Abstract
The impact of visual media on our senses has been much discussed even in the area of the humanities. The use of internet technology turned virtual communication into an everyday experience. The rise of this new medium and its comparison with the old hard-copy literary media opened up interesting approaches to the construction of our sense of reality. By briefly introducing influential media thinkers such as Landow, Kittler, Manovich, and Levy, my paper will discuss how the new media has transposed the meaning of the virtual reality and our understanding of reality in art.

Key Words: The Virtual, Art, Multiplicity, Commodity

Introduction

The importance and popularity of internet communication exploded during the early 1990s, and we saw that many scholars emerged as media critics during this period. As new inventions always have, the internet fascinated many communities including the Arts and Humanities. During the initial stage, successful thinkers were those who could show positive effects of the technology and adapt it for their own uses. The primary media thinkers to which I refer, George Landow, Friedrich Kittler, Lev Manovich, and Pierre Levy, are to be included in this group of scholars. Their early blind optimism has been polished and evolved into a more nuanced analysis of the effects of the new media.

Aside from anachronistic antagonism against anything new and threatening, however, we have not seen much serious criticism of the new media study, which, in turn, seemed to wither critical potential of the internet in the area of the Arts and Humanities. Nevertheless, it does not mean that there is no such critical work at all. I found, for example, a work by Alain Badiou quite interesting to the extent that it radically questions the liberal potential in the visual study of Deleuze. Badiou helps me identify a possible blind spot in media study from a philosophical viewpoint. After stating the contributions that such media thinkers' have made to literary analysis, this paper will examine the disagreement between Levy and Badiou, attempting to explore the implications behind their differences. What is at stake is how to interpret the virtual relationships in which we live and how we can link the new virtual technologies and our appreciation of art.

Visions of Technology

George Landow is already a classic thinker of the hypertext, who equated the digital/hypertext revolution with the Gutenberg revolution. For Landow, "print technology redefined the audience for literature from a group of manuscript readers and listeners to a group of readers who read in the privacy of their own homes," and it freed "the writer from the need for patronage and the consequent subservience to wealth." Similarly, the

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digital/hypertext revolution will free us from established authorities such as state censorship or copyright law. Today, his theory is regarded by many as "utopian," and the general current of media theory is moving toward more media-specific analysis. Some even say that the so-called "digital-revolution" has already been achieved in the printed text. Roland Barthes' idea of the play of text and Michel Foucault's death of the author indicate that such a "revolution" was first found in the printed text.

Technology, Psychology and Writing

Friedrich Kittler can give us a good insight into why contemporary technology appears to be already told by those who presented "new theory" in the past. He points out that Freud's theory was inspired by the use of the typewriter, and Lacan's reworking of Freud can be explained by the fact that he was a contemporary of Turing who assembled the initial computing machine. According to Kittler, the writing apparatus is the foundation of memory and metaphor, and the écriture is always found in between older machine and new machine. In other words, writing is the act of mediation between "temporality of the present" (life) and "its representation" (death). The use of typewriter and print technology helped them see language as an assemblage of the discrete twenty-six objects. The archaic form of digitalization in the nineteenth century excluded noise from its system and the phonetic code, which substituted sounds of letter, and it dematerialized the sign and thus became the inner voice. In this sense, for Kittler, psychoanalysis is the reality exclusively in the modern period. He finds that the contemporary life-technology is constantly suppressed and sent back to the older form of media to define the reality. Conscious realization of the past is thus a form of speculation in the present. Kittler's work shows how our psychological sense of reality can be presented as a mixture of language and imagination mediated by the specific technology.

Visualized Paradigm

One of the contemporary artists who assert the potential of the new media is Lev Manovich. One of his multimedia films, "Mission to Earth," was exhibited at the NTT Communication Center in the year 2003 in Tokyo. This work features multi-screens that show different narrations from different angles. The viewers can create many narratives simultaneously depending on which sequence of the screen windows they follow. His work exemplifies the fact that the multiple narratives are explicit under the current technology.

In his theoretical works, Manovich observes the shift from classical linear narrative in film to multiple-database narratives in multimedia. His basic assumption is that code and image co-exist, and they define what we conceive of as reality. It is interesting if we compare Kittler, who said that the reality is "the meaningful mixture of words and images," and Manovich, whose attention moved from word to code in his definition of reality. According to Manovich, film was initially recognized as an index to the reality in its projected appearance and movement, but it lost the indexical feature as it changed to be mediated by the digital database technology. In digital film, the viewer "must uncover their underlying logic while proceeding through their algorithm." The database and the media do not necessarily predetermine the logic. The digital film forces us to interact with the media and to reconstruct the narratives. The new media reverses the relationship between database and narrative. In the old media, the database (the paradigm) is implicit while the actual narrative (the syntagm) is explicit, and in the new media, Database (the paradigm) is given material existence, while narrative (the syntagm) is dematerialized.

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3 Ibid, 44
5 Kittler, pp3
6 Manovich, pp225
If Manovich’s observation is right, the question is whether Kittler and Manovich work on different paradigms of art. On the contrary, in my opinion, they are rather working on the same paradigm of thought, the paradigm of “the virtual.”

The Virtual

Pierre Levy is a French contemporary media thinker who has written extensively on the potential of the virtual communications. In his *Becoming Virtual*, Levy first explains that the word “virtual” is originally derived from *virtus*, which means power or strength.7 The virtual is not the opposition of the real material. The virtual is the real potential like data in a disk or money which can be actualized in reality. According to Levy, the virtualization involves changes of identity, location, and velocity so that our relationships with the environment change.8 In general, Levy bears hypertext in his mind when he discusses the quality of the virtual and its potential.

For Levy, the virtual is real just as language is real. In his analogy with language, he shows that the virtual is language, and the actual is the act of reading. Conversely, writing is the act of virtualization which dislocates knowledge from its subject.9 The virtual is the form of separation from the original location and time that makes our communication possible. The transition from printed text to hypertext is another form of virtualization since it opens up for new multiple interpretations by connecting itself to other texts in cyberspace.10 In my view, the virtual for Levy and Deleuze is the potential/power to transform a mode of being – an interpretative paradigm of our perspective. In this sense, the hypertext has a potential to transform our perception of the text since the hypertext destabilizes the former boundary between reading and writing; thus it can change the relationships between the author and readers and also our experiences of interior and exterior. It can be also said that the transition from Kittler to Manovich is the act of virtualization which poses a question to the previous forms of reading.

Levy sees the new communicative experiences in cyberspace as a “richer reading experience”11 which will extend our communicative potential. The separation from the original place and time is not only necessary but also valuable for him. When he equates the function of money with the virtual language, however, his theory opens itself up to a criticism as well.

Critique of the Virtual

The whole argument of Badiou regarding Deleuze’s philosophy is complex; yet, his critical point regarding the virtual is relatively simple. For Deleuze (and Levy), the virtual is a philosophical Being, the ground of the actual.12 Badiou calls the ground the virtual ‘univocal’, which means that Deleuze’s advocacy of multiplicities and transformation is really based on the single entity of the virtual. In other words, Deleuze’s thought can be interpreted as a fixed system of differences. For example, Badiou thinks that Marx’s overturning of the Hegelian dialectic resulted in perpetuating the dialectic thought.13

If the virtual is the void, the site of inversion that is seen as unseen from the end point of the actual, the virtual can be justified as power behind any outcome that codifies its structure. Badiou insists that true multiplicity comes from different sets of systems instead of a single system that produces multiple outcomes. In my view, Badiou raises a fundamental question about the appraisal of the virtual as a producer of multiplicities.

Levy’s money analogy to the virtual can explicate a crucial difference between Deleuze, Levy, and Badiou. In *Becoming Virtual*, Levy says that “if we

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8 Ibid, 26-33
9 Ibid, 51
10 Ibid, 56
11 Ibid, 56
13 Ibid, 44

- 221 -
block virtualization, we create alienation.”

Money economy is said to separate the producer-subject and the product-object. When the product becomes commodity, the value of the product no longer lies in the identity of the producer, but rather it depends on the scarcity in exchange or the exchange value. Alienation occurs as the market determines the value and identity of the producer-subject. Levy insists that the virtual is subjectivity’s way out of the dependence on the exchange market. He sees the sharing of knowledge and interactive communication in cyberspace will form a new human relationship in the world of commodities.

Interestingly, a similar argument has been made in the analysis of brands and their role in an economy. Jonathan Knowles shows that brand is constituted by proposition and personality. It is wrong to think that brands carry an irrational magical attraction that controls the consumer’s mind. By transforming functional assets into relationships, brands can establish an emotional basis in their relationship with the consumer. As a result, the brand is able to “decommoditise the form of cooperation’s assets.” Since the establishment of brand requires the corporation to adopt the perspective of the consumer and transform the boundary between the producer and the consumer, the brand appears to be similar to the virtual in Levy’s argument. For Badiou, however, this new communication, which escapes the commodity relationships, will still be based on the value formation in a money economy. Whether brand is richer communication (multiple) in consumer society or deeper involvement into money economy (without multiplicities) is a question raised by the comparison between Levy and Badiou. Needless to say, their standpoints are not merely theoretical. They are political.

Art in the age of virtual reality, for Levy, is an important and unique means of sharing a way of feeling. The force of commodity and technology separates/liberates us from the here and now, yet virtualization brings us the “emotional exaltation.” Art is a form that escapes the actual action in life, and at the same time, it enables us to be emotionally connected and uniquely individual. Is this uniqueness possible only within the current form of economy, or is art outside of the commodity form possible at all, are, in essence, the questions that the theories of the virtual ask.

14 Ibid, 175
16 Ibid, 38
17 Ibid, 99