

Interview for *Plug-in Cinema* (2002)

1. Just to establish yourself in our minds; name your top five of any media (can be films, books, artwork, websites, games and so on...) that have influenced the work you do?

A.

Films by Tarkovsky

Films by Brothers Quay

Daniel Liebeskind, Jewish Museum Berlin

Mike Figgis's Timecode

3. How did the writing of 'The Language of New Media' come about?

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 in a way I was working on this book for the last seven years.

The term new media itself started to appear in press around 1990, but I actually began to work with computer graphics and 3-D computer animation 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.

4. What is, in your opinion the most valuable asset of the texts such as 'The Language of New Media' and why?

A. There are two aspects of the studies of new media which make them worthwhile, in my view. First, they help us answer the question "what is new about new media" by systematically analyzing new media in relation to media and cultural forms of the past. As William B. Warner points out in his review of The Language of New Media: "A host of scholars and critics have approached this question through various vantage points: the history of technical culture (J. David Bolter), hypertext (George Landow), narrative (Janet Murray), architecture (William J. Mitchell) virtual reality (Michael Heim), theatre (Brenda Laurel), and so on." My own The Language of New Media contributed to this list by analyzing new media in relation to visual culture of the last few centuries: visual art, graphic design, and, of course, cinema.

Second, these texts articulate and analyze the new terms which can be used to discuss new media works. In my own work (both the book and other articles) I discuss a number of such terms: cultural interface, database narrative, spatial montage, meta-media, macrocinema, software theory, info-aesthetics:

5. Do you think filmmaking technology is being driven by the producers of the technology or the people who create the films?

A. I think it is both.

6. Have you become aware of any particular point in the development of the internet when you decided, "wow, this will change the world!"?

A. In the Fall of 1993 I was shown the Web and the first graphic browser. Next summer I already had my Web site; I also completed 'Little Movies,' a series of short films designed specifically for the Web distribution. (As far as I know it was the first film project made specifically for the Web.)

7. Are there any current developments that you see as a threat to online filmmaking (with online films, we mean film made for the Internet!)?

A. Online filmmaking requires broadband connections, and broadband is arriving much more slowly than people expected. In addition, the shift away from desktop computers towards cell phones, PDA and similar small electronic devices as the new "hub" of communication and gateway to Internet is not necessarily a good thing for online filmmaking. Yes, atomfilms.com distributes films for PDAs, but how many people watch them?

8. What new areas or topics do you see a future version of 'The Language of New Media' covering?

A. There is so much that I left out that rather than trying to put it all into the future version, I am writing a new book to complement 'The Language of New Media.' The book is called Info-Aesthetics: Information And Form. Info-Aesthetics scans contemporary culture to detect emerging aesthetics and computer-based cultural forms specific to information society. Its method is a systematic comparison of our own period with the beginning of the 20th century when modernist artists created new aesthetics, new forms, new representational techniques, and new symbols of industrial society. How can we go about searching for their equivalents in information society – and does this very question make sense? Can there be forms specific to information society, given that very concept of form as something solid, stable and limited in space and time becomes redefined with software and computer networks? Where are radically new representational techniques unique to own time, given that new

media has largely been used in the service of older visual languages and media practices: Web TV, electronic book, interactive cinema? Can information society be represented iconically, if the activities that define it – information processing, interaction between a human and a computer, telecommunication, networking – are all dynamic processes?

While The Language of New Media examines the emerging elements of the new media language, Info-Aesthetics will look at its language as a whole, attempting to understand its historical significance and uniqueness. While The Language of New Media stresses continuities between old and new media, the new book will focus on the aspects of new media culture that radically differentiate it from the past. Finally, while The Language of New Media discussed a number of cultural applications of new media, from CD-ROM multimedia narratives to special effects in cinema, it has not addressed the crucial capacities of a computer which so far have not been systematically applied to cultural sphere and which will be taken up in Info-Aesthetics – simulation, visualization, large-scale databases (including gathering and analysis of massive amounts of multimedia data).

Finally, further developing the concept of “software studies” introduced in The Language of New Media, the new book will take as its object the engine of information revolution – software. While previous critical work on new media focused on the cultural objects created by new media artists and designers – Web sites, interactive CD-ROMs, or virtual worlds – I will argue that software deserves as much critical attention, because it is in software that the new cultural logic of information society manifests itself most clearly.

9. On the similar lines, where do you see the future of online filmmaking heading?

A. In the last ten years we have seen a proliferation of a number of new moving image aesthetics: motion graphics, Flash animations on the Web, live action / traditional animation / computer animation in feature films, and so on. (I recently attempted to put together a kind of taxonomy for these different aesthetics: see www.manovich.net/new_digital_cinema.html). What most of them have in common is that they are hybrid, combining different styles of imagery. Live action

co-exists with graphic design, typography, photorealistic 3-D animation, more stylized, flattened 3-D animation, 2-D cell animation, etc. We see these different aesthetics in feature length films, in music videos, in TV graphics and Web graphics; and a new generation of Web designers is now bringing this hybridity to short films they have started to make.

In comparison, most of the online films have remained more conservative, sticking to traditional cinema aesthetics and language. Browsing through online film sites such as atom.com, I rarely see films which adopted hybrid aesthetics; and if one finds them, they are delegated to “experimental” section. Moreover, new possibilities offered by digital moving image software – hyperlinks imbedded in a moving image, or real-time assemblage of shots under software control, or multiple camera angles – have not been tried out at all. (This is the paradoxical situation which I sometimes refer to as “avant-garde as software”: our software is much more “experimental” than whatever art works people actually do with it.) I don’t know if this will happen but I would like to see online filmmakers exploring these new possibilities.