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Ornamentality in the New Media

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1 Introduction

The term “ornament” is commonly reserved for certain fixtures in our daily life such as Persian rugs or tacky wallpaper. For historical reasons, aestheticians have opted to downplay the philosophical import of ornamentality. Still a number of more recent leading lights, from Ernst Gombrich (Gombrich 1979) and Rudolf Arnheim to Kendall Walton (Walton 1990) and Peter Kivy (Kivy 1991), have become acutely aware of the cognitive value of ornamentality, and of the fact that ornamentality is an aesthetic phenomenon, which is much more widespread in art and in life than we tend to acknowledge. In this essay I pursue this line of contemporary thought as I offer some reasons in support of the seemingly strange claim that ornamentality is pervasive in the new media. I then turn to explore some of its ramifications, which yield, I shall argue, an interesting puzzle.

The term “new media” is commonly used as a blanket description for a whole range of different objects, processes, and practices, which have been growing increasingly intertwined and which already pertain almost equally to the domains of communication, entertainment, and lifestyle. What we ordinarily count as new media may consist of one or more of

the following standard categories (Lister et al 2003: 13): (a) computer-mediated communications, primarily e-mail, chat rooms, voice image transmissions, the web, and mobile telephony; (b) digital technologies for distributing and consuming, primarily media texts characterized by interactivity and hypertext formats, such as the world-wide-web, CD-ROM, DVD, and the various platforms for computer games; (c) virtual reality, which runs the gamut from simulated environments to fully immersive representational spaces; and (d) a whole range of transformations and dislocations of established media in, for example, photography, television, film, etc.

There is a common temptation to adopt technological essentialism regarding the new media, that is, to identify the media with the technology. So we might say quite trivially that the new media are new because the technologies underlying them are new. To be sure, some of these technologies are indeed new and quite exciting. But others may not be so new, or are based on old ideas and conceptions. Consider, for instance, the notion of interactivity, which is widely held to be a constitutive characteristic of the new media. We ordinarily speak of new media interactivity quite literally, as consisting in physical interaction—real or simulated—between the user and his gadget: pressing a button, choosing a link, cutting, pasting, dragging an object, and so on. Yet, as Lev Manovich rightly pointed out, all classical as well as “old” modern media—literary and dramatic narratives, visual and three-dimensional representation, music, architecture, cinema, to adduce the most obvious examples—are interactive in the sense that they invite or hinge upon cognitive processes of filling-in, hypothesis formation, recall and identification, etc. (Manovich 2000: 55-61). In this sense, new media interactivity is not that different, and restricting ourselves to technological newness amounts to taking a one-sided view of a much richer picture—that of the enmeshment of our minds and lives in the technology. One should be reminded here of the prophetic words of new media pioneer Douglas Engelbart, advising his peers on the brink of the digital revolution to transcend technological essentialism: “We do not speak of isolated clever tricks that help in particular situations. We refer to a way of life in an integrated domain where hunches, cut-and-try, intangibles, and the human ‘feel for a situation’ usefully co-exist with powerful concepts, streamlined terminology and notation, sophisticated methods, and high-powered electronic aids” (Engelbart 1962: 1).

Thus, it would be safer, or at least it would make more contextualist sense, to say that the new media give rise to medial hybridity. According to Jerrold Levinson (Levinson 1990: 26-36), a hybrid is primarily a historical thing, a product of a certain development from concrete origins, which has emerged out of a field of previously existing activities and concerns, two or more of which it explicitly combines in some sense. We may take, for example, kinetic sculpture, such as a mobile installation by Alexander Calder. In Levinson's terminology, such an artifact is a "transformational hybrid" of two previously existing distinct art forms: sculpture and dance. We may say that it is a case of a sculpture gone dancing. It incorporates some of the special or distinctive characteristics of dance into what remains recognizably sculpture, albeit in an extended sense. Its mobility defies its solidity. Still what is significant about such a work of art transcends the technological achievement underlying its hybrid craftsmanship. It rather pertains to its entry into the realm of art, to the place that this artifact occupies in our lives, and to our response to its defiance of solidity by the suggestion of movement.

Now consider the example of digital TV. This new transformational hybrid brings together two "old" media: television technology—itsself a direct descendent of the telegraph, the telephone, and the early analog technology of photo-telegraphy or facsimile—and computer technology. It is quite literally television gone digital. Yet what is new and significant about digital TV is not so much its technological hybridity *per se*, but rather the changes and effects that such hybridity brings about considering the whole environmental transaction pertaining to this medium, including what it can or does offer and what users do or can do with such offerings, and how this whole package is integrated into our living spaces and activities. In what follows I would like to focus exclusively on this sense of newness; hence I opt for a more "ecological" approach in this venture on the relatively uncharted terrain of the philosophical aesthetics of the new media.

2 Ornamentality as Inhibition of Games of Make-Believe

So why, how, and when are the new media ornamental? One answer, taken squarely from ordinary experience, readily suggests itself: at least some of these technologies are conducive to audio-visual styling; hence they serve a clear decorative purpose as fixtures in our daily life. Actually this has been the case with television—the immediate ancestor of most

of the new media—almost since its very inception, as I have argued elsewhere (Guter 2002). The intertwining of such technologies as digital television, the internet, and mobile telephony decorates simply by virtue of contributing to and shaping one's environment in very much the same way that Persian rugs or flowery wallpaper do. The activated technology often becomes simply part of the space in which it is located; for some people, it may make an apartment homier and more inviting, perhaps even more than an antique sofa or a decorative chandelier. One may walk in and out of a room, catching no more than a glimpse of the screen, overhearing only a few words or a brief musical passage, and yet keep the technology switched on for pretty much the same reason one does not peel off and re-paste the wallpaper each time one exits and reenters a room. This point may be reinforced by observing the habitual frenzy of zapping and surfing. Such common practices often serve the clear decorative purpose of creating or adjusting one's ambience. Furthermore, at the very heart of contemporary art we find works which capitalize on the ornamentality of the new media, from the jocular early video installations by Nam Jun Paik to recent ontological conundrums of cutting-edge verve such as Tod Machover's *Brain Opera*, which utilizes the input of random anonymous internet users to shape immersive audio-visual environments in which real people roam, taking active part in the creative processes underlying this peculiarly shape-shifting work (Ippolito 1996).

Yet there are still deeper reasons for the claim that the new media are ornamental. Here I would like to refer to Kendall Walton's theory of ornamentation, which he presented in his influential book *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Walton 1990). In his book, Walton articulates a general theory of make-believe, which is applicable far beyond the realm of figurative painting and sculpture, stories and novels, and other such artifacts, which exercise our powers of imagining. According to Walton, "propositions that are 'true in a fictional world,' or *fictional*, are propositions that, in a given social context, are to be imagined as true. What is to be imagined usually depends on features of real world... Things that generate fictional truths in this manner I call *props*. *Representations* are objects whose function or purpose in a given social group is to serve as props in games of make-believe" (Walton 1991: 380).

It is easy to see how Walton's theoretical framework can be deployed for our purpose here. Most of our new media experiences can be described quite straightforwardly in terms of using props in a variety of games of make-believe, perceptual or other, wherein such props can be,

for instance, other network users (real or fake), texts, visual images, pop-ups and interactive graphics of all sorts, computer icons, navigational objects, sound effects, audio-visual clips, live feeds, and other stuff that new media dreams are made of. Our various games of make-believe with these props generate fictional truths about the props themselves, about the fictional worlds that they inhabit, and about us, the participants, or rather *users*. Furthermore, insofar as our new media experiences are mediated by man-computer interface, information takes the form of representation, whether by words, sounds, graphics, visuals, or, in certain immersive environments, even by kinesthetic sensations.

Walton offers an insightful account of ornamentation in terms of inhibition of participation in games of make-believe (Walton 1990: 274-289). Contrary to the standard case of fully-fledged pictorial representation, decorative representations are conceptually more complex in the sense that they present us with fictional worlds in which other fictional worlds are embedded. This puts us at a certain psychological "distance" from the embedded world, since we participate only in the first-order game of make-believe, while imagining that there is another game, which we could participate in. In Walton's words: "We stand apart from the internal fictional world and observe it through its frame" (Walton 1990: 284). For example, when I look at flowery wallpaper, I am withdrawn from an internal world, which contains certain flowers, into a second-order world of complex flowery patterns on the wall. Insofar as a representation is decorative, we inevitably find ourselves withdrawn to the point of being merely spectators, rather than participants in a fully blown game of make-believe. We oscillate between the tempting fictional richness of the internal world and the overpowering sparseness of the framing world, which consists of "scarcely more than the work itself together with, by implication, its artist and his creative activity" (Walton, 1990: 287). Importantly, Walton observes that this is also true of *bona fide* representations. Consider, for instance, Vincent Van Gogh's painting *Starry Night*. According to Walton, the physical properties of the painting—the bold brush strokes, the cracking of the paint, the swirling frenzy of the artist's pictorial language—pull us back from a particularly seductive internal world into a more "objective" perspective, which might indeed yield more significant connections with our lives (Walton 1990: 288-9). A clear advantage of Walton's account is in the way it shows how widespread ornamentality really is. It can be temporary or partial, coexisting with genuine representationality.

Considering that the new media are conducive to audio-visual styling, hence to decoration, we can see how this observation readily maps onto Walton's idea that ornamentality is to be explicated in terms of inhibition of participation in games of make-believe. For styling simply draws one's attention away from the represented object to the way the representation is actually produced, hence away from any fictional truth it may generate concerning the represented object. This is very obvious in the case of audio-visual styling in the new media. As I noted before, some new media technologies serve a clear decorative purpose. This is true both in real life and virtual reality environments, as well as in the interweaving of both realms, as the phenomenon of *Second Life* spectacularly shows. Furthermore, the very notion of "data-aesthetics" (Vesna 2007), that is, the creative quest of rendering mere information or patterns of data as being pregnant with aesthetic significance, has imbibed the basic truth, which Walton's theory of ornamentality fleshes out, that experiencing an object (a conglomeration of data) through and encased by its mediational manifestation (man-computer interface) is tantamount to interfacing to a culture encoded in digital form (Manovich 2000). Thus, audio-visual styling in the new media yields significant connections with our lives by pulling us back to a game of "cultural interface".

Yet even in the realm of mere text, we find pervasive styling in the new media in the form of hypertextuality. Stated carefully enough in non-essentialist terms, this contention circumvents both the literary and the expressionist fallacies, which Luciano Floridi observes in the standard interpretation of hypertext (Floridi 1999: 121-123). While it is true that the idea of hypertext originated in an attempt to solve the problem of information overload by means of associative linkage of data (Bush 1945), it is also true that hypertextuality may yield in practice highly stylized texts such as John Cayley's celebrated self-assembling poetic collage *Book Unbound* or Stuart Moulthrop's technologically innovative essays and works of fiction. Such works of hypertext, whether consisting in passive link-node structures or automatically generated by an algorithm, are akin, in a sense, to some well-known modernist attempts in music—such as Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Klavierstück XI*—to generate "mobile form" by employing various types of chance operation, including associative linkage of precomposed fragments. We may safely say that insofar as hypertextual styling empowers the reader to determine the format of the text, thereby deflecting the reader back to the manner in which the text is generated by the reader's own performance of reading, it inhibits partici-

pation in games of make-believe. And if hypertext is indeed the conceptual structure of the infosphere—the ever expanding and converging digital “encyclopaedic macrocosm of data, information, ideas, knowledge, beliefs, codified experiences, memories, images, artistic interpretations and other mental creations” (Floridi 1999: 8)—as Floridi maintains (Floridi 1999: 128-131), then ornamentality is in effect the fundamental aesthetics of the infosphere.

Hypertextual navigation is a particular case of another key principle of the new media: interactivity. As I pointed out in my introduction, in the cognitive sense of interactivity—filling-in gaps, concluding, expecting, and so forth—the new media are not uniquely more interactive than any of the “older” media. However, contrary to the fixity and continuity of the analog media, digitality allows for random access to any data element, and it enables individual members of the new media audience to directly intervene in, and change, the data accessed. Such digital interactivity can be extractive, as in the case of hypertext, immersive, as in the case of virtual reality, or registrational, that is, consisting in writing back onto a database, as in the case of internet bulletin boards and multi-user domains. Either way, digital interactivity amounts to world-building—simply put, the viewer becomes a user—which means that when we digitally interact with the medium we patently refer back to the features of the medium itself, we are withdrawn to the way the representation is actually produced. In this sense we may conclude, perhaps somewhat contra-intuitively, that digital interactivity in general inhibits participation in games of make-believe. Furthermore, as David Z. Saltz pointed out, such interactions are performative “when the interaction itself becomes an aesthetic object; in other words, ... to the extent that they are about their own interactions” (Saltz 1997: 123). Thus, performativity is the semantic hallmark of the user’s participation in what Walton’s theory refers to as the first-order game of make-believe, consisting of the user’s own world-building activity, while imagining that there is another, embedded game, which he could participate in, albeit not as a user *per se*, i.e. as a “world-builder”.

3 New Media as Conduits of Real Life

The new media have emerged from an unlikely hybrid of military oriented and aerospace technological drive, the need of the entertainment industry to employ the full sensory array of its audience and to accom-

plish new forms of narrative, the quest of computer and artificial intelligence research for a fully fledged man-computer symbiosis, and fancies that have been brewed in the deep recesses of cyberpunk subculture. Still the overarching identity of the new media as conduits of real life, that is, as means of communication in the broadest human sense, not just in the narrow sense of data transmission, was already evident in some of the early conceptual frameworks, which shaped the emergence of the new media, and it certainly became a fact of reality at least since Douglas Engelbart's groundbreaking demonstration of his online system in 1968. As conduits of real life—whether by means of text, image, or sound, as play or as work, amid our most ordinary routines or altogether in a virtual reality environment—the new media are most commonly accessed and interacted with in search of knowledge.

It is crucial to observe here that the digital medium in itself, in its technologically essentialist sense—the closed circuit, the technology merely being on—is characterized by epistemic transparency. That is, the digital medium is capable of presenting perceptual information that is caused by and counterfactually dependent upon its subjects (Walton 1984: 246-77). This is due both to the specific hybrid origins of the new media in earlier technologies of distant seeing and facsimile, and to the nature of digitization—the process of converting continuous perceptual information into a numerical representation by means of sampling and quantifying. The technology in itself has been designed to be absolutely inert with regards to the content, which it channels. Indeed we tend to perceive the many idiosyncrasies of the medium—such as electronic distortions, blurring or unnatural coloring of the image, which are rampant nowadays in video transmissions carried by third-generation mobile telephony—as having no bearing on the status of events and objects in the world. As a converse example, consider the medium of Western tonal music, which imposes clear structural requirements for tonal movement to occur. If similar requirements were to be present in a typical new media apparatus—for example, if a given segment of web camera feed were to have its perceptual equivalent of a perfect cadence—the perceptual information embodied in the segment would have been, at best, only partially caused by its subjects, and, in any case, it would not have been counterfactually dependent upon its subjects. Interestingly, John Cage, the visionary American composer, noticed this crucial difference already with regards to the “old” medium of television. Seeking to free music from the “totalitarianism” of Western tradition, marshaled by his onetime teacher Arnold Schoenberg, Cage preached for raising music to the condition of television (Cage 1961: 40).

These considerations suggest the philosophical significance of any introduction of boundaries into the clear medium, of the interactive compromising of the open channel. A prime example is simply the framing or cropping of the photographic image. After all, the real life channeled by the new media is a framed real life, truncated by the technical specifications of the equipment used and set to fit our gadgets. As Stanelly Cavell pointed out, the significance of the photographic frame lies in the brute fact that the photograph comes to an end. "When a photograph is cropped, the rest of the world, and its explicit rejection, are as essential in the experience of a photograph as what it explicitly presents" (Cavell 1979: 24). That is, the frame has a meaning internally related to the meaning of the image it encloses.

It may be instructive to recast this idea using the valuable terminological distinction, employed by R. M. Hare (Hare 1970), between the *phrastic* and the *neustic* of an utterance. By the *phrastic*, Hare simply means the propositional content of the utterance. The *neustic* is what Hare calls a sign of subscription to the speech act that is being performed: it is that part of the sentence which expresses the speaker's commitment to the factuality, desirability, etc., of the propositional content conveyed by the *phrastic* (Lyons 1977, vol. 2: 749-751). This distinction is easily carried over to the analysis of pictorial or even sonic representation (although for reasons, which remain beyond the scope of this essay, it may not be readily applicable to the analysis of musical representation). Arthur Danto (Danto 1995) suggested that the *phrastic* of a pictorial representation—a painting or a photographic image—is what we normally take to be its propositional content: a tree, a man, the half-dome in Yosemite Park in California. The *neustic* of a picture would be the attitude its "author"—normally the painter or the photographer—wanted us to take toward that content: a certain feeling, a moral attitude, but also a commitment to its factuality.

Now returning to Cavell's insight, we can say that inasmuch as the frame puts us in some kind of relationship to the *phrastic* content of the photograph, it performs a *neustic* function. It enfolds and engulfs not so much the photograph as us, the spectators, together with what the photograph shows. My upshot is this: medial elements, which eventually deflect us back to the features of the actual representation, inhibiting our participation in games of make-believe with its *phrastic* content (our ability to generated fictional truths about that content), perform a *neustic* function. Thus, closing the circle, which began with my previous discussion of Walton's theory, I submit that ornamentality hinges upon the *neustic*. In fact, I suggest that this is actually what Kendall Walton meant by saying that ornamental representations pull us back to a more "objec-

tive" perspective, which might yield more significant connections with our lives (Walton 1990: 288-9). Furthermore, I conclude that the status of the new media as conduits of real life is intrinsically related to the neustic function of their mediual idiosyncrasies. It is noteworthy that Walton's anti-realist, constructivist theoretical framework becomes a genuine asset here, since it enables us to construe the difference between real life and fictional representations in terms of different games of make-believe, which in principle might even employ the same props.

4 Ornamental Erosion of Real Life

Now, as Hamlet says, "there's the rub". If the new media are ornamental, then, insofar as they serve as conduits of real life, they are ornamental in a sense, which is very different from the case of flowery wallpaper or Persian rugs. New media ornamentality uniquely exemplifies ornamentality without abstraction. A pinkish wallpaper flower may be an abstraction of a particular flower, exemplifying all flowers of its kind, yet none in particular. On the other hand, the new media, insofar as they are used as conduits of real life, are all about particular things: names, faces, gestures, and events. Granted, we can now put Walton's theory of ornamentation to an interesting use. If we understand ornamental representations in terms of game worlds in which other fictional worlds are embedded, and if ornamentality consists in being pulled back to the more "objective" frame-world, then new media representations confront us with a puzzle: their internal worlds are inhabited by real life denizens, which become somehow "less real" by virtue of our withdrawal into a more "objective" perspective. This amounts to an ornamental erosion of real life.

The new media present us with real life cased with a distancing neustic frame-world that sustains a manifold of mediual devices, some essential, like interactivity and hypertextuality, while others purely decorative and evocative, like audio-visual and graphic effects. Unfolding in time and spread out graphically in virtual space, bits of mimetic material, plucked from the flux of life, are set in elaborate, dazzling designs, like precious stones set in a glittering piece of jewelry. The result—kaleidoscopic, audio-visually stimulating, and seductive in many ways—leaves us oscillating tentatively between the fictional and the real. Insofar as we use the new media as conduits of real life and as means for knowledge-seeking, the excessive density of what I referred to as the distancing neustic frame-world—especially in such cases as internet-based virtual worlds or massively multiplayer online role-playing games—forces

us to conduct our moves under conditions of neustic ambiguity, that is, uncertainty concerning the kind of relationship we, the users, have to the propositional content mediated. This seems patently true, at least in certain new media environments, if we define the neustic of a representation, as Danto suggested, in terms of the attitude the “author” of the representation wanted us to take toward its propositional content, since, as I already observed, the notion of a “user”—in the context of hypertext, hypermedia, and digital interactivity in general—undercuts, or at least problematizes the notion of an “author”.

We may say that new media users operate behind an ornamental “veil of ignorance”, yet in a sense importantly different from the one John Rawls had conceived for his purposes (Rawls 1971). Whereas Rawls’s original “veil of ignorance” assumes ignorance of particular real life situations, the condition of new media ornamentality leaves them intact—carefully selected or utterly made-up—to serve as an opening move in a game of knowledge-seeking (Hintikka 2007). Yet the very nature of the game—some of its definitory rules, its goals and desired strategies—are bound to become ambiguous, if the inquirer’s attitude toward his sources turns out to be ambiguous as well. This is clearly the case in new media environments such as *Second Life*, for instance, which capitalize on the extreme malleability of data by users, and their ability to fabricate immersive, intelligent environments by digital means. Within such new media environments, which are typically inhabited by various software applications designed to emulate human interaction, and which commonly involve intense role-playing, the self-identity of the user is patently rendered ambiguous. This point has been underscored forcefully, albeit with a distinct Lacanian bent, by Sherry Turkle: “In my computer-mediated worlds, the self is multiple, fluid, and constituted in interaction with machine connections; it is made and transformed by language” (Turkle 1995: 15). In other words, virtual identity is ornamental.

5 Conclusion

In this essay I contended that insofar as we consider the new media ecologically, not just technologically, the new media are ornamental. I located ornamentality both in the logically constitutive principles of the new media (hypertextuality and interactivity) and in their multifarious cultural embodiments (decoration as cultural interface), and I identified it as the ground-floor aesthetics of the infosphere. Considering how hetero-

geneous, polymorphic, and dynamic new media phenomena are, this might seem like a theoretical long-shot. Ornamentality is clearly more rampant in certain new media environments and practices than in others. Still, as Floridi observed (Floridi 1999: 14-15), the infosphere has been gradually evolving since the 1950s along three fundamental vectors: (a) toward multimedia information and virtual reality; (b) toward graphic and immersive interfaces; (c) toward integration and convergence of the global network. This entire process is conducive to new media ornamentality, and if Floridi's analysis is correct, then it is reasonable to expect that the various manifestations of new media ornamentality are bound to become more pronounced.

The centerpiece of my argument is the puzzle of the ornamental erosion of real life in the new media. This puzzle calls our attention to a peculiar interrogatory complexity inherent in any game of knowledge-seeking conducted across the infosphere, which is not restricted to the simplest form of data retrieval, especially in mixed-reality environments and when the knowledge sought is embodied mimetically. The puzzle is set up by means of Kendall Walton's theory of ornamentation. In this context, Walton's theoretical framework has a clear heuristic value, as it opens up possibilities for a sober analysis of the peculiar semantic complexity, which characterizes at least some of our engagements with new media. On the one hand, it saves us from falling prey to certain McLuhanian sentiments (McLuhan 1965) by reminding us that performativity does not necessarily imply a conflation of the medium and its message. On the other hand, it saves us from giving in to the postmodern urge to dismantle and dissolve the classical tripartite definition of knowledge as justified true belief. It should be noted here that the ornamental erosion of real life does not give rise to anything like Jean Baudrillard's philosophically extravagant idea of the successive phases of the image from being a reflection of reality to being its own pure simulacrum (Baudrillard 1988: 166-184). If my way of construing the puzzle by means of Walton's theory of ornamentation is viable, then there can be no slippery slope to the effect of a complete ornamental erosion of real life. In other words, given that the difference between the embedded fictional world and its frame-world can be couched also in terms of the distinction between being a spectator of a game and participating in one, there can be no conceptual room for an apotheosis of the mimetic within dense ornamentality.

The puzzle of the ornamental erosion of real life poses an interesting and rather unusual challenge for aesthetic cognitivism: to figure out what would be a viable logic of virtual discovery under the conditions of new media ornamentality. At any rate this must be an epistemology that focuses not on the classic project of justifying knowledge already acquired, but rather on how knowledge is acquired in the first place in new media environments; and here, as I have suggested, aesthetic concerns play an enormously important role.

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