An interview with Lev Manovich in Malmö

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[This text was originally published on *Skiften* - http://www.skiften.com/]

As Lev Manovich gave a lecture at K3 - Malmö University, Dep. of Arts, Culture and Communication, I grabbed the occasion to sit down the day after and ask some questions. These are discussion based questions, that relate much to topics from Manovich's book *The Language of New Media* (MIT Press 2001). A book he claims "was written 300 years ago", well even if it was, he thankfully wants to give us mortals a chance to catch up. The interview also goes into other topics like software art, relating more to his later writing in the Flash Generation articles. /*Kristoffer Gansing 2002-08-28*

Why do you use the term New Media for so many different things?

One of the goals of the book, is to try and discover and outline lots of common characteristics that cultural objects and phenomena share. So, in fact the way that the book is organized is that I don't talk about digital cinema, multimedia, web sites in separate chapters but instead it is laid out in a more abstract way, describing common structures and topic themes of the new media landscape. Once you represent data digitally, and as this becomes available to computers and software, certain things follow, and especially the first chapter "What is New Media" is trying to point out what these new things are. Obviously in regard to multimedia as sound, text and images there are a great deal of differences but there is also commonality as well. One of the commonplaces of new media, which I think is completely true, is that the differences between media becomes less pronounced.

A very trivial example, yet a very important one, is thinking about "copy and paste", as a very basic convention of all software programs. Well, what it actually means is that you can copy and paste text, images and sounds so that suddenly all the different media became manageable in exactly the same way. So this is one example of what I call the logic of the computer, which is in the logic of software, in the logic of graphical user-interfaces as being superimposed onto the logic of different media. This is of course just one example.

Do you think that these forms of manipulation "take over" the autonomy of different media?

This is a very interesting question, since I believe myself to be situated in the field of new media art - where the question has always been about 'what should really be in the focus of new media art?' So people will talk about interactivity, about convergence, network and rhizomatic structures. If we go back into the history of modern computing, and the way that it was defined, and in the way that it still exists today - we go back to the 60's. We will look at people like Alan Kay who at Xerox Parc was one of the key people responsible for details and the concepts of graphical user interfaces. He realized his concepts about the computer as 'personal expressive medium' in the late 60's, but when he got to Xerox Parc many of the basic concepts of this medium already existed: you've got the mouse, interactivity, Douglas Engelbart had already done his historical presentation in 68', people already knew about Sketchpad by Ivan Sutherland in 62'. Some information that I came across just recently and which really impressed me is that Kay, as he arrived at Xerox Parc, the first thing he did was that he wrote, or he made other people write, a painting program, a music program and an illustration/design program - so he basically defined the computer as a kind of simulation machine, as a machine whose identity is precisely a negative identity, a simulator of other media. What it means for my argument is that, (and it was only partially present in *LoNM*) ultimately there is no such logic as a computer logic because this logic is something that is imported from outside the machine. It also means, on some level, that when people talk about how improper it is to use the computer for manipulation of photographs, as a kind of manipulator of traditional media when we instead should be doing programming or software art, they are using a very fifties idea about the computer as a calculator. And as I said the modern idea of the computer is something that allows you to simulate other media and in simulating these media gives you visual tools to work with them. The identity of modern software is then very much an identity of simulation. These are a very complex set of questions that I'm just beginning to think about. It opens up the discussion of what is really the relationship between the logic of the computer and the logic of media.

There is another set of issues that are of course economic. You know how in the mid-nineties things seemed to be going very well in terms of the www and there was lots of enthusiasm, it very quickly looked like the computer would have redefined semiological interaction and the logic of cinema, but since then I think things got more conservative. What was also realized is that cultural changes happen much slower than people imagine it. So the ideas of the computer logic creeping in is happening much slower than we imagined. Of course it also happens at different speed in different areas and one example, which is also

discussed in my article "From Borges to HTML" is in the two kinds of media arts that exists today. We have media arts that already existed and which have begun to introduce the computer into the production process like cinema. We also have new media arts, or software arts, which are computer based from the beginning, like computer games. So if we look at the latter we will find the logic of the computer working much more clearly, for example by being more interactive and modifiable through lots of changeable variables. If we look at cinema which established itself and its language well before the computer, including its own economic structures, then we can see how the computer is mostly used as a tool to distribute and promote cinema. On the other hand many people look at the computer as a means to define what the cinematic language really is. So the speed of the changes also depends on what field we are looking at.

In order to write about the principles and history of new media you seem to have chosen a method - which is to filter new media through the principles and history of cinema. Why give such autonomy to cinema? (for example you write that computer games can be understood as a form of digital cinema. But would it be possible to have the reverse scenario in a hundred years from now, where computer games would serve as the basis to study the principles of media culture at large?)

First of all I should say, that I made a kind of strategic mistake, because I said in the beginning of the book that cinema plays the key role of arts in the history of media, which comes with illustrations from "The Man with the Movie Camera". In reality, if you actually read the book, I bet that if you did a kind of statistical analysis of it, you will find that cinema is not really the major reference, you will find lots of references to text, design, architecture and especially art. In effect, I think that this might be the first book in English that relates the language of new media towards history, and I think nobody really noticed this. So I talk about baroque art, renaissance art, with references from Panofsky to Svetlana Alpers - so when I said in the beginning that it is all about cinema, this is actually not true.

The second answer is that is that again, I think that I chose cinema because of various personal reasons - as I'm very interested in digital filmmaking and its possibilities. Also, other studies had already explored other media in relation to new media. For example you have books about architecture by Mitchell, you had Laurel with the computer as theatre, Landow with hypertext... But in fact I felt that the field of visual culture was underdeveloped, incorporating visual art, design and cinema.

With respect to new media art - would you ascribe a higher degree of autonomy to objects created in a high level programming language, such as C++, as opposed to works created with customized software such as Flash? (this is just to get further

comment on this ongoing debate, of course there are ideological themes that are sidestepped here).

This is a very kind of common statement, which I think is a way to exclude people and say, "we know programming so we are real artists". It is a very typical modernist view, which is relying on what is regarded as the logic of the computer, which is programming. Of course, this is a paradox since it is almost exactly what I'm also saying in the book - I'm saying that the historical uniqeness of the computer is that media becomes substituted by software, which is this new kind of medium that allows you to program things etc. But I think that when it comes to art, ultimately art being about ideas and strategies in space and time then in the end I don't care how it is done. In fact since the whole logic of contemporary art, since the sixties is conceptual, then what materials and tools you use, absolutely does not matter. Ultimately it is about ideas, images and worlds you create and how you do it, be it Photoshop or C, doesn't determine its quality.

However, in relation to new media, in your book, you do talk about connections between customized software and the consumer society, through concepts like "the logic of selection". Don't you see any ideological complications when it comes to art production and the software that is used?

Yes, you know that a couple of months ago I wrote this article that I tried to make as controversial as possible. ("Flash Generation") The point that I was trying to make, was very much in favor of software art, but I used this to superimpose a very particular idea. I'm interested in how you create today, with all these media accessible. Obviously, the so called postmodern culture, has since the seventies worked through quoting and pastische - where so many video artists begun to quote already existing media - directly or indirectly. The "digiculture" has shown how quoting and remixing can be a very creative technique. With media art though, I really got tired of this field of endless video installations that quote existing media. What I like about a lot of software art is that it follows a different logic. Where people have created their own worlds or they create some kind of interactive environment, or an environment where users can upload their own media - all which seem as a sign of a different sensibility or consciousness which is not so closely tied up to commercial media, as say the consciousness of previous generations. So to that extent there is something positive about software art, because often it allows you to create your own worlds as opposed to using commercial tools like Photoshop, which are all designed to manipulate existing media. In effect, software artists themselves often say something like that, so recently Golan Levin, was visiting our department and said the he had started to do software art precisely in opposition to the generation of people who were using tools like Photoshop, which very much redesigned existing media. So for him programming was a way of creating his

own world.

The Flash Generation series, fed off into a discussion (on the electronic nettime and rhizome discussion lists) about interactivity and usability, however you didn't comment on this particular thread. Also in your book, you don't go much into the user and questions such as subjectivity, interaction and usability.

It is true, and again I don't try to deal with everything in my book. It is a study of new media in a somewhat formalist tradition, trying to look at how new media texts / objects are structured. In a way that film theory before me has described the structure of film - and literary theorists going all the way back to Russian formalists have talked about the techniques of the artistic text. I'm also interested in the process of production, so I talk about how software shapes the imagination of producers, commercial and artistic. And this is also why I don't talk about interactivity since I find it to be an extremely difficult concept to deal with, since this is really something that happens when users start interacting with and accessing a work. To deal with this seriously, which is a big topic, where you probably have to bring in a whole field of disciplines, like cognitive psychology etc, is something that I haven't done.

But I want to briefly comment on usability, a concept that is important in a kind of design community, or human-computer-interface community. I find it to be referenced more often in Europe. In America, people somehow don't take it so seriously, and especially in artistic culture around new media it is something which is not part of the dialogue. The reason that it is not part of the dialogue, I think is a basic assumption of contemporary art practice, that when the user comes to the artwork, you are supposed to have a difficult time, right? You don't know its code, you don't know its interface and discovering its hidden messages is part of the game. The work is often obviously difficult, the rules are not fixed, because the code of its interface are often unique to a particular work (in the way it is put together), this makes art a particular system of communication now in our society.

Ultimately if you look at the "best" works of design they are not very different. Especially when you think about contemporary design in consumer society, which is less about communicating particular information, than it is about creating desire, they are really works of art creating atmosphere, without particular meanings. So I think this idea of usability is something which isn't very useful, if you are thinking about interesting cultural objects. If you are thinking about banal interfaces that simply communicate information, then we can talk about it, but for me this topic is not so interesting to discuss. I also want to point out that the issue of usability completely bypasses the economical structures of culture, like for example I think I saw a book from around 1995 about how easy the web

technology is. So IBM can put out a site, and a twelve year old can put out a site of the same quality in twenty minutes and of course, consciously or unconsciously the commercial interests want to deal with this situation and all of a sudden you have Dynamic HTML, Flash, Script which raise the bar. Suddenly the individual cannot produce a web-site that looks professional. Of course you can produce a web-site but after everybody was exposed to all this multimedia content, the website produced by an individual will look unprofessional. This is exactly how contemporary culture sensors individual voices. The ideology of professionalism makes it difficult to communicate their messages.

What about the connection between digitization of culture at large and the consumer society? You did write about the need to refuse interactivity...

What I say is that in a funny way you can become "individual" by using Microsoft Windows and customization - but what was actually the question?

Well, do you see a connection between selection and digitization of culture at large - meaning that selection and interactivity can be seen as concepts embedded in the consumer society?

This is not how I thought about it, because I guess for me selection operates on a few different levels. Let's say you have a media database where you can select different clips, then of course you have to digitize the materials first, but selection also means that you can select different filters, renditions and hyperlinks - so it also refers to the structure. On the most primitive level, and this is how interactivity often worked in the nineties, interactivity is also selecting one path among many. So it's not only about digitization, it is also about the whole structure of software and of the computer.

I was thinking about the computer technologies as emerging from the need of augmenting the human intellect, and for storage as in the research of Vannevar Bush. Interactivity then becomes more of an effect - because you need a way of retrieving the digitized information. So digitization could be seen as a base of this interactivity.

Yes, this is a very good analysis and I completely agree with you because I think for me interactivity is a consequence but also what makes possible a very fundamental role of the computer as information storage, accessing and processing device. This is an important opposition that I make in *The Language of New Media*, when I talk about narrative fiction / immersion on the one hand, and then information and control on the other hand. I talk about how when you read a book or listen to music you, at least traditionally, don't want interactivity but if you are accessing information you want to have choices and be able to

follow different paths. Of course the computer is not the first information processor, before we have the library, book or the scroll - and historically we can probably say that all information storaging, accessing and processing technologies were interactive. So in one way I completely agree with you, and this function of the computer, as a tool for computation (and not fiction generator, which wasn't really thought until the sixties), real-time control and storage, already fitted into an existing paradigm. But I forgot about how we got to this point?

We were talking about interactivity as an effect of digitization and storaging technologies. But I guess to oversimplify the question, we could say that I want you to comment on if you see a problem with digitization, in the same way that you criticize interactivity and the logic of selection. What are the creative possibilities of the forms of new media , when they seem so tied up to a specific form of consumer society?

We shouldn't focus too much on this argument since it is only one among many in the book, because I also look at the computer as a creative and liberating technology. It also depends much on where the user is, because for example when I teach in San Diego which is a stronghold of commercial culture with Starbucks and McDonalds around every corner, something of which my students are very well aware, I often get these kind of questions. They ask if the computer isn't just a perfect technology to propagate this capitalist consumer society, and I say that if you are sitting in the states where you have such easy access to information and materials, you go to the library you can sit at a computer - and you can see how in the second part of the nineties, the Internet was overtaken by all these big companies, it is very easy to get the impression that all this is just an extension of capitalism. Well, if you sit in lots of other countries, from Ukraine, to Brazil to Bosnia it becomes a window to the world, and a way to connect to other people and a way to access information that your TV doesn't allow and it really becomes a way to escape. So it really depends on the context. Of course, once these countries enters the world of global consumer society then this liberating function becomes no longer liberating, but again this is not a global system yet.

The Net.Art coming out from Eastern Europe in the mid nineties, springs to mind here.

Yes, and at that time it was really a way to connect with an international community - something that hasn't really happened since the sixties, which was one of the points of my Flash article. So selection doesn't just mean selecting which object to buy, it is also selecting which community you want to talk to. It is basically selecting the dialogue you want to participate in.

Also in the Flash article, you finally write about narrative works, as a kind of

challenging area for new media artists...

I think that basically what I'm saying is this, that you have two traditions in the history of using the computer to create art and moving images. On the one hand you have this traditional algorithmic tradition, with people like James and John Whitney who made beautiful, abstract algorithmic films, and today this tradition continues with lots of Flash art. Then we have this other tradition which begins in the seventies and really picks up in the eighties, with software that allows you to manipulate figurative media. Today we have Hollywood films like *Star Wars* that rely on the computer to create realistic, figurative objects and environments. I'm interested in exploring the area that lies in between these two extremes, but not only to generate abstract stuff but also to generate or manipulate a part of a fictional, presentational universe. Of course this is not entirely new, people were trying to do algorithmic poetry already in the seventies, at places like Yale University. Then we have books like *Hamlet on the Holodeck* where Janet H. Murray suggest something like this. I don't want to say that this is the future, but that this is something to explore. And again, I don't see it as either or, that we should completely replace the author or the director by a program, which is simply too difficult - again I rather see the computer as augmenting, right? Like we talked today in relation to your project (www.wake/ interactive.dk) of the computer as an associative engine, so the editor, director or author creates the main lines and the computer can add its own associations, other images, other spaces and other lines of dialogue. This is something that is less difficult to do. Basically what I'm suggesting is that this interesting area of algorithmic generation, that for decades have been used to generate abstract stuff, would be interesting to use in relation to more figurative media.

Have you thought about how your theory of new media, at least as initially laid out in the book, could be seen as destroying film studies as the study of a specific media?

It is funny that you ask this question since exactly two weeks ago, I was at Denver, Colorado for the annual conference of the American Society for Cinema Studies. A society of say a thousand people, with mostly people from the states who teach film and film production, and in fact I was invited to be part of this opening panel, precisely about the future of cinema studies. One of the proposals was to rename the society, the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. People are trying to deal with these sort of questions, but I should say that by large I find that they were really a way behind, as the topics on new media was about how we can introduce CD-ROM to film and media studies. And when I mentioned that it is not really about media any more, it is about software, people were quite shocked by that. So to some extent you're right actually, ultimately if we follow this line of reason to the end it definitely destroys cinema studies, but we should

also say that we have the art of cinema, we have the history of cinema which is a certain body of knowledge and as I say in the book, this is a place where you can find a lot of interesting ideas which can be used today for new media, so let's hope that we'll still have people in the future who will study cinema and who'll be able to teach it to us and other people.