimentation.

At the same time, while my book does not speculate about the future, it does contain an implicit theory of how new media will develop. This is the advantage of placing new media within a larger historical perspective. We begin to see the long trajectories, which lead to new media in its present state; and we can extrapolate these trajectories into the future.

Q.

What are the new projects you are working on?

A.

I am working on a new book provisionally titled Info-Aesthetics (see www.manovich.net/ia). I am also working on various practical projects in digital media. You can call them art; I call them experiments. For me, new media opens up so many new possibilities, only some of which have been explored so far.