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# *Chapter 1*

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## The Discursive Practice of the New

### **Key concepts**

Most textbooks on new media begin with a chapter that compares ‘old’ and ‘new’ media. Whilst this provides a clear chart of technological development, I would like to approach the topic somewhat differently. What follows is the presentation of the ‘new’ in new media in a theoretical way. This notion of newness is explored through some key concepts of critical and cultural studies, such as discourse and power, and aims to establish the centrality of the subject in the study of new media culture. Some terms may be unfamiliar to you so there is a glossary of select terms at the end of the book that offers brief guidelines to the concepts presented in this and following chapters.

### **The idea of the new**

The idea of the new tends to be dominated by its status rather than its function or even its actual moment of conception. Or, put another way, ‘newness’ is usually defined as something that has recently appeared. However a more interesting aspect is how it presents itself as being ‘new’ independently of the actual chronology, and how this presentation affects its position in the cultural order of things. In this chapter, it is the idea of the new – as well as how and why we use it – that is the focus. Quite often, the label of ‘new’ exceeds either the chronological aspects or its topicality, and sometimes both. When ‘new’ is attached to an idea, a concept or in this case technological innovation, its interpretative values are altered. We read it differently and it begins to adopt different cultural positions. This means

that in many ways the term or concept that follows the ‘new’ is immediately qualified, not simply as something of recent invention or appearance, but as something that needs to be considered in a different manner. Approached in this way, what constitutes the new becomes more problematic and ideologically charged. It is something that potentially contains the full range of qualities associated with the new, from the desirous to the troublesome, the unique to the portentous, and the essential to the threatening.

Already we witness one of the difficulties of the term ‘new media’. For example, for how long can it be declared as the ‘new’? How long can it retain such a status? Is the term permitted to continually claim and reclaim media as they come along, so that its definitional sense collapses? What happens to the ‘old’ new media when they are technologically superseded? Does the fact that the technology has changed make the media themselves old? It is important to recognize the danger of using such terms and qualifying analysis when the technology may well be redundant by the time the analysis appears in print or even on the web.

What of preservation and presentation? How can digital installations or examples of new media art be stored and redisplayed once their technologies have become outdated? What happens if the technology remains constant but new uses are created for it; the transformation of computers into tools of artistic production, for example? Where does the emphasis of the new operate in such examples? The challenge is to understand how the function of ‘new’ operates, not just to explain and qualify but also to categorize and clarify; and to appreciate how this happens within a cultural sensibility.

Such issues are in themselves not new, and the function of describing and claiming something as new has been essential to many artistic and cultural processes. The fact that New Media has the term ‘new’ in its title does add a further dimension however. This chapter focuses on the relationship of new media to the arts and notions of aesthetic value to look more closely at these sorts of questions. There are many other ways in which the idea of the ‘new’ of ‘new media’ can be discussed, but the approach used here has the advantage that it allows us to explore the definitional aspects of what new media is, as well as discussing the complex idea of newness. Furthermore, it also reveals how attitudes change and politics are formed and negotiated.

### **Discourse: how and why we use the term ‘new’**

To think about how we use the idea of ‘new’ we need to think about why we use such a phrase, especially when we are trying to separate similar technologies. For example, our watching of television has not changed a great

deal in the wake of new media. What we watch and when we watch have become variables – we can record and watch different programmes at our convenience but ultimately we still sit down in front of a screen to view a programme. One way we can view the impact of the term ‘new’ and assess its importance in connection with new media is to look at Michel Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Michel Foucault is not a media theorist but his ideas challenge us to look at parts of our culture that we usually don’t – such as why ‘new’ in ‘new media’. It is because Foucault’s work concentrates so strongly on thinking through and analyzing some of our most hidden cultural practices and beliefs that it is of importance here.

### *Discourse*

One of Foucault’s most significant and well-discussed concepts is **discourse**. It is a complex term because it draws on other ideas such as power and subjectivity. One way to think about discourse is to understand it as a network formation. There are many discourses that link and connect with each other which are used by different people for different processes, social situations, interpersonal relationships and even technologies. Discourse can be a system of knowledge, thought, ideas, belief, **cultural practice**, habit or action that forms social subjects and cultures to which they belong. Whilst the perspectives that approach, discuss and analyze discourse range from the basic to the highly complex, there are four fundamental interacting positions through which we can understand discourse and why it is important for our investigation of the ‘new’ in new media. Firstly, discourse can be understood as a set of truths or meanings that are associated with a specific institution – the systems of knowledge that we identified earlier; for example, the discourse of technology, medicine, mathematics and so on. Secondly, we could view discourse as forming a distinct set of meanings that are centred on clear issues or themes – the discourse of love, the discourse of new, or the discourse of communication. Thirdly, and arguably one of the most important aspects in getting to grips with Foucault’s idea of discourse and how it works, discourse always points to a relationship of power and how it shapes the actions of individuals and their society. Lastly, we can understand discourse by recognizing it as a type of power in itself.

Seeing ‘new’ in the context of discourse, or as a discursive practice, is significant for our interests concerning new media, and the reasons why and how we use the term ‘new’, because culture uses discourse to bring together a series of ideas and statements to make sense of things. ‘New’ used in this way is therefore as much about how we position new media technologies culturally and politically as it is about their production. By identifying

mobile phones as ‘new media’ – there is something more at work than simply acknowledging their digital status. We need to take into account other considerations that are linked with the status of New Media – consumerism, bias and trend, for example. Another example is that of ‘new media art’. Viewed as a genre of fine art, the term concurrently identifies its genesis and prescribes its audience reception. The discursive practice of the new in new media, then, is at once a challenge to how we understand ‘new’ as a textual or mediated form, and an attempt to bring together a range of changes in media under an umbrella term. The term ‘new’ involves relationships of power between other subjects in the field of new media.

Before we can continue with our investigation of the term ‘new’, it is necessary to briefly outline how Foucault theorizes the term ‘power’ and how it connects with discourse. Sketching out the relationship between power and discourse helps us to identify how New Media has become utilized in society, not simply as a label to distinguish recent technology from old, but also to look at the concealed implications of such a label: the ideology behind the promotion of the term ‘new media’.

### *Power*

There are many works about Michel Foucault’s concept of power and how it is placed in the wider landscape of his work. Here we are interested in a concise explanation of what Foucault means when he uses the word ‘power’, and why it is different from other more general uses of the word. Power is commonly used in society as a notion that implies force or coercion and the interpretation of this force as something that a person yields, bears, *holds* over something or someone. Foucault views power differently. For him, power is connected to knowledge but, more than that, it cannot be separated from knowledge. This relationship of **power/knowledge** exists both within and between discourses and flows between individuals and different areas and groups of society. One of the main differences between the more common use of the word ‘power’ and Foucault’s is that Foucauldian power is not a repressive concept but a productive one. Power in the Foucauldian sense influences what we are (how our subjectivities are formed), how we makes sense of our worlds, our lives, our friends (knowledge), and what we are able to do (ability). Foucault was interested in bringing to light the relations of power that operate in society but which we are not usually aware of in day-to-day life.<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between discourse and power is one that concentrates on servitude. Who speaks for whom? Who is New Media ‘new’ for? Invested in these questions is the search for the means by which we, as subjects, are

managed and controlled by power relations – for truth. Foucault believes that discourses are transparent:

they need no interpretation, no one to assign them a meaning. If one reads ‘texts’ in a certain way, one perceives that they speak clearly to us and require no further supplementary sense or interpretation. (Foucault, 2002: 117)

He argues that it is the power relations which are intertwined with discourse that authorize the sets of beliefs, actions and ideas that they help to create, justify and legitimize. The discourse of formal written communication carries with it specific expectations and influences the behaviour of the subject (sender or receiver). This behaviour is self-regulated and the ways in which we as a society value and locate formal written communication is a good example of how power relations operate at a hidden level. Think about how, depending on your intended recipient, you form a letter, or an email. The whole process of intentionality is invested with both visible and invisible forms of power. In terms of new media and power, there is a shift from old communication models built around concepts of noise. How we value the term ‘new’ in ‘new media’ is equally loaded with power relations as Foucault conceives them. We could even go so far as to say that the less we question relationships such as ‘new’ + ‘media’ the more likely it is that the politics and managing techniques of power relations are at work.

### **Positioning ‘new media’**

For Foucault, it is the gaps and the ruptures between discourses – established systems of knowledge and orders of classification – that offer ‘new’ ideas, and ‘new’ concepts. To give an example, and place the notion of the ‘new’ in some context, consider the following:

The use of concepts of discontinuities, rupture, threshold, limit, series, and transformation present all historical analysis not only with questions of procedure, but with theoretical problems. (Foucault 1986: 21)

This notion of rupture is positioned within Foucault’s broader concerns with discontinuity, mutation, interruption, gap, and so on. The newness in ‘new media’ is embedded in the same qualification of rupture that Foucault so deftly articulates in his work. By positioning new technological development as ‘new’ there is a break, a rupture with existing and prior technology. ‘New’ assumes a political, ideological site as a prefix to ‘media’ and disrupts the history of media development with a theoretical problem. Not only do we need to understand and link ‘old’ media with ‘new’ media, but we also need to address issues of ephemerality within such labels, as well as

the technology itself. In the same way that discourse is transparent, can we say that media is transparent? By employing the prefix ‘new’ do we begin to invest recent technologies with power precisely because of this term?

Foucault’s ‘**archaeology** of knowledge’ asks us to look to these types of breaks and seams in discourses, that have occurred throughout history, in order to understand how meaning is generated and sustained. Within such a (Foucauldian) sense, not only is meaning produced through such discontinuities, but it is also invested with complex moments of power. Foucault’s purpose is to understand how discourse works in these terms of power and production, and this in turn becomes an interpretation of the cultural order of things. If we were to follow this route we would always be mindful of any term that includes ‘new’ because such a term is a self-declared, and potentially **self-reflexive**, cultural rupture. (Chapter 3 discusses the idea of paranoia in terms of the new – which is very much in keeping with this Foucauldian line.) The ‘archaeology of the new’ positions it within a wider concern with cultural discourse, and subsequently as part of the issues of theorizing and interpreting the new. Within the field of New Media we witness cultural positioning in a very forthright manner. Indeed, the critical and cultural commentators on this phenomenon are constantly looking to see what this discourse will do, and how it fits into the existing relationships and processes. This archaeological approach presents the possibility of understanding the notion of New Media in terms of power and its relationship to other cultural moments.

Outside the actual technologies that form what we know new media to be – digital cameras, mobile phones, digital film, digital installation, MP3 players, DVD players/recorders and so on – the positioning of New Media is really a question of how the perception of ‘newness’ became so closely involved with technological innovation. And we can ask the further question of how this discourse of ‘the new’ became so fixed and stabilized as a term, and in doing so became invested with power? Answers to these theoretical questions are found in prior movements that have celebrated the idea of the new, where the situation before the discontinuity became a historical movement. Take the example of ‘Modernism’ and the subsequent reactions and challenges of the ‘Post Modernism’ movement. Despite the logic of the term, Modernism had a very specific and defined time frame (roughly 1905 to 1939), and yet what came after Modernism was still ‘modern’ but not Modernist (that is, belonging to the movement of Modernism). The term used here is ‘modern’ instead of ‘new’ but it presents a similar rupture. When Post Modernism was declared it was not a sequel to Modernism, but quite the opposite, for it was an attempt to break from Modernism’s politics and aesthetics. This passage, or rendering, of the modern to Modernism

appears to have parallels with the developments of the new and New Media. There is, of course, a constant and ever expanding output of new media technologies, but the term 'New Media' as a cultural idea does not necessarily include them. This is partly because culture and society utilize the contexts and products of New Media through political and cultural modes rather than as all-encompassing phenomena. That said, New Media appear to claim that any technological development can indeed be included in their domain.

For example, the original purpose of the Hubble telescope was to produce astronomical images for scientific investigations, but those same images very quickly became seen as aesthetic objects. The scientific attributes of the telescope did not change, but the perception of its products did. A related issue is revealed in this observation. The term 'New Media' signals a very specific set of textualities (the processes concerned with the production and consumption of different interpretations of texts) at a very specific moment in history (one that is perhaps coming to its conclusion). This is significant to the definitional process because the term can *only* be applied in the context of digitality. If this were not the case then we would need to consider prehistoric man's use of new painting materials in the cave paintings in Lascaux, France, the introduction of egg tempera and gold leaf to achieve certain effects in Renaissance painting, and even the use of the perspective machine as illustrated by master painter Albrecht Dürer, as part of the concern of New Media textualities and theory. This is because all of these examples (and there are of course countless more) are versions of a new medium being employed to radically alter the artistic and cultural landscape of the time. 'New Media' is therefore *not* just about the introduction of new technologies, or up-and-coming practice, or emergent technique, style or material. Rather the term 'New Media' has a typological necessity – it creates a **paradigm** of texts, theories, and processes that become a defining and interpretative process. Once something is located within the New Media context it is articulated within a much wider set of issues, occupying a cultural territory that moves outside the specificity of digital production or application.

To understand these matters further we need to address the idea of the new and how it has come to gain a certain currency within this particular discipline of cultural theory and practice. In doing so, we begin to engage with the way our culture and society values something that is new and questions where the celebration of and attention towards new things comes from. Popular media survives on the celebration of the new, this being so clearly exemplified in trashy magazines. However, such celebration and thirst for the status of the new extends to all areas of communication; broadsheet

newspapers, a new email, a new SMS, ‘new’ reality television. These are only a few examples, but, when we consider the status of the new, it starts to become obvious that there are more elements attached to identifying objects as new than we may first recognize.

## **The status of the new**

Let us take up a number of ideas on what might be considered as crucial for the status of the new. These are in some ways part of the discontinuities that allow new media to be seen as such, and how they are articulated. In doing so we will create a template for considering the status and function of the ‘new’ in new media. Drawing up such a list has its own constraints, but the aim behind the exercise is to continue with our philosophical inquiry into the term ‘new’ and, more specifically, question its attachment to other terms like ‘media’. Five suggestions for the status of the new are given. They constitute only a beginning and an invitation for you to continue to challenge the term when it operates as a prefix, as in the case of New Media. This indicative list of ideas is designed to disrupt the seemingly seamless phrase ‘New Media’ and, despite its limitations because there are of course more than five possibilities, to bring together those concepts of discourse and power. Each suggestion looks to deconstruct the discourse of the new and uncover the ways in which the idea of the new circulates.

### *1. Newness as the previously unseen or unexperienced*

The thing itself – technology, image, narrative, mode of delivery, and so on – may not be new, but this will not matter once ‘newness’ is evoked. To refer to a previous example, high definition television (HDTV) is not a new form of television. It doesn’t alter our viewing practice and we are not required to physically or mentally change what we do when we watch HDTV. However, its introduction to the medium of television asks us to think of it as though it were different and as though there were signification variations for us to note. At one level this raises an issue that we identified earlier – to whom is it new? In answering this question, the list of possible agencies is long: the producer/artist, the spectator/audience, the cultural moment, the social group, and so on. And of course within this list combinations and shifts are possible – the spectator as artist (to evoke a sort of Barthesian ‘Birth of the Reader’ status); or one group’s encounter with something that other groups have experienced for some time. (Commercial television, for example, was introduced in the USA in 1941, the UK in 1955 and Australia in 1956.) In

such cases the status of the new is dependent on the new use or experience rather than the newness of the thing (in this case technology).

This idea of utilization is important because it captures a second order of invention that comes to determine the attribute of the new. In other words, we sometimes need to differentiate between the actuality of invention and the inventiveness of use in order to understand the quality of new. Turning the computer into a tool to make an aesthetic object does not require the invention of a new machine – we do not need a new type of computer to do this. Rather it is the inventive use of the computer that can be seen as new. It is important to recognize that, just because something is seen as new, it does not necessarily mean that it is somehow inventive.

There are times when the application of the new is in fact deeply reactionary. In these cases we witness what can be called a type of ‘hegemony of newness’. One of the most overt examples of this is the reinscription of an indigenous artistic culture as a second cultural order. A simplistic example would be the manufacture of indigenous cultural artwork by mass production, to be used in advertising or some other disenfranchizing enterprise. The indigenous Australian art form is highly unique and distinctive; but its replication on advertising billboards and everyday objects from coffee cups to tea-towels, although it may well be a new use, is not necessarily inventive. The artwork may even be partly produced by new media technologies but it is not seen as part of New Media. In such an example the apparent newness is in fact the opposite because the indigenous artwork is a cultural process that has taken place for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Here we witness a type of anti-new media operation in which modes of production alter the force of the object – an idea we find in Walter Benjamin’s work on art and reproduction.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the difficulties of this version of the ideology of newness there are other, equally ideologically loaded and determined, variations. This is in part because there is a great deal of investment in the status of the new – it is something that carries power and substance. It is quite often very difficult, perhaps impossible, to register something’s ‘newness’ because it has passed into the already seen and the often known. Van Gogh’s use of colour and shape is no longer seen as new so it is difficult to imagine just how startlingly new it was when his paintings of sunflowers first appeared. And yet it is not totally beyond our imagination to see the newness in these images even today. Perhaps what is required is some effort to reposition the images within their past contexts, and to take more time looking at them than we are used to. This is the spectating position that requires time rather than rapid glances.

This reinstated quality of the new suggests that the new does not have to be seen for the first time, and it can have been in our presence for a while. Already we begin to see how the status of newness may be defined by attributes that are independent of time, and may depend more on issues such as context, use, and spectatorship. Even more significantly, the status of the new is always culturally located, inscribed, and sustained. Even when the status of the new is being articulated within a very specific and tightly defined area such as the information technology of New Media, the wider cultural order is always operating and using products of new media directly or indirectly within its defining contexts. The ‘thing’ in itself may well have been around for a very long time, but to the spectator, or even a whole social group, it could be a wholly new experience. This may sound apparent, but our concern here is with how this process works at a cultural level; so that we may better understand how the notion of new media functions as more than a technological indicator. Another example will help to explain. Although it is not related to new media technology, the worth of the following example lies in its connection with the main themes of this chapter – the analysis of the new and how ‘new’ becomes something that is culturally produced and in which people invest socially, politically and economically.

When the image of the rhinoceros, as well as the animal itself, was brought to Europe in the 16th century, there was naturally great interest and excitement. To European eyes this was a totally new creature, something of fantastical and almost unbelievable proportions. And yet of course this was an ancient animal, a commonplace and familiar sight to many Africans. Norman Bryson makes the interesting point that the representation of the rhinoceros presented enormous difficulties for artists of the time because all they could see was its newness. Dürer’s rendition draws more on the style of the fantastic and mythic than of the real animal. As Bryson describes it:

When Dürer, in his drawing of 1515, comes to deal with the problem of representing the likeness of a rhinoceros, the image he creates reveals to a striking extent his dependence on secondary accounts and descriptions of this novel and extraordinary beast; in particular, his dependence on prevailing taxonomies of the animal kingdom where the rhinoceros is categorized as a grotesque anomaly or aberration, a kind of horned dragon equipped with an armour-plated body and scaly, reptilian limbs. (Bryson 1985: 22)

Bryson then goes on to show that over two hundred years later when the illustrator Heath sets out to represent the rhinoceros he draws more on Dürer’s image than the real creature.

This struggle to depict the new exposes the limitations of the existing system of representation, be it words, images, narrative structures, and so

on. The culture is forced to adapt the existing language system or invent new signs. We shall return to this point later in this chapter. This is the process whereby the new exceeds the existing representational systems. New media has done this in two ways: by producing totally new object-images, that is, the thing that is neither object nor image, but can be both. We find examples of this most readily in areas of new media art. Artists such as Keith Cottingham (<http://www.kcott.com>), Friederike van Lawick and Hans Müller – Lawick.Müller (<http://www.lawickmueller.de/english/seiten/start.htm>) exemplify how new media produces new object-images that are both object and image. Their artwork is concerned with challenging representation and identity through new media artistic processes. Keith Cottingham's digital portraits and digital architecture ask us to adopt and then deny our traditional methods of interpretation and engagement of the image because they also challenge what we perceive new media artwork to look like. His art looks *real* but it is not tangibly real. It only occupies the reality of its digital existence. Similarly Lawick.Müller's exhibition *Perfectlysupernatural* portrays ideals of beauty and classic representation in digitally created busts that appear as photographic portraits to provoke us into thinking about how (or if) we will reconsider these ideals within the landscape of New Media. Each artist asks if new technologies bring new understanding or appreciation for beliefs and values we have celebrated and represented before.

The second way in which new media tests existing modes of representation is through reproducing existing media in new, innovative ways, such as mobile phones – the Blackberry; or television – digital recording. Digital manipulations and creations of the image are good examples of both of these processes of excess. It is possible to create an object-image that has no existence in the real world, but looks as if it does. Cottingham's and Lawick.Müller's work do exactly this. The excess found in their images is the beyond of the real world but looks as if it has every right to belong within that world. It is also possible to take up object-images from the real world and transform them beyond themselves so that they become 'truer' versions of themselves – the more beautiful model, the more truthful political moment created by digitally erasing opponents – when of course what is being produced is a version much further from the truth.

Bryson's point regarding Dürer's depiction of the rhinoceros and the future generations of artists who could not stray from his representational paradigm is that sometimes – perhaps very often, although we should hold back from suggesting always – the modes of representation will override the reality of the object. We find it easier to 'trust' the misrepresentations of a field that we know and understand, such as the World Map, rather than the object itself. What new media has had to negotiate is not only its relationship

to the object-image it creates, but also its position in terms of representation itself. It could be argued that this is not unique – that Cubism, for example, had to do the same thing. What is perhaps crucial to new media is that the issue of the new has already been emphasized.

## 2. *The new as the original*

In some ways the notion of the origin would seem to be the antithesis of the new – the origin is quite often to be found buried in the past, retrieved to provide legitimacy and historical substance. However the original also has the sense of the new in as much as it functions to demonstrate invention. In this sense the originary nature is doubled because it is seen as the first and the new. This is a complex process because it also involves a negotiation between concepts such as ‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’ and others such as ‘invention’ and ‘creativity’. This is the ideological concern of the origin and the original. Western culture, certainly since the Enlightenment, has invested considerable significance in the notion of the origin. This was an investment that lasted, in one form or another, until the Post Modern challenge – a challenge that is still being negotiated. Perhaps one of the best commentaries on this chronology and its contestation is Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*. Derrida, a French philosopher, argues that the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau – so important to the formation of the ideals of the Enlightenment – shapes a broader attitude towards the idea of the origin (and original).<sup>3</sup> Rousseau argued that the origin was of such profound significance that whatever was not part of that origin was merely a supplement, of less importance and merit. Derrida’s deconstruction of this argues that there is no such thing as an origin – certainly not in the sense constructed within the Enlightenment – and ultimately everything is a supplement of a supplement. To quote just one example of this line of thought: ‘there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references’ (Derrida 1976: 159).

New Media has an investment in the sense of newness and therefore is part of the original. Yet, as indicated at the outset, the sense of the new is contentious because it cannot really function as a chronological moment. Of course the real investment we witness in the notion of New Media is the link between the two terms. The origin(al) matter of New Media is the utilization of new forms in new contexts for new effect, and so on. In this sense New Media continually asserts the sense of the original (even if it doesn’t necessarily fulfil such assertions). But how is it located in terms of the origin of something like the cultural aesthetic? The answer, in some ways, is that it has acted very much in a supplementary fashion to the two camps from

which it emerged – art and technology. In this sense New Media, like so many of its predecessors, slowly moved into the sense of the origin when it came to define its own cultural spaces.

This process takes place at both macroscopic and microscopic levels, within and outside of the discipline. It is possible, for example, to trace how New Media came to be determined as part of the origin of contemporary art through a number of indicators. One is the movement from culturally liminal exhibition sites – in some cases literally the street, with performance artists and installations working in the everyday environments of the urban, and shopping malls – to those of so-called ‘high art’ galleries such as the Louvre in Paris or the National Gallery, or Tate Modern in London. It is also possible to examine how, within New Media itself, the sense of the original and origin developed. At times this has emerged simply out of the history of technological development (the privileging or preference for one medium over another – VHS as opposed to Beta); or a particular attribute has become more developed and therefore perceived as more central to the new media domain. Time-based media is a good example of this because its ‘originary’ status is both textually and theoretically driven. That is, we see time-based media as being located in the actual new media art works and texts as well as in the theorizing of new media as a discipline.

### *3. The new as viral; the new as corruption*

The idea of something being totally new is clearly an impossibility, and this is not simply because there must be a pre-existing condition which allows it to happen. What makes the totally new impossible is that it must eventually be located within a sense-making system that pre-exists it. There are many ‘metaphors’ for discussing such systems, but one that seems particularly appropriate here is that of the viral. The new, it is argued, acts like a viral process, embedding itself in the pre-existing order, changing its structure and quite often its whole operational mode. This is the ‘corruption’ process, but within a very specific qualification. The model we might like to adopt here is an evolutionary one: as old orders are abandoned and rejected, new ones emerge that are better suited to the changing environment. The difficulty with such a metaphor is that culture has come to locate the sense of evolution as one of development, rather than corruption. In the context of New Media we need to consider how the ‘old’ is changed and preserved at the same time. This is also to suggest that the viral influence requires the old form to be maintained in some manner.

The legitimacy of new media art has even been questioned on the ground that it is a false entity, a textual pretender within the art world as well as an

anomaly within technological and scientific arenas. This is a rather bleak summation and does represent a biased perspective. There has been much celebration and acceptance of new media art, and recently it has claimed an authority within itself. All developing artistic forms must struggle with their sense of intervention in the existing order, but new media always has the double 'burden' of being coupled with technology. It needs to demonstrate its credentials on two fronts: aesthetic legitimacy and the right to include non-traditional material (not, it must be remembered, originally designed for the arts) not simply as an addition, but as the primary textual order. In this way new media has been viral to both the art world and the technological one, continually shifting between the two. This in-between status is partly what has given new media so much of its creative force and depth; and, like a virus, enabled it to provoke changes within the establishments of both technology and art.

The status of virus has another implication – the domain of the computer and the internet. Here we witness how (predominantly) visual culture establishes a mythology that becomes self-reflexive through multiple productions of certain texts – films, television programmes, photographs, YouTube videos. These texts repeat myths of hacking and viruses which are disproportionate to the reality, such as computer viruses melting down metropolis in the film *Die Hard 4.0*). They stem from the actual acts of creating and disseminating viruses on the internet and grow to become Hollywood versions of such acts (*Hackers* and *The Matrix* are other examples), and then on to the reports of famous hackers and virus creators who enjoy celebrity status. Such rapid production of images and narratives within this cumulation of texts helps to form a popular discourse around the theme of the virus. Given that much of new media actually creates, narrativizes, and displays these texts, the self-reflexivity aspects become part of the discourse itself. The 'new' of New Media begins to occupy the position of 'viral', partly because it defines itself as such through the repetition of these sorts of discourses.

#### 4. *The new as interdisciplinary and polymorphic*

In 1962 Thomas Kuhn published *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which became a major work on the sociological and philosophical perspectives on science and scientific knowledge. Part of the significance of Kuhn's work was that it shifted the sense of scientific knowledge from something that was somehow independent and objective, and placed it alongside other forms of knowledge that were subjected to the vagaries and travails of cultural forces. Kuhn introduced the idea of paradigms – and paradigm shifts – arguing that any changes in scientific knowledge are embedded in a whole

range of other processes. Knowledge, for Kuhn, could never be placed within a single, self-contained and airtight sealed compartment. The ‘revolution’ part of Kuhn’s work can be seen as an engagement with the new, and he ties it in with a vast and complex set of social and cultural forces and not just technological/scientific change and invention.

One of the ways Kuhn discusses the relationship between these revolutions and social change is through alterations of worldview. At one point he describes this as a transformation of vision (Kuhn 1962: 111–35); his key point being that a scientific revolution makes people see the world differently. At one level these transformations of vision take place in what might be seen as a shift in subjectivity. Kuhn’s example is a contour map which looks like a set of lines on the paper but to a cartographer is a picture of terrain (Kuhn 1962: 111).<sup>4</sup> After we learn how to see this terrain our subject position shifts and we ‘become an inhabitant of the scientist’s world, seeing what the scientist sees and responding as the scientist does’ (Kuhn 1962: 111). (This last comment needs to be addressed further and we will return to it shortly.) For Kuhn, these transformations of vision have the capacity to reshape the world, how we inhabit it, think of it, and engage with all its agencies.

Things that have always existed, but remained invisible to the subject, emerge into existence; ideas about works and relationships of elements and subjects are transformed. And all of these are tied together so that one paradigm shift involves a great many others:

To see oxygen instead of dephlogisticated air, the condenser instead of the Leyden jar, or the pendulum instead of constrained fall, was only one part of an integrated shift in the scientist’s vision of a great many related chemical, electrical, or dynamical phenomena. Paradigms determine large areas of experience at the same time. (Kuhn 1962: 129)

So transformations of vision are much more than simply seeing things differently, or even being able to see things at all. (Another of Kuhn’s examples is the registering of a planet instead of a comet. Uranus had been seen for over a hundred years, but it was not until 1781 when Herschel defined it as a planet that it was *seen* as one.) The social order changes because the status of something changes; subjectivities change because their relationship to something has changed. In this sense the ‘new’ can actually be something very old, whose presence emerges because of this transformation of vision – which suggests that it is the perception and registering of the thing rather than the thing itself which is new in a great many cases.

Another example closer to new media is telephony. Remember that we are exploring how the term ‘new’ involves a sense of fresh perspective

regarding something that is familiar to everyday use but which has come into new use, or more specifically has had its familiarity and use extended and advanced. Mobile telephones are good examples because even as technologies they illustrate how quickly our use and perspective of them can change, ultimately leading to another relevance and purpose. From their first circulation into mainstream Western culture to current day application, mobile phones have become much more than portable communication. They have altered our patterns of communication, from the need to be in a specific place at a specific time in order to be contacted to the manner through which we 'speak'. Mobile phones now include video messaging, text messaging, bluetooth, and MP3 facilities, demonstrating that they have moved beyond traditional, or 'old', telephony. This example can be drawn out in future studies to illustrate the many paradigm shifts that have occurred within telephonic communication, but for now we will stay with our exploration of the theorizing of the new.

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Taking this up from quite a different angle yields a similar set of conclusions. Bryson begins his book *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* with an example from Pliny on the relationship between an image and reality. (It is an example that we also find in Jacques Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, and we shall have good cause to return to this shortly.) It is the story of the competition between the two great rival painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius:

Zeuxis produced a picture of grapes so dexterously represented that birds began to fly down to eat from the painted vine. Whereupon Parrhasius designed so life-like a picture of a curtain that Zeuxis, proud of the verdict of the birds, requested that the curtain should now be drawn back and the picture displayed. When he realized his mistake, with a modesty that did him honour, he yielded up the palm, saying that whereas he had managed to deceive only birds, Parrhasius had deceived an artist. (Bryson 1985: 1)

Bryson uses this story as a vehicle to explore the idea of the image as sign (a transformed reality in effect), but in some ways this can also be seen as an example of the transformation of vision. The profound optical illusion encountered by Zeuxis operates at the level of deception, which is really about the transformation of reality and perception of the world. Note that

Zeuxis concedes to Parrhasius' skills not as a person, but as an artist. The distinction is remarkably similar to Kuhn's specification of the scientist and layperson. What is required to see and then understand Parrhasius' veil and the planet instead of the comet is a transformation of the viewer's relationship to the object/image.

These examples suggest that the new is a complex intersection of issues requiring recognition at a moment in time. It is not always – perhaps very rarely – something that appears for the first time. The new is not always new at all. One of the ways in which the new gains its status is the transformation of vision that allows us to see the new, and the social consequences that allow us to evaluate this status of the new. This is not simply to argue that the new is just an adjustment of how we perceive it; Kuhn's point, which is tied to the shift in 'seeing' things, is that knowledge itself is transformed. Meaning and meaninglessness are determined within this paradigm shift because what are at stake are the version of reality and its interpretation that will become the shared version within a culture.

An aspect of newness that often escapes a culture's attempts at representation is the fact that it is, certainly in its embryonic phases, polymorphic. Its presence is felt both thematically and structurally. As forces and processes come into play, the shape of the new moves until it becomes more fixed and stable. This is the agency of the new as it subsumes existing modes and alters them. A relatively straightforward example of this in new media is the internet. In a relatively short space of time it has altered in form and operation many times over. Sometimes this is due to technological advancements (from Telnet through to broadband for example) but often the form has altered as cannibalized modes are replaced with inventions. The process of moving from text on the screen (replicating the page of a book) to hyper-text is a good example of this. It is polymorphic because it does not abandon its old mode (literary type), but alters it to a new one.

This example also illustrates why there can never be anything that is totally new. This is not because such a status is impossible, but rather, as has been argued throughout this chapter, because the new is always drawn into a known and familiar system so sense can be made of it. New media art is sometimes seen as a new art form and sometimes as a new version of technology, and sometimes both at the same time. No matter what is being positioned, the one constant is that the newness is drawn into a sense of the known in order to have existence/meaning. During these processes the sorts of challenges manifested are the ones that end up reflecting on the disciplines and their histories. In this way new media has become a self-reflexive moment in the teleologies of both the arts and technology.

One of the key aspects of new media is that it conflates the technical and the aesthetic, and so shares aspects of Kuhn's paradigm shift as well as the issues of representation and art found in the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius. It would be a mistake for us to suggest that the technological developments that led to certain forms of new media have not ontologically shifted the qualities and attributes of the media images and narratives. However this would be to fall into the trap that Kuhn works so hard at avoiding. The newness of new media is not necessarily its technical inventions, it is the transformation of vision that affects how we make sense of, and even actually make, the world and its social orders. The revolutionary status from this Kuhnian perspective of the new in New Media is more about how it relates to the wider cultural issues and forms and less about the technological aspects involved.<sup>5</sup> In this sense when we engage with the new media we are fundamentally addressing cultural and social aspects of the technological changes that have been brought about.

### *5. The new as political investment*

We have already noted that acquiring and sustaining the status of the new is important for a number of reasons; not the least of which (within a capitalist order certainly) is its currency and value in systems of exchange. Here we witness twin processes of ascribing value to the artistic object: tradition and newness will increase value but in quite different ways. This almost literal market-value approach is one of the ways in which the status of the new acquires a political investment. This is the operation of the new in terms of its commodification. The importance of being seen as new in new media sometimes operates in this way, but there are other factors at hand. One of the key ones to be considered here is the complex relationship between new media theory and new media practice.

New media's existence required the advent of new media theory. This was not just to give it some sort of cultural legitimacy (the recognition by the academy in effect); nor was it simply to offer an explanation of new media as it has developed – although of course this is what has taken place. Independent of both of these causes and effects is the idea that new media as practice is also new media theory; and often new media theory looks very much like a practice driven process. The parallels with cinema are usefully drawn here. From its inception much of the interplay between cinema as a medium and its theorizing took place in a symbiotic relationship. From Vertov, Pudovkin, and Eisenstein through to the French New Wave, there has been a strong parallel development of theory informing practice, and

practice informing theory. The film-makers also theorized the idea of cinema. Not all cinemas progressed in this manner; the point here is that there was a significant and highly important theory/practice interaction as cinema developed. Similarly, new media has been marked by a theorizing of what is new about new media through its practices; and much of the practice is derived from the theoretical underpinnings.

Interestingly, this sort of self-reflexive exchange and interaction has led to a particular investment in the status of the new in new media. Because it is a form and cultural process that has, at the very least through nomenclature, been positioned as the new, new media comes to itself with an internal tension. This is part of the struggle to retain the identity of new not just as a marker of a textual form, but also as an ideological construct. If a certain version of new media is no longer considered new how can it retain this label and status? The answer is that there is reluctance to confront such an issue. This in turn leads to a second order of internal tension of the new itself. As has been argued earlier, the idea of the totally new is impossible. There are just versions, varieties, and movements from the old into something else. In this sense all new media contains old media. Sometimes this is an evolutionary process such as the progressions of digitality to more and more complex systems of clarity and presentational verisimilitude; sometimes it is an archaeological process with older versions forming the foundations for the next order; sometimes it is a metaphoric process as in the idea of reading applied to hypertext and whether or not this is the 'same' as reading the page of a book. The significant aspect of all this is that the old media is embedded in the new, twisting it, informing it, shaping its future. Only *how it has been embedded* alters so that it may be refused or resisted in the drive to claim the status of the new.

### The discursive practice of the new

This chapter commenced with a Foucauldian note and it seems appropriate to draw some conclusions from the same source. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault articulates what he terms the **enunciative function**. This definition follows a fairly lengthy series of analyses on enunciation, subjectivity and discourse. At the outset Foucault is clear in his intent and we can draw parallels to his project:

1. 'My aim is not to transfer to the field of history, and more particularly to the history of knowledge (*connaissances*), a structuralist methodology... My aim is to uncover the principles and consequences of an

autochthonous transformation that is taking place in the field of historical knowledge' (Foucault 1986: 15). We are always in the midst of historical knowledge when we engage in new media issues, and given the significance of new media to the cultural order and everyday life, we can follow this line and articulate it as part of the field of historical knowledge. Furthermore, given Foucault's aim to uncover these principles, any study of the new of new media will benefit from his theoretical perspective.

2. 'My aim is most decidedly not to use the categories of cultural totalities ... in order to impose on history, despite itself, the forms of structural analysis.' Instead Foucault is concerned with 'question[ing] teleologies and totalizations' (Foucault 1986: 15–16). This conceptual shift is crucial for any study of the new because it liberates the analysis from answers and allows it to investigate systems of knowledge as they function to create meaning. This, it turns out, is essential to Foucault's sense and analysis of the enunciative function. In the concept (as typological ordering) of new media it is important to look at the ways in which the term, and all that is included under its rubric, comes to signify the new. However this cannot take place in terms of a cultural totality, which is something that has dogged the term since its inception. Rather it is necessary to question the teleological aspects of what it is to function in the sense of the new.
3. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 'belongs to that field in which the questions of the human being, consciousness, origin, and the subject emerge, intersect, mingle, and separate off' (Foucault 1986: 16). It has been the declared intent of this study to examine the idea of new media in terms of the subject, culture and image. If this is to be achieved, or even suggested, what is essential is precisely what Foucault sets up here in terms of his archaeological approach. In this sense the idea of the new in new media can only be understood if it is mapped in terms of things like the subject, consciousness, and origin. Not to include these sorts of conceptual issues is to run the very real risk of not placing new media within the domain of culture and subjectivity of which it is an essential part.

The sorts of conditions specified by Foucault allow him to go on to construct the archaeological analysis.<sup>6</sup> It is evident from these few lines that he is self-reflexive in approach and precise about what might be gained. It is a system that should allow an understanding of how meaning is produced, functions, and operates across and within the formation of disciplines. Our concern here is with the new as part of knowledge formations/operations and how this has impacted on the cultural construction of new media.

I wish to close this unfinished discussion on the new by suggesting that the new of new media operates very much like Foucault's 'discursive practice'. He offers the following as a succinct definition of the term:

it is a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function.

(Foucault 1986: 117)

Understood in these terms, the new of new media is the discursive practice, whilst new media itself is the enunciative function. The specificity that Foucault attributes to discursive practices is important here because it underlines the volatility of the new, and reminds us that it always circulates within a very specific set of discourses. What is new is really found in how it is articulated within the discursive practices. The enunciative function of new media in these terms matches what Foucault sees as 'the statement':

Thus the statement [read 'new media'] circulates, is used, disappears, allows or prevents the realization of a desire, serves or resists various interest, participates in challenge and struggle, and becomes a theme of appropriation or rivalry.

(Foucault 1986: 105)

Seen in this way the new of new media is invested with all the themes of power and subjectivity that operate within the discursive practices of culture, and new media itself becomes part a much larger set of enunciative functions within those cultural orders.

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