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## **Moving Media Studies. Remediation Revisited** **Edited by Heidi Philipsen and Lars Qvortrup**

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Reviewed by

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### **Introduction**

Two questions can be asked: firstly, not do we need another book on remediation, but why? And secondly, if this is the case, what kind of book should it be? This review spirals around these questions.

On a superficial level it might be asserted that *Remediation – Understanding New Media* by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) needs to be applied to real life cases in order to concretize their concept of remediation, which in their book remains in some senses too vague. To some extent this is what the book edited by Philipsen and Qvortrup attempt. On another level, they pose a different set of questions, and therefore inject a new moment in the debate on remediation with a focus on the basic question: what is communication? So accompanying the empirical and case-by-case contributions there is an undercurrent of meta-theorization and analysis.

With respect to meta-theorisation, anthologies, as is this book with chapters written by in all ten people, always face the following dilemma: allow contributors to freely interpret remediation and the book will lack a common thread, or alternatively, provide a template or meta-theory on communication for contributor's to use and it may become too much of a strait-jacket. Qvortrup proposes just such a meta-theory in the first chapter, but the different contributors do not use exactly his template. Admittedly, some are inspired, like Qvortrup, by Luhmann and use some of his concepts, but only a few of them take on-board Qvortrup's proposal of a meta-theory based upon the concept of in-formation.

### **Qvortrup/Luhmann and in-formation**

Qvortrup's opening chapter simplifies the debate on communication media to two paradigms: the transmission paradigm and the complexity paradigm. The

former is to do with communication as the 'transport or transmission of meaning between people' (p21). It regards the medium of communication as a connecting device drawing together two or more communicators. This paradigm can be problematic when the communicators do not speak the same language or do not share the same symbolically generalized medium. The complexity paradigm asserts that the basic function of communication is to manage the complexity of the external world. This entails generating a 'manageable number of signs and concepts' based upon the construction of 'a distinction between the external world and the cognition of the world' (p20). Qvortrup takes his inspiration from Luhmann's discussion of complexity and in particular his concept of in-formation. Luhmann said the following:

A communication does not transport the world, it in-forms the world. As an other operation communication results in a distinction. It says what it says; it does not say what it doesn't say. When further communications are coupled to the first, borders between systems are created, thus stabilizing the distinction (Luhmann, quoted by Qvortrup, p26).

What exactly is this in-formation? It is the manner in which a loosely coupled world is in-formed, taking on a distinct form that generates meaning. Qvortrup uses the metaphor of the Lego brick to make his point. It is both a medium as well as a form, and when connected it can represent a building or some other meaningful entity. In Qvortrup's own words:

Meaning is a horizon of possible couplings within which not everything is possible, but within which nothing is necessary. Meaning as medium represents a state of contingency. However when a meaning operation is informed, for instance into signs: Distinct sounds, characters or words, which themselves are media for further in-formation operations. Thus, meaning improbabilities are transformed into meaning probabilities (p28).

Simply put, meaning results as something – e.g. a written sign, an object...etc. – gains a form. Take the shopping list with certain items included and certain items excluded. The items are in-formed in and through the list and gain thus a meaning as we shop. Meaning and communication are thus a means for ordering experience and reducing its complexity into manageable units.

How does this all tie up with Bolter and Grusin's book *Remediation*? Remediation is defined concisely in the glossary (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 273):

Defined by Paul Levinson 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.

More importantly two logics are seen to be central to this refashioning: the logic of immediacy and the logic of hypermediacy. The former increasingly uses digital applications to erase the sense of the media and achieve 'an immediate (and hence authentic) emotional response' (op. cit. 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' (op. cit. p53).

The logic of immediacy or more precisely 'transparent immediacy' in Bolter and Grusin's conceptual world, reverberates with the transmission paradigm

and in Qvortrup's opinion should be renamed with the more appropriate concept of 'in-formation'. As he puts it:

Any observation is a meaning-based transformation of medium into form, because observation as well as communication is a form-creating operation. To observe is to exclude something which is not observed from something else. This implies that a form is created, i.e. that the world is in-formed (p34).

He widens this meta-theory of communication to include also computer games, graphical user interfaces, and other ways in which the logic of hypermediacy is used to transform substance into form and make 'the environment practically, ethically or aesthetically manageable' (p34). In other words, the two logics identified by Bolter and Grusin are re-worked in the terms of Qvortrup/Luhmann's meta-theory of communication as in-formation. Qvortrup ends his contribution by noting that to avoid confusion and make it obvious that 'transparent immediacy' is only one of several complexity management strategies, he suggests that the term 'immediation' be used.

Qvortrup's simplification to two communication paradigms has heuristic value and the reader is equipped for the chapters to follow, which have more the character of case-studies. If anything has to be said about Qvortrup's chapter, it is that the engagement with Bolter and Grusin remains too much in the background and only in the final pages does it emerge into the foreground. However, on the positive side he does provide a theoretical 'optic', another of Qvortrup/Luhmann's terms, with which to observe Bolter and Grusin's book in a critical perspective.

## **Case studies**

The chapter by Harritz explores the manner in which actors in a number of recent films look directly at the camera and create a closer sense of the real, 'the use of the look at the camera is a rhetorical device that is supposed to engage the spectator in a more intimate "I and you" conversation and identification' (p49). She understands this in terms of Bolter and Grusin's concepts of transparent immediacy and hypermediacy. Her main point is that while female actors 'personalize the "frame" that normally would separate spectator and film (op.cit. p49)', male actors in a number of films use the look at the camera to create 'a feeling of despair, alienation and separation from the film's diegesis' (op. cit. 51). Harritz does not engage with Bolter and Grusin other than agreeing that film has a desire for the 'real' and that hypermediacy is present because films can combine live action footage with computer compositing and computer graphics.

Philipsen's chapter provides the reader with a more direct engagement with the concepts proposed by Bolter and Grusin. Like Harritz her chosen media is film, but unlike her she focuses on some of the film trilogies made by the much discussed film director Lars von Trier. Using his work she argues that the sense of immediacy and the real can be achieved not by using stylistic effects that are considered transparent, such as costumes to imitate the "real" context. Instead, when the dramatic narrative is engaging the film viewer is willing to accept all manner of stylistic effects that don't necessarily enhance transparency e.g. hand-held camera filming, lines in the floor to mark rooms. In other words, the hypermediate focus on stylistic effects is heightened, rather than lessened and made transparent, and the viewer still believes in the immediate sense of reality of the film. This is something which Bolter also agrees is a possibility in the final chapter in this volume (p202). Philipsen's point, which is a revision of Bolter and Grusin's original thesis, is that

remediating through different media, can approach the immediate sense of the real by one of two strategies: erasing the sense of the media or the opposite. Originally, Bolter and Grusin were more categorical and said that the empirical real (transparent immediacy) was the only option for an immediate sense of the real. Philipsen suggests the 'presentation of the real' (heightened sense of stylistic effects) as an alternative option to the empirical real and she notes at the end of her interesting contribution that this presentation has much in common with Qvortrup/Luhmann's conception of the in-formation or construction of the real.

Walther in his chapter on the football club Real Madrid explores the structural coupling between the sports and media system. Historically they were more separated, but in the era of the Murdoch Empire media are more interested in promoting all aspects of the game, including the personal lives of the celebrity footballers in clubs such as Real Madrid. Likewise, football clubs are more interested in coverage in the media, including pay-by-view television, the Internet and newspapers. Football as a multi-media event pursues not only presence and authenticity in a realistic transparent fashion, but is also indicative of its hypermediated character. Thus, television makes use of 'statistics, extra viewpoints, multiplication of cameras, slow motion techniques, split screens...etc (p90). The event of the event, or 'eventness' as Walther terms it, is thus created. Media reveal an ability to capture every possible temporal and spatial aspect of the event. This chapter works on several levels: as a systems level analysis of sport and the media, for those interested in one particular sport, namely football, but surely applicable to other sports, and for those interested in one of the world's most famous clubs. Walther is open about the inspiration supplied by Luhmann e.g. in the view of sport and the media as self-producing and self-maintaining systems (*autopoiesis*). But the reader would have liked to have seen how and if Walther could have used in particular the arguments on in-formation introduced by Qvortrup in the first chapter.

In a review of an anthology it is impossible to comment on each of the case study chapters with sufficient detail. What can be done instead is to give some indication of the content of these other chapters. The chapters by Marselis (on family genealogies and the use of the web/digitalized resources), Kahr-Højland (on use of mobile phones in negotiating museums), Hanghøj (on integrating computer media with learning games), Agerbæk and Jørgensen (on publishing the same piece of news in different formats) all share an interest in Bolter and Grusin's refashioning of an image/text/object in another medium, whether it is the mobile telephone or on a web-page. What I found interesting with some of these chapters is the educational focus. In particular, the importance of providing a scaffolding to direct the experience of participants (p130, 164). Without a scaffolding to secure progress through a narrative (e.g. a museum exhibition) the participants at best experience what Kahr-Højland calls informal, random learning.

Philipsen and Qvortrup have been able to secure a chapter by Bolter entitled *Digital Essentialism and the Mediation of the Real*. Many of the readers of this volume will I fear hop over many of the other chapters in the book in order to study his contribution. While this is an understandable strategy, to ignore the empirical breadth of this book and the meta-theory proposed by Qvortrup will result in a superficial encounter with the book's topic, namely revisiting remediation.

Bolter argues that it is important not to fall into the trap of essentialism. By this he means the view that all things digital are converging into a unified form of practice. He underlines the opposite, that we are experiencing an increasing divergence as new communication tools, such as mobile phones, provide new opportunities for divergence. This is connected with the cultural and ideological context in which these opportunities arise and are utilized. By

contrast, digital essentialism leans too much towards technological determinism. This he contends was a key point in his book with Bolter and Grusin (1999).

The second part of his chapter explores definitions of the real, a key topic in the *Remediation* book. He reminds readers what remediation is about:

Remediation is, above all, the borrowing and refashioning of the representational practices of one media or media form into another, and such practices are constituted as a combination of technical choices and ideological positions. The measure of these practices is not a standard dictated by any essential features of a technology; it is instead their ability to capture the “real” with reference to some cultural standard (p201).

He continues to provide a key clarification, perhaps modification of his position with Bolter and Grusin. He emphasises how both strategies of transparency and hypermediacy are concerned with the experiences of the real, but importantly what was under-communicated in *Remediation* was how:

Hypermediacy aims for immediacy of experience too; the immediacy is simply defined differently, as the experience of the artifact itself rather than the experience of the artifact’s disappearance (p202).

Bolter notes that it is the case today that transparent immediacy is well-defined in culture, and hypermediacy is considered the ‘other’ representational form. In the *Remediation* book hypermediacy was used to describe ‘a general strategy of disruption’, as the ‘other’ representational form multiplying media. But he advocates in this chapter the term hybridity as a better description of hypermediacy because it not only accounts for the manner in which multiple media are combined, but provides insight into how a hybrid refashioning can be found within a single medium.

He concludes his contribution by providing examples of the manner in which transparency and hypermediacy (here termed hybridity) can co-exist and oscillate. For example in the TV show 24. It is not therefore always the case that they collapse. Secondly, there is still a strong belief in the power of transparent immediacy, despite younger generations in the United States, Europe, and Japan appearing to prefer hybridity. I think it is too simplistic to assume, as Bolter seems to in this chapter (p206), that it is the older parental generation who prefer transparent immediacy and the youth who prefer hybridity.

It would have been interesting if Bolter had addressed and commented on some of the other chapters in this anthology. He does cite Qvortrup and Walther, but it is not with reference to their contributions in this chapter, but to some of their earlier work. Perhaps the editors of the book had no option and were forced to accept the chapter Bolter was already in the process of writing or had previously written. On the other hand, it is still interesting to read how Bolter develops and clarifies his views in the period after the publication of *Remediation*, and this is how I choose to read his chapter.

## **Final points**

This volume reads well and all readers will find some chapters of interest, whatever their disciplinary background. However, a few more critical comments are in order. In my review of Bolter and Grusin’s book (Dobson,

2006) I highlighted their reflections on what they called the self-as-mobile the self-as-networked experiencing immediacy and hypermediacy. My proposal was that additional concepts such as the self-as-autonomous, self-as-existential and the self-as-structured might also attract theoretical attention. This volume edited by Qvortrup and Philipsen (2007) is notable for its omission of their conceptions of self. Perhaps it is because they are more concerned with a more general meta-theory of communication (Qvortrup's project) or case studies of different media (other contributors). Nevertheless, it is a strange omission in a volume that purports to re-visit *Remediation* as developed by Bolter and Grusin.

Secondly, *Moving Media Studies. Remediation Revisited* would undoubtedly have benefited from more chapters in the style of Qvortrup's meta-reflection on communication and as a consequence fewer case study chapters. This is to do with the balance between meta-theoretical reflection and case studies. It is also to do with the dilemma I outlined at the beginning of this review: providing a red-thread or template for all the contributions vs. allowing each contributor to make their own theoretical choices. If a meta-theory is a template for contributors then I am really advocating several possible meta-theories/templates, and these will develop, complement or complete with the meta-theory embedded in the work of Bolter and Grusin.

## **Bibliography**

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