Cinema and the New Media

K. Parameswaran, Ph.D.

Introduction

New Media or *media convergence* is a new term that denotes the modern media environment. New media basically connotes the coming together of media forms, the Internet and the newer techniques of communication technology. In simple terms, the convergence of these factors has led to a new discourse of art. Indian film and art criticism is yet to come into terms with the new media. Here text is still equated with literature and value judgment.

This article argues that both these view points are out dated and that a new valuation of art is required in the context of the new media.

The term *media*, in general, refers to the form in which a communication act takes place. Thus, there can be spoken, written or visual media. Here, media is spoken of as in opposition to the matter or the content of the communication. In other words, in general usage, media refers to the form of the communication where as the term message refers to the content of the communication.

Media, in this sense, is largely divisible into the aural or audio media and the visual media. In the aural media, the message takes the spoken form. Inter personal communication, radio and various traditional art forms like the *harikatha kalakshepam* of Tamilnadu, the *paddhakam* of Kerala etc are examples of aural media.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
10 : 2 February 2010
K. Parameswaran, Ph.D.
Cinema and the New Media

73

In the visual media, the message takes the form of written symbols. It may be letters, hieroglyphics, pictures, paintings, cartoons, graphs, photos, video clippings, full length feature films, documentaries, animations, graphics etc.

As far as visual media are concerned, the receiver of the message has to first decode the visual symbols and then only will they be able to understand the content. This, more often than not, may also involve translating these symbols to aural symbols like speech sounds. In the aural media, the step of translating symbols into another form does not usually occur. So it can be said that the aural media is more basic as far as human beings are concerned.

It is to be remembered that this position in Media Studies jells well with the position adopted by the structuralism school in Linguistics. It is their main contention that the spoken form of communication is more basic. It is because of this reason that linguistics relies more on spoken data. Even it's more modern types of study like Corpus Linguistics relies primarily on large samples of spoken language. Discourse and Conversation Analysis are newer branches of Linguistics that concentrate on specific types of spoken languages.

New Media

The *New Media* can be seen as a convergence of two technologies: the technology of media and the technology of computing**.** Computers which were primarily used for performing calculations and modern media technologies (like film, gramophone records etc) started to become inter-connected during the 20th century. By the end of the century, it can well be seen that these technologies were well on a path of convergence, mainly through the translation of existing media into binary information which could be stored digitally on computers.

Thus, new media can now be defined as graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces, and texts that have become computable; that is, all these have become recordable as computer data. In other words, all forms of old media involved an analog process were in data was transferred into physical media like gramophone records. At the same time, new media records data as numerical representation in binary code.

The term *new media* gained popular currency in the mid 1990s as part of a marketing pitch for the proliferation of interactive educational and entertainment CD-ROMs. One of the main implications of these new forms of media was that corporations, not individual creators, would control copyright. The term became far more widely used as the internet began gaining popularity from 1995 onwards. To be more specific, though the term 'new media' can be traced back to the 70s, it is only within the last 25 years or so that the term has taken on a more advanced meaning.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com 74
10 : 2 February 2010
K. Parameswaran, Ph.D.
Cinema and the New Media

In practical terms, it has been observed that all forms of new media rely on digital technologies. The main result of this development is that it allowed media forms that used to exist separately to coalesce into one another. In other words, media convergence is a characteristic phenomenon of new media. Thus, it can be seen that the idea of new media captures the development of new kinds of digital media as well as the reshaping and transformation of more traditional media forms in such a way that they could adopt and adapt to the new media technologies.

However, the term *New Media* has been disputed on the grounds that the technologies involved are now up to 25 years old, and therefore not new in the sense of recent innovations.

Lev Manovich, in his classic work *The Language of New Media* (2001) has contended that terms like *digitality, hyper textuality* and *interactivity* commonly used to describe the new media are vague and unclear and has proposed a set of five **'principles of new media'.** He explains that these laws are not immutable statements in the manner in which the term *laws* are commonly understood. Rather, the principles indicate, in general, the ways in which the new media functions. The principles are *numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability* and *transcoding.*

At the same time, it is widely recognized that interactivity is one of the major characteristics of new media. Interactivity has become a key term for number of new media use options evolving from the rapid dissemination of Internet, the digitalization of the media, and media convergence. The new media has also been defined as communication technologies that enable interactivity between users and between user and the information.

In other words, Internet can be seen to be replacing the "one-to-many" model of traditional mass communication with the possibility of a "many-to-many" web of communication. Thus, in short, interactivity can be considered as a central concept in understanding new media, but different media forms possess different degree of interactivity even some forms of digitized and converged media are not in fact interactive at all.

Cinema and New media

It is against this back ground of the development of the new media (media convergence is yet another new term that underlines the concept of technology, arts and media combining to provide entertainment in the garb of information or information disguised as entertainment!) that the position of cinema as a form of mass entertainment has to be seen.

One of the hall marks of new media forms is that all of them – be it the cell phone, the SMS and MMS systems, webcams, Skopje and other internet protocol based voice

Language in India www.languageinindia.com   75
10 : 2 February 2010
K. Parameswaran, Ph.D.
Cinema and the New Media

transference systems, any thing- are basically intrusions into man's personal space. This it is a 'given' in today's media and entertainment world that people or the consumers do not come to the media but rather that the media is going to the consumer. Thus it has also become axiomatic that media forms have to be so dressed up as to attract the attention of the consumer. This has developed into a new semiotics and aesthetics for art forms in general that use new media as a vehicle for transmission and exhibition.

Valuation of Art Forms

Music, theatre and cinema have become part of this transition from a stage or auditorium based art form to one that survives on the new media contexts. One of the more important aspects of this transition is the evolution of a new discourse that lays stress on visualization.

A very basic instance of this new discourse is the increasing visualization of the ubiquitous short messaging service (SMS). The increasing use of symbols, importing of graphics, interspersing texts with clip art forms etc provides witness to the new trend of the visualization of text.

Some other instances are the convergence of art forms like music, film etc. films on music, artistic interpretations of films, video productions that deal with folk art forms like *theyyam, thira* etc. In all these instances the basic stress has always been the attempt to increase the attractiveness of the media. Again this process has resulted in developing a new aesthetics, a new discourse.

Basically a text can be defined as content placed in a specific context. This content can be studied as a text – as literature - and as discourse – i.e. as text that is a function of its context.

A majority of the film and art criticism that appears in our dailies and periodicals treat content simply as text. Thus film, music, art as well as literature are approached in terms of literary criticism. Thus the text is analyzed, its structure pulled apart and its language deconstructed threadbare. From this point of view comes a value judgment about the work of art. Here the value judgment comes often in the form of evaluating the art piece and giving it a place value.

A new valuation required

This genre of criticism is irrelevant against the increasing trend of visualization of the new media. This is because of two factors.

One is that against this trend the treatment of content as literature has become out dated. Symbols, visual inputs etc have become integral part of the text and hence the tools of analyzing text as literature will not be effective.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
10 : 2 February 2010
K. Parameswaran, Ph.D.
Cinema and the New Media

76

The other factor is that the context of the new media is also changing. As far as new media is concerned, the text is developed at a faster pace than in the case of the older forms. Thus the ways and means in which the text is created and it is understood has also changed, is constantly changing.

Placed against these two factors, value judgments also have lost relevance as far as film and art criticism is concerned. Value judgment presupposes the existence of a right and a wrong. But, in the case of the emerging, visualized new media, the question of right and wrong is only an emerging function of the context.

Conclusion

So, in the new media environment, what is more important is the placing of the text in context. Thus new art and film criticism should also correspondingly lay increasing stress on how the text is visualized and presented. Rather than value judgments on whether anything is right or wrong, what assumes importance is the analysis of how the content evolves as a function of the context. Since context is constantly changing as far as the new media is concerned, new criticism is always a constant striving to place the text, which again is a shifting amalgam of text, visuals and graphics as a discourse.

It is high time that Indian art and film criticism also realize the fast changing context in which art forms are perceived and appreciated. Such a realization is the first step in evolving a new critical discourse that accepts art as part of various new media forms.

K. Parameswaran, Ph.D.
308, Pakshiraja Towers
Police Kandasami Street
Coimbatore 641 045
Tamilnadu, India
paramu_2000@rediffmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
10 : 2 February 2010
K. Parameswaran, Ph.D.
Cinema and the New Media

77