**HODGSON — Mapping**

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**Mapping the Contours of the New Aesthetic, Opening Considerations for Digital Rhetoric**

Hodgson, J.

In May 2011, designer and digital futurist James Bridle introduced the world to the idea of the New Aesthetic, a kind of emerging art and cultural critique that called attention to our acts of mediation, to the underlying systems and protocols that produce particular computational visualizations, and to the human viewpoints that frame those considerations. For Bridle, the New Aesthetic revealed the increasingly blurred distinctions ‘between “the real” and “the digital”, the physical and the virtual, the human and the machine’ (2012, n.p.), and it made us increasingly aware of a kind of ‘network vision’ manifest when the digital spills into the real—what William Gibson has called ‘eversion’ (2007). To this point, the ‘digital spill’ of New Aestheticism has been predominantly marked by the novelty of pixelated representation (Terrett, 2012)—8-bit graphics (and their overt pixelated qualities) manifesting in cultural spaces, screen glitches, down-sampled satellite imagery, and the blurry-squared edges of render ghosts. But for Bridle, the pixelated imagery serves merely as a kind of visual shorthand, a surface orientation. What the New Aesthetic points to, however, is the underlying systems that produce those pixelated representations, the media in which they are being undertaken (and of which they are reflective), and the human-technology assemblages that allow us to make sense of these things.

As such, Bridle’s year-long curatorial exercise on the New Aesthetic tumblr was more than just a collection of images and artifacts suggestive of an aesthetic of the network itself. Rather, the New Aesthetic oriented us to a moment of contact between what Lev Manovich has labeled ‘Turing-land’ and ‘Duchamp-land’ (1996). It brought together new media art and contemporary art, offering a series of convergences wrought with the dangling threads of the socio-politico-techno-cultural structures that underlie our ubiquitous human-technology assemblages. In so doing, the New Aesthetic helped us attune to design and making practices that sit between new media and contemporary art, as well as attuning to many rooted outside these frameworks (ranging across a variety of industry practices).

With this impact on design and/or our making activities, it should come as no surprise, then, that the field of rhetoric studies would have interest in the practices and purposes (if not emerging paradigm) of the New Aesthetic. For rhetoric has always been concerned with making, with the ways in which we produce discourse and/or artifacts for particular audiences, of particular moments in time, space, culture, etc. And rhetorical scholars, particularly those connected to digital rhetoric, have been increasingly concerned with our acts (and artifacts) of mediation, the systems (computational, cultural, communicative, etc.) that produce or allow for particular types of material and digital utterances and engagement, and, perhaps most importantly, the human-technology assemblages at the center of digital making and what those assemblages mean for rhetorical activities in the 21st century (both within the narrowed lens of digital rhetoric and in the general sense of communication, identification, persuasion, engagement, and the like). As such, if the New Aesthetic can be marshaled toward providing structures or explanatory models that could easily map (into) emerging rhetorical/humanistic practices, then it would have much to offer a range of critical and creative inquiry practices, from those practices featured in targeted subfields like digital rhetoric studies to larger umbrella structures like the digital humanities.

The problem here is that New Aestheticism actually resists the very kind of codification needed for it to be ‘marshalled’ anywhere. This is in keeping with aesthetic turns in general (cf. Rogoff, 2012), but for Bridle, the ‘resistance’ to application is less a matter of avoiding New Aesthetic tropes, and instead is due to the fact that the New Aesthetic is an ongoing process of critical engagement, born of a networked culture, taking place in/on/of networked worlds, and mirroring certain conditionalities of the network itself—which, in Bridle’s view (2013), renders it resistant to codification. Bruce Sterling performatively makes this point in his ‘An Essay on the New Aesthetic’, where he offers over 30 ‘is’ statements trying to grasp and situate New Aestheticism—ranging from ‘The New Aesthetic is a native product of a modern network culture’ to ‘It is rhizomic’ to ‘the New Aesthetic is really a design fiction’ (n.p.). Aside from offering glimpses of the potential qualities of the New Aesthetic and, perhaps more importantly, helping mainstream the New Aesthetic by publishing his essay in *Wired*, Sterling’s articulation comes up short in providing a kind of conceptual whole to what the New Aesthetic is or may become. And it most certainly does not provide a set of tropes for employing the New Aesthetic (as hermeneutic or heuristic).

This is perhaps what has made the New Aesthetic so valuable. It generated a lot of interest and critique not because it offered any prescriptive tropes, but rather because it was more significantly concerned with attunement, digital attunement—i.e., with attuning us to the circulating intensities of representation, mediation, and enactment central to our hybrid cybernetic/human cultures (what Manovich would call ‘computer culture’, Beth Coleman ‘x-reality’, and N. Katherine Hayles ‘mixed reality’). In this view, the New Aesthetic isn’t meant to be a revolutionary aesthetic like the aesthetic movements of yore (Dadaism, Futurism, Cubism, etc.), but rather an awareness-aesthetic—one oriented towards opening us to what McLuhan has referred to as ‘the numbed stance of the technological idiot’ (1994/1964, 18).

But for all of its promise as an awareness-aesthetic, no one has been able to articulate what the attunements of New Aestheticism are or how they might inform larger conversations and practices in the digital arts, digital humanities, digital rhetorics, or digital literacies. Part of this tension stems from Bridle’s own hesitation to codify the New Aesthetic, preferring that it reflect the unstabilized and unfixable tenets of the network paradigm from which it emerges—an emergent aesthetic stemming from ‘a new natural order’ (i.e., the network) (Bridle, 2011). While I agree with Bridle’s not wanting to arrest what is, by all indications, an ongoing performance, a process of critical engagement and critique, the many works on the subject (his own as well as the many other commenters: ranging from Bruce Sterling and Catherine David to Joanne McNeil and Ian Bogost) provide enough for us to begin to map temporary contours of the New Aesthetic—a snapshot (perhaps snapchat) of our fleeting, yet-ever-present New Aesthetic moment.

This presentation, then, will attempt to articulate these contours without arresting them. It will work to situate these gestural shapes in relation to rhetorical and mediating practices (from hyperrhetoricity to hypermediacy), and attempt to leverage them in order to foster a frame of engagement that may help us make sense of the increasingly blurred lines between screen-mediated and non-screen-mediated experiences. It will do this in three parts: one, it will identify the conceptual purview of the New Aesthetic (history and trajectory); two, it will introduce and respond (in brief) to key criticisms lobbied at New Aestheticism; and three, it will articulate four contours of the New Aesthetic and explore those contours in relation to current digital rhetoric / digital making practices, with particular attention on issues of design (functional and experiential), representation (particularly the leveraging of metaphors from our engineered devices), and mediation (small-screens practices and mediated being). As the limitations of the talk prevent full development of these concepts and applications, the talk will be designed to showcase the key frames, contextualize their impact, and demonstrate their possibilities as a way to invite further questions, criticisms, and creative responses.

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