

Considering 'New Media': "Inasmuch As It Is Always Taking Place" (1990; Gary Hill)
against "Raging Bull" (1980; Martin Scorsese)

Gary Hill's "Inasmuch As It Is Always Taking Place", a multimedia installation prepared for the Museum of Modern Art, is now only arguably a work of 'new media' in light of Lev Manovich's "Language of New Media." While the video element of the work can be broken down into discrete units as per Manovich's requisites, it seems that Manovich would insist the medium be in binary form. From frames of video to the 525 interlaced scanlines of the image, to the individual pixels that exist as the smallest unit in the equation, every element is, in fact, discrete. But what's missing from Manovich's list of what constitutes 'new media' is the fact that analog video was likely the medium Hill was working with in 1990. If digital video had been used, there would be a firmer basis for argument. But analog video is not comprised of binary code.

Despite the use of discrete elements in the form of pixels, the resemblance to computer code ends at this point. While even most electronic devices, precursors to computer language, utilize circuits that, like computers, are in either a distinctly 'on' or 'off' position, the pixels used in a television monitor have several 'on' positions with different states. A pixel in a television's cathode ray tube is actually a small piece of glass that, depending on the specific angle that light strikes it, may appear to the viewer as red, green, blue or a combination of the colors. This multi-state device then will not fall under the umbrella that Manovich's theory dictates.

On closer evaluation, and in light of Manovich's thinking in fact, the work that was initially chosen here as the 'old media', the film "Raging Bull" might fall closer to his definition of 'new media.' While again there is an absence of a binary coding structure, the discrete elements inherent in the nature of any gelatin-based photographic media (i.e. thousands if not millions of suspended silver particles) might suggest part of the equation. But one must wonder how a medium more than a century old could be considered 'new.' One argument could follow the line of thinking that film has in fact, evolved into digital cinema and is represented already, in binary form, in the DVD and Laserdisc versions of the same work. But the original is film, not a binary source.

Again, looking back to Manovich's definition, one finds he uses the word 'apparent', a term also applied in evaluating the grain (or particles) of film negative and print. What a cinematographer calls 'apparent grain' is quite noticeable in the film because Scorsese sought the gritty look of an era in the past (ironic considering the discussion of pixels in a television screen; Scorsese shot "Raging Bull" in black-and-white partly to protest the alarming fact that the newer Kodak color film was found to be fading far more quickly than previous formulations).

But despite the similarities, neither work fully meets Manovich's criteria. What is interesting is that Ada Augusta is quoted as having said "the Analytical Engine weaves algebraical patterns just as the Jacquard loom weaves flowers and leaves." Manovich talks about the irony (or not) of the use of discarded 35mm film for early punch-card

'computer' systems. One must wonder if the works are not both very close relatives to their binary counterparts.

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