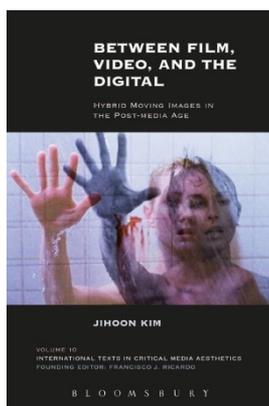


# An Ontology for New Media Hybridity

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Jihoon Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital: Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-media Age*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016, 404 pp., ISBN 978-1-6289-2293-6.

**A**s the title indicates, in *Between Film, Video, and the Digital: Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-media Age*, Jihoon Kim describes the ontology of contemporary artworks produced within the universe of New Media Art, particularly the ontology of those works he understands as *hybrid moving images*, images whose typical materialities are denatured, deconstructed, and resignified when remediated through recording platforms, technical formats or artistic practices initially strange to them. For this task, he thoroughly examines the case of analogue films, such as celluloid materials, the case of digital videos, which may comprise original footage or digital manipulations of those films, and, through what seems to me an evolutionary conclusion, also the case of multimedia installations—combination of different techniques for the mediation of both analogue film and digital video according to new forms of appreciation.

At a first glance, such objects of study may seem to offer a predictable or redundant analysis, but readers must not fall for this: Kim is very lucid when he claims that today we can no longer undertake a systematic research on contemporary digital art based on the tenets of Clement Greenberg's long-lived art criticism, that is, from an epistemological perspective which assumes that the form and the expressive capacities of a given medium are distinct from those of other media, what encloses it into its own singularly specific

materiality (Kim 11-12; Krauss 24, 30). For Kim, new media foresee, transgress, and improve even the most fundamental materialities of electronic and digital technologies in such dynamic and complex ways, and naturalise them so deeply as bedrocks for social and cultural relations, that it is becoming impossible for us to assume something like a singularity or a singularization of their materialities on the basis of their form and expressive capacities. Aware of this need to establish a new epistemological perspective for our contemporary art criticism, one that grounds itself as pluralist and relativist by taking into account new media's capacities to configure, reconfigure, and, most importantly, prefigure their own materialities, Kim suggests that this criticism should work in the light of an array of theoretical tenets which he assembles under the hypernym *post-media condition*.

This is a form of historical conscience: in the mid-nineties, Rosalind Krauss, faced with the fast evolution of digital media, particularly due to their increasingly convergent affordances, saw herself revising the then dominant epistemological perspective according to which a given medium's materiality is singularised upon and within its form and expressive capacities. According to her new understanding, since it did not seem at all productive to evaluate and qualify a medium on the basis of just its physicality and expressivity, the wisest alternative would be to grasp a medium as a set of conventions that derive from, without ever being identical to, the material characteristics of a given technical support. The chief advantage of this new perspective, which we may take as the outset for what Krauss describes as a *post-medium condition*, is that it reaffirms the importance of the material support, upon which the modernist idea of medium specificity rests, and thence conciliates the material and technical specificities of a given medium with the conceptual diversities of artistic creation (Krauss 5-7, 15, 24, 31-32).

Now, in his book, what Kim does is to revise this *post-medium condition*, which mainly accounts for the contemporary art of the nineties, and to update it into his own *post-media condition*, which broadly accounts for New Media Art and which, I believe above everything, offers a critique of a functionalist and essentialist conception of *media convergence*. By means of a pluralist and relativist conception of *media hybridity* – the understanding that, today, these media are able to prefigure the potentials of our very visual fruition and to assemble themselves anew – he shows how this historically-oriented capacity of ours is used as a privileged medium for our appreciation of previously constructed imagery. Indeed, by rethinking the relationship between contemporary art criticism and New Media Art criticism, Kim explains that his thesis must be articulated upon three post-media primary conditions:

- (1) the demise of the modernist medium specificity, that is, the proliferation of electronic and digital technologies that has led to the dissolution of the boundaries between one art form and another, which were previously sustained by a media's unique properties; (2) as a response to the

demise of the modernist medium specificity, a renewed awareness of what media's material, technical, and aesthetic components are and what artists can do with those components; and (3), as a result of this renewed awareness, the emergence of artistic practices by which the media's components have new, previously uncharted relationships with those of other media in ways that go beyond its formal boundaries. (10-11)

And so he concludes: "The last two conditions, I shall argue, suggest not the total abandonment or loss of medium specificity *per se*, but a reconfiguration of medium specificity *in tandem* with media hybridity." (11; emphasis added).

Describing a contemporary ontology for new media hybridity, which is also describing a contemporary ontology of visual fruition, cannot be an easy task; but the whole of Kim's reasoning becomes clearer as we read through the five thematic chapters in the book. In Chapter 1, Kim analyses recent digital video technologies to demonstrate how they can work in new ways to overcome our functionalist and essentialist conceptions of film, photography, and painting, a clarification process that runs deeply through the relativity of image stillness, movement, temporality, and, therefore, indexicality (well, yes, readers may find some common grounds between these theories and those by Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Raymond Bellour). In Chapter 2, the author delves deep into the realm of image abstraction to expose how digital video media, through their technological apparatus, are able to emulate or to make use of the analogical film material properties to produce their own, immanent, abstract aesthetics – what, the way I see it, exposes how the digital arts are able today to explore the versatile nature of our visual education in order to make themselves improvingly, creatively, and dialectically self-referential. This evolution is also present in Chapter 3, which focuses on how experimental films create new eventfulness, affects, meanings, and criticisms by remediating found footages through their own materialities, and contrasts these films with recent technologies for digital image generation – a contrast that seems to work very well as a strategy to raise our awareness about the importance of imagic materials and their related technologies for the formation of historical discourse and conscience. In Chapter 4, readers will find two intertwined discussions on a select group of intermedia essay films: one about how these films rely on digital technologies to remediate a broad scope of film-based images and thence give rise to what thus becomes migrant memories; the other, about how that pre-existing material, these migrant memories, and the new media conspire to shape the creativity and the subjectivity of the filmmakers in question. Together, these two discussions weave a tight relationship between reflectivity and subjectivity, a relationship whose pragmatic aspects are ultimately very representative of the technical and social revolutions filmmakers must subject themselves to in order to cope with the artistic materialities prefigured by the permanently-evolving technologies that surround them. Finally, in Chapter 5, Kim explores what he de-

scribes as “cinematic video installations”, a selection of installations whose focus is to articulate video technologies to enhance our cinematic experiences, particularly those of cinema as a multifaceted art of spectacles; his intention is to explain not only the new dialectics that arise from within the combination of cinema and video, two artistic genres which deeply rely on a historically-crystallised image *jouissance*, but also that it is possible that new relativities and dialectics are produced on the very level of their technical and spatial embodiments – what, again, seems to materialise a form of historical conscience bound to a pedagogy of vision.

As the readers may notice, these chapters structure an analysis of cumulative complexity. Kim begins his discussion on a rather phenomenological level, introducing arguments for a fundamental relativism of medium specificity, arguments that he anchors in the most basic natures of imagic stillness or imagic movement. He then discusses how artistic forms of media abstraction actually expand and deepen this relativism through new ways of exploring the material possibilities of a technical support, ultimately subverting old conceptions of medium specificity. Next, the debate enters what I understand as a universe of interdiscursivity, particularly that of image interdiscursivity, in order to expose how images burgeon their own discursive materialities along different times in history and, therefore, along different revolutions on media physicality, expressivity, and materiality. The following discussion, on the memories that stream through the composition of essay films and that are both agents and products of their filmmakers’ subjectivities, seems to me a discussion of the historical consciousness that media artists must have about the fact that the possibilities and limits of their art necessarily derive from the possibilities and limits determined by earlier media and media arts, what reiterates the author’s idea of a current *post-media condition*. The final discussion epitomises the analyses of the previous chapters by enlightening how multifaceted and complex media arts, such as films, videos, and installations, actually result from and depend on a historically-oriented visual education that progressively allows for new detachments of image discourses or materialities from the technical supports within which they were originally produced.

Besides meticulous archaeologies and genealogies, readers will find in these chapters analyses of a significant number of artworks that illustrate and explain the issues in focus. Kim’s selection includes works by Mark Lewis, Bill Viola, Takeshi Murata, Jürgen Reble, Vicki Bennett, Ken Jacobs, Hito Steyerl, Jonathan Caouette, Douglas Gordon, Stan Douglas, among many others. It is not an easy reading, but it is inspiring; it contains precisely what readers must provide themselves with if they want to access a refreshed perspective on the present state of contemporary art and if they want to correctly grasp it as material manifestation of cultures and ideologies increasingly reliant on our visual capacities, increasingly shaped by the naturalisation of new media as bases for social relations.

**Reference**

KRAUSS, Rosalind (1999). *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of Post-medium Condition*. New York: Thames & Hudson.

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