



University of Tehran

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Studying the Role of 3D Computer Simulation in Generating Photorealistic Images

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2-1-2 Cinema and Zuse's Machine

The germ of the idea of “Cinema and the Digital Media” penned by Lev Manovich comes from the idea that “the modern digital computers were born of cinema”, and it aims to compare cinema to Konrad Zuse’s machine to make us more familiar with this idea.

According to Manovich, if cinematography is defined as the art of writing motions, its nature involves the recording and storage of the visible data in the material form similar to a movie camera. The recorded data is processed in the laboratory through various steps and it is read and displayed on the screen using a projector. In the digital machine, the program is written on an external medium where it can be controlled (the films are punched in Zuse’s machine whereas they are stored on a hard disk in the modern computers). Hence, the storage medium (the punched film and hard disk) and an encoding method (chemo-optical storage, punched binary holes, and magnetic binary data) are considered to be the important components of the digital machine and cinema. However, given Konrad Zuse’s avid interest in the visual arts, their influence on the invention of digital machines, and the comparison between the performances of Zuse’s digital machine and cinema, the technological interpretation of Oedipus complex by Manovich, based on which the child (digital machine) murders his father (cinema), sounds acceptable. In a non-tragic twist, it forms the basis for the integration of the media.

Today, fifty years after Zuse’s invention, the state-of-the-art media not only allow for the storage of photos, graphical images, motion pictures, sounds, and texts in a different and dynamic material for but also provide for the creation and production of sounds, realistic three-dimensional images, and interactive virtual spaces. It can be, therefore, deemed a

different dimension and a step forward as compared to Manovich's analogy. This different material form can be defined as the conversion of the numerical codes to the basis for storage in the digital machines. These codes can be processed and interpreted. This new material form involves a substantial change. For instance, in media such as photos, films, and texts, the original work can be referred to due to their physical essence. However, when these works are turned into numerical codes, their substantial essence becomes inaccessible and we can only gaze at the numerical codes.

“Neo: Do you always look at it encoded?”

Cypher: Well, you have to. The image translators work for the construct program. But there's way too much information to decode the Matrix. You get used to it. I don't even see the code. All I see is blonde, brunette, redhead.” (The Matrix, 1999)

The reasons for stressing the role of cinema in this text are Manovich's idea about this fundamental role in the history of the computer as well as the characteristics and features that have helped cinema become the most influential medium of the 20th and partly 21st centuries. Over a century, cinema has gradually prepared its global audience for accepting the transformation of the media and has helped us understand the subsequent features of the digital media. Hence, it is believed that many people experienced the digital revolution as a gradual evolution. Cinema gradually made the advocates of the unity of time and space of photos (Vanvolsem, 2011, 154) accept the modification of photos. It reduced the accepted reality to the reality shown by the motion pictures and developed it. It even replaced the original photos with the motion pictures in some cases. Cinema improved the vision of its audience and enabled them to look at the world not solely through their mechanical eyes.

“I am cinema-the eye. I a mechanical eye and I show you a world that only I can see. Free from the limits of time and space, I adapt myself to any or all parts of the world and I can also record them. My mission is to create a new image of the world, and thus I can discover the unknown world by taking a new approach.” (Zabeti Jahromi, 2009)

In his article, Manovich refers to the substantial role of cinema in introducing a number of digital concepts such as sampling, random access, and simulation to us. For example, through a movie camera or a video camera records the images of the reality shown to the camera through sampling. The number of these samples is limited by the minimum duration of the presence of these images on human's retina. On a 35mm roll film, 24 frames form one second

of the film. Therefore, the continuous timeline can be recorded through discrete sampling and recording 1/24 second film frames. In a similar approach, the digital machine uses the sampling technique to convert and store the analog data (image and sound) (Fig. 2-3) (Manovich, 1995). In a digital image, the number of the pixels along the horizontal and vertical directions on a two-dimensional plane determines the precision of the sampling process, whereas, in a digital sound, it is determined by the level of voltage at certain intervals. In the case of analog films, the linear sequence of the images is maintained. In other words, the frames can be displayed sequentially over time. Moreover, in order to access a given part of the films, the frames must be skipped at the speed determined by the video player to be able to access the desired segment of the film. However, the animated or still digital images provide for the immediate or random access, and the person can access the desired part of the sequence or an image in a collection of images.

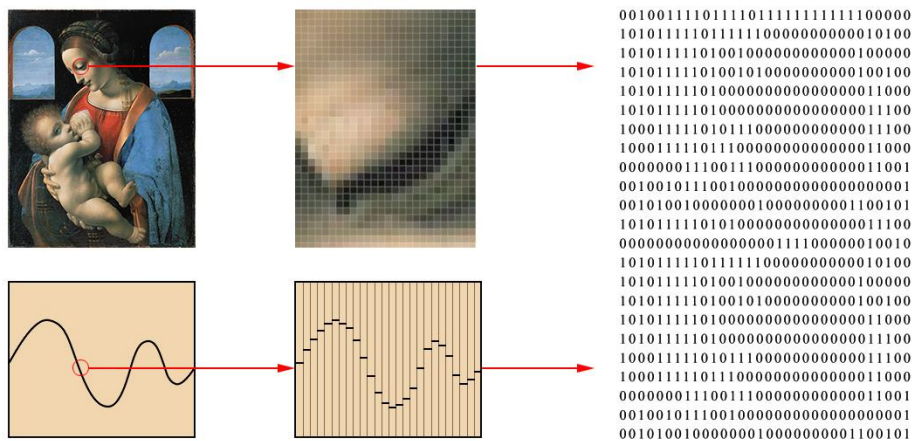


Figure (2-3): The conceptual method of sampling during the conversion of images or sounds to numerical codes (the sound diagram is adapted to the image type) (Oja and Parsons, 2008: 198)

2-1-4- Baudrillard and Simulation

Jean Baudrillard, the French sociologist, philosopher, photographer, and theorist, defines the difference between imitation and simulation with regard to theories such as simulation and hyper-reality and states that in an imitation a copy of a physical subject is made, whereas in a simulation it is possible to experience something that lacks physical existence. He based his definitions on the possibility to refer to the original in the physical and material world. He introduced three historical phases or sequences of simulation that reflect his approach to this subject.

Phase one: Baudrillard argued that there was an evident difference between the original and its copy prior to the advent of industrialism and it was possible to distinguish the copy from the original by comparing them. For instance, the artist or artisan would make a handmade key, which was obviously a copy of an original key that existed somewhere else and it was possible to refer to it (Fig. 2-5). Due to the difference between the original and the copy, each had its distinctive characteristics and features that rendered them different.

Phase two: With the industrial growth and the onset of the industrialist era, it was possible to produce identical copies of a subject. These copies did not differ from each other or the original subject, hence the uncertainty in the difference between the original and the copies. For example, a key factory can make numerous identical copies of a key (Fig. 2-5). Consequently, there is no distinction between the original and the copy.



Figure (2-5): Right to left: The distinction between the original and the copy; copies of the same subject; the model and the code replacing the subject (Hedges, 2010)

Phase three: In today's postindustrial era, the model and the code (similar to a computer code) are more important than the "original" subject, resulting in the transformation of the notion of "the original". For instance, every person can use a specific password to access different hardware (security devices) and software (such as the Internet websites) items. However, there is no physical key or an original subject and only a virtual code is used to this end (Fig. 2-5) (Hedges).

Baudrillard valued the notions of imitation and representation equally, and thus there is no difference between the applications of these notions in this regard. However, according to Baudrillard, there are fundamental differences between the notions of simulation and representation, which determine the type of the reality faced by the person. Baudrillard argues that representation occurs more frequently nowadays and it constitutes many of our real-life experiences. To further clarify this point, Warren Hedges uses the flight simulator as an example to interpret the opinions of Baudrillard (Fig. 2-6). In general, the flight simulator

is a device used to teach virtual airplane control. Therefore, this device provides for the “imitation” of a physical entity such as the cockpit of an airliner in practice. However, the same device can “simulate” something that is nonexistent such as the cockpit of a fictional and imaginary spacecraft. Therefore, based on Baudrillard’s theories, a simulacrum is a representation consisting of several identical copies and it represents something that is nonexistent without the representation technology. In “imitation”, a copy can be assessed against the original version. For example, the ship was shown in Titanic (1997) was comparable to the original ship in 1909.



Figure (2-6): The dual applications of simulation to flight simulation and representation

However, in a simulacrum, the original subject is not accessible beyond the creator’s technological world. As another example, in Avatar (2009), the machines, creatures, environments, and technologies do not represent anything, and thus they are considered to be “the original”, which is a code or a virtual model commonly known as a digital code. We cannot face the original in our everyday lives without the aid of the simulation technologies. Simulation is also made possible by the analog technologies. For example, a live music performance can be copied on the gramophone records, and since the original can be referred to, it is deemed a form of imitation. However, multi-track recording, which is the separate recording of the sound of the instruments, the singer’s voice, and the music effects and their synthesis, yields a form of music that cannot be heard live and thus the final version or product owes its existence to the recording and playing technologies.

Based on the flight simulator example, it is concluded that what Baudrillard believed in is enormously important. It is, in fact, the procedure through which the user experiences the simulation similar to realness whether the simulated subjects match their real existence or not. Hence, if the simulation results in realness, it will be more important as compared to the situation in which it can create an accurate copy of something (that can be referred to a subject beyond the simulation). Fredric Jameson, the American theorist and literary critic who is known mainly as an analyst of the contemporary culture, defines photorealism as an example of the artistic simulacra and suggests that the photorealistic paintings are created by copying a photo, which is itself a copy of the reality (Massumi, 1987). The notion of photorealism is discussed in the following chapter. However, besides Jameson's definition, the functions of the virtual images link the simulation and representation notions explained by Baudrillard with the notions of photorealistic three-dimensional simulation and representation. Similar to the flight simulator, they also set the scene for the visual representation of an existing reference and can also visually simulate something that is nonexistent using the virtual models or codes. Nevertheless, the flight simulator can be compared to the concept of virtual world, because this world can be both a representation of the real world and an unreal simulation of this world that is created based on the structures and notions of the real world.

2-1-5- Virtual World

One of the notions mentioned in the previous section was the concept of virtual world, which is not a new concept because humans have always tried to shape their surrounding environments and have tried to frame their own concepts of the alternative worlds by changing the world they have lived in. These alternative worlds are governed by the rules set by their human creators. A virtual world may only exist on the minds of its creators or may be represented via a medium to enable the individuals to share it. The real world certainly influences the virtual world, and although the virtual worlds are fictional spaces, the fine line between the real world and the virtual world is sometimes blurred. Hence, if the virtual world is a model of some places and experiences, it seems to intend to imitate its real-world peer. The virtual world is a real representation of a world that may have physical (actual) existence. Even in the physical world, it is not known whether the being or thing we face is real or a representation (Sherman and Craig, 2003, pp. 40-41). This is demonstrated in Alexandra's

work titled “This Is Not a Pipe” (Fig. 2-30), which is a photorealistic representation of René Magritte’s painting. From the qualitative aspect, the virtual world created by Alexandra is more realistic and effective than Magritte’s painting because technology has brought us closer to Magritte’s idea by polishing the details and messing up the line between the reality and the representations. That is to say, it could be stated that virtuality is not contradictory to reality. Rather, it is the reality itself while there is no need for the opposition between virtuality and reality and it must not be considered an illusory world. In fact, virtuality plays a major role in human’s language and thinking. For instance, when a person is asked whether he/she has finished his/her article, the person may say “yes” in response if all of the major and minor activities for writing the article have been performed. However, the positive answer may be a virtual answer because the person may need to check the syntax and spelling of his/her article, add references, and publish the article. In other words, the article is written and exists virtually and the activity is mostly done. Therefore, it could be stated that the article does not contradict its existential reality and this marks the line between virtuality and illusion. That is to say, the illusory existence of the article shows that it is not real. Hence, despite the difference between virtuality and reality, they are both somewhat real. Today, and increasingly in the future, it will not be possible to sharply distinguish between the virtual reality and the actual reality and the technological advancements will put human societies on the boundary line between these two. Computers and computer-based communication networks not only have led to the emergence of the digital culture but also have caused the epidemic of “virtuality”. For example, when a person is walking in a city and decides to use an ATM, he/she, in fact, experiences a physical environment as an actual reality, but he/she can also communicate with the virtual world. The ATM brings the person to the virtual banking world, and although it is not possible to interact with a human being similar to the traditional system, the individual experiences the actual reality and virtual reality concurrently. The keypad and the screen, the bank wall accommodating the ATM, the sidewalk, and the keys that are pressed are all elements of the material reality. In addition, the servers and computers inside the building, the ATM controller, and the communication cables form a whole system and are actual entities. However, the communication network to which the person connects is a virtual experience whereas the online banking world and digital money accessed by the person are real. If the world of online banking (virtual reality) tells the individual that his/her account balance is zero, the person will not receive any cash (the actual reality). The virtual reality or the virtual world that communicates with the person through the ATM is where the actual money is virtually stored (or there may be no money due to

system errors). When a person uses an ATM, he/she wants to convert the digital money to real cash, and thus the virtual reality becomes existent through this process. According to Rob Shields, the virtual world is a hidden world that can be fetched through the “lightness of electrons” (Shields, 2002, p. 22). In this case, virtuality is not the same as unreality. In this example, the virtual reality is formed by the material and real technology (Lister et al., 2009, pp. 124-126). An important factor in this example is the type of the link between the person and the virtual world, which is established visually. All virtual spaces and environments are formed from images. In this regard, the Internet is another example of the virtual worlds.

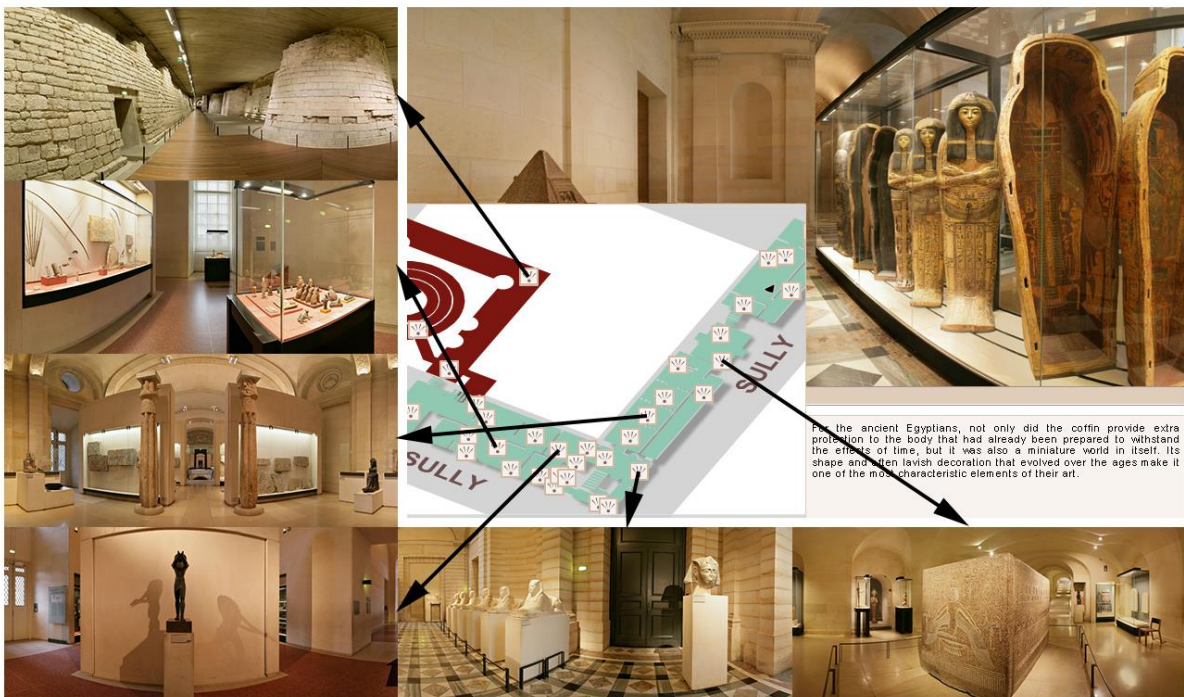


Figure (2-7): A virtual tour of the Louvre Museum, the ancient Egypt section, simultaneous access

Activities such as chatting, training, playing, touring, and shopping, which can be performed in real life, can also be done via the Internet virtual web pages. An individual sits in front of the monitor and connects to the virtual world via a virtual interface controlled by codes (the codes and controller are also virtual). He/she orders “Photorealism in the Digital Age” on Amazon and visits the ancient Egypt section of the Louvre Museum in Paris on a virtual tour. He/she can also have a live video chat with another person in another geographical position and play simultaneously with thousands of other gamers. (According to the Wall Street Journal, the total number of the online gamers that play the League of Legends is approximately 27 million people per day (Sherr).) He/she may take an academic course on

the Coursera website and there may also be other features available in the virtual world. As mentioned, the virtual world rules may be different and even grant the connected user privileges that are not available in reality. For instance, on the virtual tour of the Louvre Museum, there is no need to see the works in each section in a certain order because the users can access all of the works in each section through the codes provided to them (Fig. 2-7). This form of access is a notion introduced as a characteristic of the digital culture by Manovich and was discussed above.

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