

Lev Manovich

Introduction to Korean edition of The Language of New Media

I am delighted to introduce the Korean translation of my book. In some ways, Korea today is the quintessential “new media civilization” - and at the same time, it is not. Of course, given the speed of adaptation of new communication and network technologies in different countries around the world, it is difficult to observe how these technologies interact with the local cultural and social patterns without being there "on the ground," so the following observation, based on the impressions from my week-long visit to Seoul a few years ago, maybe incorrect. It seems that while leading the world in the use of a number of new communication services, Korean society at the same time in many ways remains "traditional" and highly "hierarchical" - the values which appear to contradict the “open source” and “hypertext” ideologies which go along with the new communication technologies.

Such contradictions, or rather, creative and generative cultural tensions, are exactly one of the subjects of this book. While it may appear on the first sight to be the systematic exposition of the unique features and creative techniques of new media filed, after reading any few pages in the book you will see that in fact, it is animated by a different desire. The “language” of new media which this book aims to map out – or, more precisely, numerous separate “languages” (this is one change I would love to do post factum to the title of the book) – are always hybrids, incorporating memories, expertise, and techniques of already well established cultural forms such as cinema, theatre, printed books, and so on, as well as new more recent techniques which come from the new engine of global information society – digital networked computer. Every section of the book therefore takes up a particular

dimension of new media and examines it as a meeting ground - a field of struggle, competition, and creative tension – between the energies of the past and present.

A few years ago such an approach appeared strange to some participants and observers of cyberculture. Why dig the references to the old culture when Internet was supposed to bring us all into the new brave world as painted in *Wired* and similar publications? Yet I am happy to say that today the global audiences for my book that positioned new media in a longer historical context keep growing, while many futuristic pronouncements of cyber gurus from the 1990s look quite embarrassing. Our culture is undergoing computerization, and every one of its layers is changing as a result, but these changes can take a very long time to become visible. (Geological metaphors are not out of place in this respect). Think for instance of a culture which accompanied the development of new industrial society in the nineteenth century. If we time the beginning of this society to the introduction of engine in the first decades of the nineteenth century, we see that it took about one hundred years for the cultural super-structure to catch up. It was only in the 1920s when artists, designers, and architects have clearly formulated new set of aesthetic forms and principles that together formed new twentieth century culture of “industrial modernism”: spaces made of geometric forms devoid of ornament, aggressive use of type, compositions made from simple abstract elements, new color schemes, and so on. I do have a strong sense that many cultural phenomena and styles which surround us today are equivalents of academic painting or architectural eclecticism of the nineteenth century – something which does not at all belong to the twenty first century and which one day, when we will find proper cultural responses to a new global information society, will look hopeless irrelevant. Yet today it is not easy to say which current impulses are messages from the future, and which are simply here through inertia.

It is my strong feeling that the emerging “information aesthetics” (i.e., the new culture of information society different from the old culture of industrial society) has or will have a very different logic from “industrial modernism.” The later was driven by a strong desire to erase the old, visible as much in the avant-garde artists’ (particularly the futurists) statements that museums should be burn, and in the dramatic erasure of all social and spiritual realities of many of people in Russia after the 1917 revolution, and in other countries after they became Soviet satellites after 1945. Culture and ideology of industrial modernism wanted to start with “tabula rasa,” radically distancing themselves from the past. It was only in the 1960s that this move started to feel inappropriate, as manifested both in loosening of ideology in communist countries and the beginnings of new post-modern sensibility in the West. “Learning from Las Vegas,” to quote the title of a famous book by Robert Venturi and et al (published in 1972, it was the first systematic manifestation of new sensibility) was to admit that real, organically developing culture had a very different rhythm and logic than Bauhaus-grown “international style” which was still practiced by architects world-wide at that time. We can say that in 1990 when Soviet Empire collapsed post-modernism has won world over.

Today we have a very real danger of being imprisoned by new “international style” - something which we can “global international.” The cultural globalization, of which cheap international flights and Internet are just two among other carriers, erases certain cultural specificity with the energy and speed impossible for modernism. Yet we also witness today a different logic at work: the desire to creatively place together old and new in various combinations. It is this logic, for instance, which in many ways made Barcelona where I am writing this right now, such a “hip” and “in” place today. All over the city, architectural styles of many past centuries co-exist

with new “cool” spaces of bars, hotels, museums, and so on. Medieval meets multi-national, Gaudy meets Dolce and Gabana, Mediterranean time meets Internet time. The result is the incredible sense of energy which one feels physically just walking along the street. It is this hybrid energy, which characterizes in my view the most successful cultural phenomena today. This book then is a systematic investigation of a particular slice of contemporary culture driven by this hybrid aesthetics: the slice where the logic of digital networked computer intersects the numerous logics of already established cultural forms.

In conclusion let me offer you a different metaphor to think with about this cultural slice which we also call “new media.” This metaphor is that of “remix.” I often look at contemporary culture in terms of three key processes – three different kinds of remixes. The first remix is what already for a few decades we referred to as “post-modernism” – the remixing of previous cultural contents and forms within a given media or cultural form (most visible today in music, architecture, and fashion). The *second* type of remixing is that of national cultural traditions, characters, and sensibilities intermingling both between themselves and also interacting with a new “global international” style. In short, this is the remix of “globalization.” “New media” then can be thought alongside these two types of remixes as the third type. It is the remix between the interfaces of various cultural forms and the new software techniques – in short, the remix between culture and computers. Its cultural logic is new not because this is “modernist new” which tried to erase the past – on the contrary, it is new because of the scale of the remix process at work, its speed, and the components themselves involved. Some of the results, which are being generated, are trivial, some are OK, and some are brilliant. While computer is a very powerful remix instrument, what comes out from it is ultimately up to the creative individuals who are at the controls of the computers – you.

Welcome to the hybrid!

Lev Manovich

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