



Remediation. Understanding New Media – Revisiting a Classic

Reviewed by

Stephen Dobson

Professor

Lillehammer University College

Email: stephen.dobson@hil.no

7 years have passed since the publication of Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (1999). It has already in the space of this short time attained the status of a classic. What is entailed by the term 'a classic text'? These days it means that it is a much cited work among academics, can be found on numerous college reading lists for undergraduates and has been reviewed, not always favourably it must be added. On another level assuming the status of classic in such a short time reflects something other than these quantitative measures. A classic is a text that continues to connect with the changing pulse of contemporary life, such that it is experienced as relevant despite the lapse in time since publication. The key word in this connection is experience and this is something to which I shall return. Another measure of classic status is how the text compares to other much cited texts, such as *Literacy in the New Media Age* by Gunther Kress (2003), which not only contains the phrase new media in its title, but is well on the way to attaining classic status among those interested in plotting changes in new media and their consequences.

Accordingly, in the essay that follows, Bolter and Grusin's text will be revisited by looking at several of the things mentioned above: examining how some writers have reviewed the text, critically assessing the concept of experience used by authors and lastly, positioning the book alongside Kress's *Literacy in the New Media Age*. But first, a presentation of the book's key ideas and how they might be contextualized through examples.

A presentation of *Remediation. Understanding New Media*

The authors note in the preface that the book began as a series of discussions by the authors arising from a graduate seminar on the genealogy of the media. Genealogy understood in the Foucaultian sense as a consideration of the historical and socio-cultural conditions supporting new media and their development and usage. Historical genealogies occupy a central position in the whole book, such that the reader is introduced to innovations in not only new media, for example virtual reality and photorealistic graphics, but also when innovations historically occurred in other media, such as painting (the use of linear perspective in the Renaissance, p24-25) and photography (Daguerre's assertion in the mid 18th century that all will form photography collections of their possessions, p70). Historical genealogies are the defining characteristic

of the key concept remediation. This is defined in and through two other concepts, or better still two logics: the logic of immediacy and the logic of hypermediacy.

Immediacy is introduced by citing a cult science fiction film called *Strange Days*. In the film the main protagonist sells tapes for a virtual reality headset, the *wire*, which allows the wearer to 'tap into' sensed experience as it was recorded by a previous wearer of the wire. The headset's goal is 'unmediated visual experience'. Furthermore, the authors note that even though this film is fictional, it is saturated with cell phones, radio, TV screens, voice answering machines, and this mirrors today's Los Angeles with its media rich environment:

[...] in which digital technologies are proliferating faster than our cultural, legal, or educational institutions can keep up with them. In addressing our culture's contradictory imperatives for immediacy and hypermediacy, this film demonstrates what we call a double logic of remediation. Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them. (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 5)

Put simply, virtual reality wants to erase the media (logic of immediacy), and yet at the same time there is a contrary tendency, the proliferation of multiplying media (logic of hypermediacy) where the presence of the media is continually made apparent. Total immediacy is never possible because a trace of the media remains, nor is total hypermediacy possible or desirable. One of Bolter and Grusin's key assertions is that these two logics are not necessarily mutually exclusive, there are examples of media that simultaneously rely upon both logics to heighten the viewer's experience of the event as authentic. For example, CNN news coverage of war has been known, in the logic of immediacy, to provide live reports that take the viewer to the scene, where missiles are falling and buildings crumbling. At the same time, in the logic of hypermediacy, these reports are framed in a TV window on the screen alongside a simultaneously viewed window with a studio broadcaster who interviews the reporter in the field, tele-text runs at the bottom of the screen and there is a web-address for the viewer who wants additional information on the news item.

Immediacy refers to the manner in which a media desires to provide a window through to the live event, while hypermediacy's concern with multiple media make the viewer more aware of the different windows used to achieve the mediated experience (p81). Both immediacy (*window through*) and hypermediacy (*window at*) reflect the popular windowed style of the internet and computer technologies:

Windows opened on to a world of information made visible and almost tangible to the user, and their goal was to make the surface of these windows, the interface itself, transparent. As the windowed style has evolved in the 1980s and 1990s, however transparency and immediacy have had to compete with other values. In current interfaces, windows multiply on the screen: it is not unusual for sophisticated users to have ten or more overlapping or nested windows open at one time. The multiple representations inside the window (text, graphics, video) create a heterogeneous space, as they compete for the viewer's attention. (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 31-32)

It is possible to construct a diagram, something not attempted by Bolter and Grusin, to summarise the differences between immediacy and hypermediacy:

Diagram: Immediacy compared with hypermediacy

Immediacy	Hypermediacy
Window through	Window at
Epistemologically: knowledge rests upon transparency (p70-71)	Epistemologically: knowledge rests upon opacity
Psychologically: viewer feels that the medium has been erased	Psychologically: viewer has the impression that the medium has not been erased, on the contrary
Reality (as presented through the window of the medium) is reached and experienced as authentic	'Experience of the medium is itself an experience of the real' (p71) and authentic
Unified perspective, suggestive of normative linear view	Multiplies media (p31) and fragments viewer's perspective, suggestive of deviancy and revolt to the normative and linear
The focused gaze (p54, 81)	The shifting glance
E.g. virtual reality experience of flying, such as a pilot training simulator	E.g. TV news reports

In many senses the logic of immediacy reverberates with a modern concern for order, unity and maintaining the control achieved through a unified, at times linear perspective and gaze, whereas, hypermediacy reverberates with post-modernity's desire for fragmentation and the multiplication of perspectives that mutually deconstruct each other in a shifting glance. But such a simple dichotomy between the modern and postmodern underscores the manner in which Bolter and Grusin bring both modernity and post-modernity together with their concept of remediation.

So, what is remediation? As indicated, it rests on the dual logic of immediacy and hypermediacy. But more can be said. A concise definition is supplied in the glossary (p273):

Defined by Paul Levenson as the "anthropotropic" process by which new media technologies improve upon or remedy prior technologies. We define the term differently, using it to mean the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms.

Both the logic of immediacy and the logic of hypermediacy draw upon this desire and both logics draw upon digital technologies. The former uses digital applications to erase the sense of the media and achieve 'an immediate (and hence authentic) emotional response' (p53), while the latter's use of digital hypermedia 'seek the real by multiplying mediation so as to create a feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience, which can be taken as reality' (p53)

Classical painters drew scenes from the Bible or other literary sources, just as Dutch painters incorporated maps, globes, letters and mirrors. So, The refashioning undertaken by new digital media is nothing new, as the Bolter and Grusin note (p45). At one extreme, examples such as CD-ROM picture galleries on the Internet offer images of paintings, not in opposition to the originals, but as new means of access to these older materials. In other words, the original painting is remediated to an electronic digital form.

The remediation may not seek transparency and immediacy, but the opposite. For example in encyclopedias on the internet refashion earlier printed and textual versions with the addition of sound, video clips and electronic

searching and linking capabilities. The borrowing or repurposing can take not only the content from an earlier medium, but also incorporate and refashion the earlier medium in the new digital medium.

Thirdly, the remediation can be more aggressive, such as in music video's that refashion the older live version, multiplying the media used to re-create the once live version. In this case the older medium – the live performance – is a distant trace of the computer, studio and synthesized final version.

Lastly in the typology of remediation offered by Bolter and Grusin, there is the case of the video games that seek to re-absorb the older medium. For example the games *Myst* or *Doom* that remediate cinema, such the players can become characters in a cinematic, interactive narrative (p47).

Common to these remediations, resting upon different degrees of immediacy and hypermediacy, is the fact that the presence of the previous media can not be totally effaced. There is no transcendence, instead a constant dialectic with earlier media exists (p50). Theorizing remediation further they draw attention to three of its characteristics: Firstly, 'each act of remediation depends on other acts of mediation,' such that, 'media are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other' (p55). Secondly, the remediations are to be considered as real, as artifacts, and the argument that they are simulations of a more authentic origin has to be discarded. Put differently, in the terminology of Wittgenstein, a correspondence theory of truth is disproved as the reality of the representation itself is heightened and validated. Lastly, as the remediations are both real and mediations of the real they are capable of reforming reality as well. For example, through computers we gain alternative visions and versions of the world around us and we act upon their input/output to change the way in which we act and reason. This is not surprising considering the fact computers and mobiles are increasingly an ubiquitous part of our reality. This does not mean that computers will disappear totally into appliances, as Donald Norman has argued. On the contrary, they can and are the source of reflection. For example in digital art the viewer reflects upon not only the art but the experience of the digital medium (Bolter and Gromala, 2003: 5-6). In other words, the computer is both transparent and hypermediate.

These characterizations reverberate with post-structuralist concerns about text and the limits of representation. But, where Bolter and Grusin go further, is in their ability to reflect upon so many types of media simultaneously and in any integrated, cross-disciplinary manner. This is evident in the manner in which they extend their concept of remediation to include the networks of technology, social relations and economy that governs, and at the same time provides a supporting infrastructure for remediation.

Each medium and its remediation constitute and rely upon what they call a hybrid (a term adopted from Latour) network of technological, social and economic relations. The example they give is American TV (p67), with its TV sets (technological), social uses (TV dinners, defining shopping habits, occupying the children) and expression of economic realities (e.g. the commercials interrupting and also financing the TV channels). For each example of remediation it is possible to identify networks of technology, social relations and economic. What they don't do, despite discussing McLuhan's book *Understanding the Media* and its reference to technology and culture, is suggest that culture is an independent component in this network, and it must be remembered that TV cultures vary between and within countries.

One of the reasons for their adoption of the term network is to escape the charge of technological determinism. A network of inter-relations between the economic, social and technological means that no one term has primacy, as was the case in classic Marxist writers. But the term network comes at a price,

it can be insensitive to those excluded from immediacy and hypermediacy. As I have argued elsewhere (Dobson, 2000: 122-123), instead of the term network, communication channels can be used to indicate something of the way in which some people are included, excluded or experience something in-between, what might be called *inclusive-exclusion* (both included and excluded at the same time, through stigmatization or discrimination). In short their concepts of remediation, immediacy and hypermediacy risk being insensitive to those excluded and the production of what is commonly known as the digital divide.

Examples and conception of self

The first three chapters of the book present the theory behind the concept of remediation. The eleven chapters that follow provide examples covering new media, defined to include such things as computer games, digital photography, photorealistic graphics, digital art, film, TV, virtual reality and the Internet. A chapter is devoted to each, and perhaps the reader would have preferred that instead of 11 chapters devoted to 11 media, the number had been reduced so that a selection of these media were discussed in more detail. Moreover, film, art, TV and photography are of course not new media in the sense of recent. But, they become new, or more correctly they are reinvented as 'each innovation rearranges and reconstitutes the meaning of earlier elements' (p270). Put in their terminology, they remediate other media and innovations based upon digital technology in particular.

It is impossible to cover each of the chapters devoted by Bolter and Grusin to computer games, digital photography and so on. Some examples must suffice. Let us begin with virtual reality:

One way to understand virtual reality, is as a remediation of the subjective style of film, an exercise in identification through occupying a visual point of view. (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 166)

To prove their point they note how the scaling of building and negotiating space scenes in the film *Vertigo* provided a model for the virtual reality scenes in *Strange Days*. In short, moving through space as an immediate experience is desired by virtual reality enthusiasts.

The authors write that television is 'not as capable of photorealism as are film photography, and now computer graphics' (p186) because television lacks their high resolution and visual depth. The arrival and lower cost of high resolution TVs may change all of this. Nevertheless, it is clear that television still remediates and comments on photography and film, offering liveness, the 'here and now' as opposed to film's 'there and then'. It is capable of both immediacy and hypermediacy, largely according to TV genre. Thus, immediacy is the 'style favored by dramas, soap operas, daytime talk shows and certain real-life programs, while hypermediacy is the style of most news and sports programming, situations comedies and commercials' (p187).

Remediation goes both ways: TV remediating the windowed look of computers/Internet and the Internet remediates TV, for example the live cam recordings shown on the Internet remediate the monitoring function of viewers looking at the television (p204).

In the final part of the book the authors reflect on changing conceptions of self made possible by remediation. They identify a mobile self based upon immediacy and made possible by virtual reality experiences, as a person can occupy different perspectives and increase their empathy (p245) The virtual self appears through a person's bodily experiences (touch and sight). In this sense it is not an abstract Cartesian self founded upon 'I think'. And yet, virtual

reality rests upon the abstract Cartesian gaze. It is therefore both Cartesian and anti-Cartesian.

They also identify a networked self based upon hypermediacy experiences, 'constantly making and breaking connections, declaring allegiances and interests and then renouncing them – participating in a video conference while sorting through email or word processing at the same time (p232). The notion of community is remediated, from the kind of community once established by the advent of the telegraph, to virtual communities.

Both the self-as-mobile and the self-as-networked share a search for authenticity and occasion what they call, using Cavell's term, a 'presence of self' (p234). This has origins with and remediates the romantic notion of the self that wants not merely presence of the world or presence in the world, but making the self present to itself. Bolter and Grusin conceptually link these thoughts on the self to James's idea that the self is a totality of material, social (through recognition from others) and enduring spiritual/felt constituents.

For post-modernists these reflections on the self will be nothing new. They merely heighten what I have called the self-as-performed (Dobson, 2004) with its embodied components of self-as-autonomous, self-as-existential and self-as-structured and de-centred. With performance in mind, Goffman's conception of the self as a role acted upon a socially, mediated stage provides an equally apt conception of self.

Reception

The book was enthusiastically received, with a globally positive appreciation. As one writer put it, Blakesley (2001), '*Remediation. Understanding the Media* is an event, one to which teachers of writing in any environment should pay attention'.

However, this writer was somewhat concerned that the writers magically reduced:

[...] the function, power, and purpose of mediation to agency as process, as technique, rather than rhetorical action'

And if media are reduced to function, Blakesley argues, communication becomes a process and technique, shunting information and giving people what they want, instead of understanding that media function rhetorically, through identification and persuasion. Blakesley's point, like Critical Theorists a generation before, is that the *Remediation* book proposes a too instrumental view of media technology, as a means. It forgets the ends to which it can be used. I think however, that Bolter and Grusin do in fact consider ends in their somewhat cautious conclusion, where they suggest that remediation merely mirrors society's ever-present fascination with both 'transparent and hypermediated technology' (p270).

As to the instrumentality charge, the author's use the concept of network to talk of remediation within a social, material and economic context. Such a conceptual triangle is flexible enough to help understand each instance of remediation in both instrumental and non-instrumental terms. For example, TV can be viewed instrumentally in economic terms of costs to the viewer. It can also be viewed non-instrumentally in terms of the social value of viewing TV together with family and friends. More worrying is Blakesley's own view of communication as persuasion because this can be construed to demonstrate a belief in communication as nothing more than an instrumental act.

A common criticism of the *Remediation* book is that it is hard to pin down the concept of remediation 'because it is being used in many different ways' (Vandenbussche, 2003) or it is vague (Baetens, 2006). However, to some extent this is an unfair criticism because what the authors provide is a typology of the term, such that it can exist in different forms according to the degree of refashioning of the older medium in the particular instance. Thus, in the presentation above, following the authors, a typology of four different types of remediation were outlined.

Secondly, Baetens (2006) argues that the media history rewritten in their use of remediation, is not chronological, but teleological through its constant highlighting of the desire through history for a more direct contact with reality. Of course it might be argued that this was to betray the genealogical project as defined by Foucault and Nietzsche his predecessor, since the genealogical method looks not to keep to or search for a constant definition of a concept throughout history. Instead, genealogy looks to disclose how the truth of a phenomena, in this case remediation, is produced, under which conditions, in whose interests and how both these shifting conditions and interests can change its truth. But, once again, when they operate with what appears to be a typology of remediation, they are in fact allowing for a flexible concept of remediation that changes according to the context.

In sum, in opposition to the undoubted enthusiasm of reviewers, some have charged that the concept of remediation was unclear and vague and that that the authors have had a too instrumental view of media technology. But their definition of the concept through a typology means that the concept was both defined and at the same time could be used in a non-instrumental, flexible manner when required by the context.

The concept of experience

Central to any book on new media is the concept of experience and how it is transformed. This perhaps accounts for the authors feeling the need to cite the arguments of McLuhan, Benjamin and Baudrillard. The role of the first mentioned in theorizing new media is well-known, so in this part of the essay the focus will be upon how Bolter and Grusin have appropriated or criticised the work of Benjamin and Baudrillard for their arguments on experience and its authenticity.

The reason they use or refer to these authors is, I believe, because they feel that they continue to have a finger on the pulse of contemporary life and they also desire to hold a finger on this pulse. Benjamin's (1969) well-known essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* is cited to understand how mechanical reproduction removed the unique aura and distance attached to works of art. They were more accessible to a larger public, and in their terminology, 'psychologically more immediate' and hence authentic. At the same time, mechanical reproduction drew attention to a fascination with media in a hypermediate sense. For example, the manner in which the viewer of film was entranced by the shifting scenes of the film or by the lens of the camera as it panned across landscapes.

Benjamin understood the manner in which experience was mediated by mechanical, in our sense digital, machines/computers. Put differently, he reflected upon the interface between man and machine, just as Bolter and Grusin reflect upon the interface between man and computer/new media.

But Bolter and Grusin ignore an important concern in the work of Benjamin – this was the loosening of the subject-object or subject-machine relation, where consciousness could be an important and restricting component. This is why Benjamin explored experiences of Hashish among other things. In other

words, he was dissatisfied with experience that was entirely and completely wedded to the conscious of the individual (Dobson, 2003). This omission means that Bolter and Grusin lack an insight into alternative experiences that may not be so wedded to the self. Their argument for a flexible and networked self still leaves them wedded to a belief in the power of consciousness and the subject to computer/new media relation.

Our experience of media is at times far from conscious and propelled by different goals and desires. This is a constant concern in the work of Baudrillard, a writer to whom Bolter and Grusin also refer (p174) in somewhat critical terms. For them Baudrillard – with his finger on the pulse of contemporary life - is important as the theorist of simulation, who argues that the simulation has taken over and the real disappeared and become itself nothing more than a simulation or endless stream of simulacra. Such arguments can be found in Baudrillard's (1983) book *Simulations*, but also to arguments that every image, every media message is a code that tests and permits pre-defined answers or messages (1983: 120). In other words, the unique individual with a unique answer is refused and conscious is not really needed other than to present the required answer. Baudrillard therefore, like Benjamin, is aware that there are limits to conscious experience and control, and also by implication, limits to its authenticity.

My point is that simply that it is important to have a broad understanding of what counts as experience, and at times Bolter and Grusin seem far too concerned to reproduce the modern project of a controlling conscious self, as it struggles to discipline and appropriate different media and remediations. Accordingly, they underplay how the connection between signifier and signified, supported and enabled by media, can be loosened to such an extent that they freely float from each other, beyond the control of the individual (Gundersen and Dobson, 1996: x-xi)

Remediation. Understanding New Media – a classic?

As I have argued there are weaknesses in Bolter and Grusin's book. They are for example far too uncritical of their very own concept. But this must not detract from how useful it is when applied to the analysis of different new media. As long as this continues to be the case, then the book will have a finger on the pulse of contemporary life and the title of a classic is justified.

How does the book compare to a book such as *Literacy in the New Media Age* by Gunther Kress (2003)? The latter is fast becoming a classic in the field of new media and how they should be analysed. Kress was concerned with the relation between the image and the textual, especially when viewed on the computer screen, and how they required different logics, one linear and temporal and the other spatial and spontaneous. As he put it:

‘The world narrated’ is a different world to ‘the world depicted and displayed’. (Kress, 2003:2)

This concern with changing logics recalls the interests of Bolter and Grusin and how remediation rests upon two logics, that of immediacy and hypermediacy. But, they have a wider field of application for their concept, considering such media as virtual reality, digital art, mediated spaces and photorealistic graphics.

This wider application takes the concerns of Bolter and Grusin away from Kress's primary concern, that of literacy and the field of pedagogy. But, even in this respect there are likenesses because it is possible to read in both books a fundamental interest or desire to socialize people into the potentials, what Kress calls design potentials, offered by new media. This inclusion of people

reveals at base a shared interest in what I would call, for want of a better term, *a social pedagogy for a new media age*. But the details and also limits of such a social pedagogy have yet to be presented by these authors.

Literature

- Baetens, J. (2006). *Jan Baetens asks Remediation or Premediation*. (<http://www.altx.com/ebr/riposte/rip9/rip9bae.htm>)
- Baudrillard, J. (1983). *Simulations*. New York: Columbia University.
- Benjamin, W. (1969). The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. In, *Illuminations*. Edited by Arendt, H. New York: Schocken.
- Blakesley, D. (2001). *A Review of Remediation. Understanding New Media*. (<http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/6.1/reviews/blakesley/remediator.html>)
- Bolter, J, and Grusin, R. (1999). *Remediation. Understanding New Media*. Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Bolter, J, and Gromala, D. (2003). *Windows and Mirrors. Interaction Design, Digital Art, and the Myth of Transparency*. Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Dobson, S. (2003). *The Urban Pedagogy of Walter Benjamin. Lessons for the 21st Century*. London: The Goldsmiths' Press. On-line: (<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/cucr/pdf/benjamin1.pdf>)
- Dobson, S. (2004). *Cultures of Exile and the Experience of Refugeeness*. Bern: Peter Lang Publishers.
- Gundersen, R. and Dobson, S. (1996). *Baudrillard's Journey to America*. London: Minerva Press.
- Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the New Media Age*. London: Routledge.
- Mc Luhan, M. (1964). *Understanding the Media. The Extensions of Man*. New York: New American Library, Times Mirror.
- Vandenbussche, B. (2003). Remediation as Medial Transformation: Case Studies of Two Dance Performances by 'Commerce'. In *Image and Narrative*. Online Magazine of the visual Narrative (<http://www.imageandnarrative.be/mediumtheory/bertvandenbussche.htm>)