

Essential remediation. Is remediation essential?

On Remediation and the language of new media by Jay David Bolter

Bolter and Grusin's Remediation is a study of intermedial relationships that rejects modernist aesthetics and calls these assumptions into question.¹

Bolter text is a quest for remediation evidences in new media theory, contesting what he calls new-media enthusiasts that, as an inheritance of modernist aesthetic theory, have, in his words, the assumption of essentialism and absolute originality in new-media art. It can be seen as spotting exercise in the identification of remediation signs in modernist inspired theoretical analysis of new media.

What I will try to elaborate in these lines is that Bolter's text, despite its emphatic rejection of modernist aesthetics, presents certain ambiguities and lines of thought that can accommodate a coexistence with the essentialism he, so hardly, rejects.

Bolter starts to present remediation almost as an inescapable fatality of any new medium but, after this initial emphasis, along the text, a milder sense of peaceful coexistence with modernist aesthetics can be felt. This is evident in the

¹ Bolter, Jay David. 2007. Remediation and the language of new media. Northern Lights Volume 5.

ways he redefines remediation along his speech. From, "... remediation... rejects modernist aesthetics..." and "... remediation is an avoidable element..." to "*Remediation* is a study of the relationships between 'new media' and traditional media". In this last case, by considering remediation the study of the relationships, he is not exactly establishing a hierarchy or an assumption that these relationships aren't there to be questioned, leaving space for reconciliation with modernist points of view. It's very interesting to notice that in the last sentence, after using Manovich's *The language of new media* as an anchor point of modernist fallacy, he ends up acknowledging its merit and consistency: "The fact that Manovich himself can produce art that grows out of his theory makes the theory itself more convincing".

The author builds his elaborations calling up mainly Lev Manovich and Janet Murray seminal books, respectively "The language of new media" and "Hamlet on the holodeck". It considers both as presenting an essentialist approach to new media theory but, immediately failing, according to his point of view, by the fact that both authors develop their theories establishing a comparison with older media forms and theory; avant-garde cinema of the 1920's, in the case of Manovich, and classic literature in the case of Murray. Along his elaborations, the reader can't help to feel that Bolter's broad conceptual definition of remediation could be analyzed as an unfair strategy in the analysis of these authors and their respective points of view. It's true that, both Murray and Manovich, anchor their texts in examples from older media but, hasn't this strategy of explaining something new by creating bridges, parallels or even opposites with known references been the foundation of human communication and knowledge transfer? Grusin, himself, refers that, unlike theory that is being created from a practice in new-media, communication studies researchers "often examine digital media from the perspective of traditional mass media". Can't an essentialism driven creator theorize on his work falling back on what, in Bolter's broad concept, could be considered remediation strategies?

The reader can't help to feel that, as it happens frequently when one wants to emphasize a personal point of view, Bolter easily falls in a biased perspective of new-media that, conveniently, conforms to the evidences he is looking forward

to find. The assumption of remediation inevitability in all mediation forms can only be claimed by a convenient adaptive concept of the term itself, something that we can surely detect in Bolter's text.

In fact, we can extract two definitions of remediation from Bolter and Grusin. One is a very strict definition: remediation is the re-purposing and representation of one medium into another, inducing a significant transformation of the source medium and the target medium. The other definition is very broad: remediation is the re-purposing and re-appropriation of anything at hand, anything that can be represented in a medium, or as a medium.²

This ambivalence, as Marianne van den Boomen notices along the text of the previous extract, can be traced back to what she describes as a fuzzy definition of medium itself. In order to build up from a clear definition of the term, Boomen, dissects it in different contexts and aggregates several components in seven possible categories. These categories range from the material carriers or storage devices, production technologies, reproduction technologies and display devices, symbolic-material forms, genres to distribution systems, social/receptional setting, interface and, finally, modality of perception. Despite this clarification effort she considers that the oscillation possibilities of the concept along these categories "cannot provide a universally usable definition of the word 'medium'. We can only work with temporary, specific work definitions in specific research contexts." She adds that "Depending on which of the above categories is taken as essential for defining what a medium is, you can argue almost anything about media".

This elasticity, acquired by the concept of medium along the intense debate that it has generated, while accompanying the evolution of our society, originated

² Boomen, Marianne van den. 2005. The mirror hall of remediation. Meta BlogNote. <http://metamapping.net/blog/?p=112>

what Manovich calls a medium crisis and installed a condition described by many as post-medial.

In his Post-Media Aesthetics essay, Manovich elaborates that along the XXth century the entire concept of medium was questioned, entering a crisis that is still not solved today and that contributed to render meaningless this key concept of modern art.³

This post-medium condition where, according to Arild Fetveit, “creation is simply inclined towards interchanged, hibridity and impurity”⁴, can also be understood as the hybridity age that Bolter considers we are living in, and could establish an understanding ground for these confronting arguments.

For the sake of this analysis, we will enclose medium in one of Bolter’s definition:

In order to constitute a new medium or a significant new form within existing medium, designers must produce a significant change in representational practice with the tacit or explicit suggestion that this change offers an experience that is more compelling, more ‘authentic’, even more ‘real’.

But hasn’t even the notion of ‘real’ been drastically challenged by the emergence of the digital realm? Digital tools made visible many ‘images’ that have been invisible until recently, while creating many new ‘realities’ that were previously unimaginable.

In Bolter’s arguments to establish the concept of remediation, Boomen identifies two definitions; pseudo and aggressive or radical. Pseudo-remediation is for Bolter’s the case of the production of a movie based on a novel, were “the content has been borrowed, but the medium has not been appropriated or quoted’. Boomen denotes that he insists that digital media enables a “more

³ Manovich, Lev, 2001. Post-media Aesthetics.

⁴ Arild Fetveit, “Gerard Richter, Remediation and the Post-Medium Condition”.

aggressive remediation [that] throws into relief both the source and the target media” and that is this aggressive remediation, the real remediation, that he seems to be after.

What is intended to be questioned here is, if inside the boundaries of the concept of medium that emerges from Bolter’s definition and assuming a radical remediation scenario, aren’t we “touching” essentialism? That is, if in case of radical remediation, can’t we obtain a total un-remediate outcome that conforms to an essentialist perspective of artistic creation?

Theory and Practice

The importance of practice to support theory or theory that emerges from an art practice is probably the key to soften Bolter’s position in the discussion of remediation inevitability and brings peace to the supposed antagonism he encounters with the positions of modernist rhetoric.

The importance of reflection on one’s own practice to support and justify it theoretically or a theoretical view of one’s work motivated by the practice, has been of high importance in many authors/artists aesthetics thought. From Kandinsky, to Marcel Duchamps or Paul Klee we have seen the artist concern in questioning their respective expressive medium and art itself but, maybe never like in new media this complementarity of practice and theory has been so acute.

For Jay Bolter one of the reasons may be the proliferation of courses merging the practical aspects of multimedia production with communication and art theory. This fact is undoubtedly important for this reality but another aspect that certainly gives its contribution is the fact that new-media is in permanent avant-garde pace. It evolves at the fast rhythm of technology and of the aesthetic and social effects it produces, making it sometimes difficult for the theory to react in time, as if it had to be ‘reported’ from the eye of the creational storm to be poignant.

Nevertheless, the new media theory landscape continues to be constructed and enriched by different groups, with different backgrounds configuring differentiated approaches.

Manovich, considers that “it helps to practice what one writes about”, differentiating theory emerging from him and several other artists and theoreticians from the non-practioners group of theoreticians. Bolter’s points out the “intellectual diversity among the groups working in digital media” and also considers that “the most important division among these groups is the one between theorists and practitioners”.

Lev Manovich, claims that, as all media became computational, its essential characteristic is software. Through what he calls Transcoding, old media forms are transformed into software and that is the distinguishing element of digital media. With this essential characteristic he claims that “from media studies, we move to something which can be called software studies; from media theory — to software theory”, considering that software cannot be excluded from modern media theory.

Artineer or Enginist?

At the same pace that media theory keeps moving into software theory and the importance of practice to support it is becoming more relevant, a new type of artist has also been emerging; an artist that adopts, not only technology but, every form of media as a second nature.

If, has Bolter says, “many digital artists and even application designers and game designers do not program themselves, but instead trust their ideas to others to code.”, in new media, software programming should never be seen as craftsmanship. It’s from the mutual contamination of the technological and the artistic domains that digital media has evolved to occupy its undeniable place in our culture and society.

More than relying on ordering a technological component for an artistic concept, new media creation has been built on a solid territory of interdisciplinary contamination that generates true collective dialoguing artists, or individuals that complement a technological expertise with aesthetics concerns.

The notion of engineering as a tool for the artist didn't even passed the early days of electronic art with the collaboration of engineers and artists at the events known as Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.). This initiative, founded in 1966 by a group of engineers from the Bell Telephone Laboratories, namely Billy Klüver, tried to establish collaboration between technology and the arts, involving artists such as John Cage, Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, among others. E.A.T. was a pioneer effort in reuniting the universe of science and the arts. Inspired by Aristotle's notion of Techne – in which there was no differentiation between the practice of art and science – Klüver proposed the active and equal participation of the artist and engineer in the creation of the artwork.

Once I gave a talk [...] and made the point that an engineer should just be another tool for the artist. But Bob [Rauschenberg] very specifically said, "No! It has to be a collaboration." I immediately understood what Bob was saying. The one-to-one collaboration between two people from different fields always holds the possibility of producing something new and different that neither of them could have done alone. (Klüver cited in Miller 1998)⁵

Many digital media forms, such as video-games or digital performance, among others, require a very broad and specific knowledge spectrum that renders it impossible to be created by a single individual. One such extreme example of artistic creation is video-games. Even in the independent video-game scene, where the recently coined area of game art has been forged, the specificity of

⁵ Creating Common Ground: Dialogues between performance and digital technologies. Sita Popat & Scott Palmer

each game development activity is so specialized that it normally requires a large complementary team. Video creator and game studies theorist, Ian Bogost, describes this aspect of collaborative creation in his recently published article, “A Portrait of the Artist as a Game Studio”.⁶

Alongside this group of collective artists that integrate complementary skills in a common creative ground, new media has been constructed also by a large community of individual artists that merge computer sciences skills with an artistic inquietude. An important contribution to this evolution has been the large spectrum of open source tools oriented to be used by designers and artists. Software frameworks such as Processing and openFrameworks, and hardware tools like Arduino, opened up an all new world of artistic intervention to non-technological creators and have been at the foundation of this new profile of technological artist.

This complementary set of skills in a single person has crossed also to the business world, generating even new professions as the request for creative technologists becomes common among the digital realm job offers. Normally, this profile request, expects to find professionals capable of defining and creating the design component of a project, while also been able to implement it technically.

Another interesting example of this scenario is a long lasting and still not settled discussion in the Interaction Design Association group, in the professional social network LinkedIn, with the question “Do designers need to be able to code?” Even if in large media corporations the amount of work in both areas, determines separated skills and activities, is interesting the analysis of the magazine Fast Company about Facebook development. Although the famous social network employs a large team of designers and programmers, major developments are the result of a small task force working close to the CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, constituted of individuals that master both design and software programming skills. This complementarity of skills allows reaching a prototyping level that is closed to a final stage of development.

⁶ A Portrait of the Artist as a Game Studio. Mar 15 2012 <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/03/a-portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-game-studio/254494/>

It's then, maybe natural that, this group of practitioners tend to, according to Bolter, align on an essentialist perspective of their work. Be it to "justify its claim on our cultural attention", as Bolter says, or just motivated by this broader point of view towards new media.

Essential Cinema

As Marianne van der Boomen denotes, maybe this could all be reduced to the eternal quest for establishing what is new and what is old. This concern can be identified both in "native" new-media artists that assume an essentialist position but also inside each medium by artists who seek to break the boundaries of their expressive media. Cinema embodies a very interesting scenario for elaborating on these premises. The struggle it had to endure to be considered a new medium by its own right and the permanent state of rupture that many of its practitioners assumed in their creative processes, can clearly reveal this unrest.

The fact that Lev Manovich chose Dziga Vertov's, *The man with the movie camera*, to establish a comparative framework for new media, is a very symptomatic example of this condition. Vertov's claimed a creative and representational practice for cinema that should lead to a "cleaning up of film-language, for its complete separation from the language of theater and literature."

In his text, "Towards a re-invention of cinema", Peter Greenaway claims that, every medium needs to constantly re-invent itself. Although framed by the medium cinema this is an open canvas for this medium to evolve into what Weibell⁷ calls a medium without referent. Sometimes this re-invention, by generating a new medium without referent, introduces new representational practices that interrupt this flow of medium to medium. This, inevitably, will influence retrospectively older media but may not show any evident remediation of any previous media, at least in its representational aspects.

⁷ Peter Weibell, Future Cinema

Greenaway, who at a certain point in its career decides to “abandon” cinema in favor of different artistic practices, claims that cinema is dead and the only way to give it a new life is by releasing it from the four tyrannies it has been confined to; those of the text, frame, actors and camera.

This statement could almost sound like a blasphemy or a physical impossibility. How can cinema be freed from something that can be understood as its constituting DNA?

For Greenaway, text imprisons cinema to a point that even to sell a movie to a producer, the author has to deliver a script, which is clearly a book, in a specific format. The tyranny of the frame has been fought by many creators along the history of cinema and has been considered by many directors a constraint to transparency in cinema.⁸

The human figure has long left the central role in painting, namely after the emergence of photography, but actors still impose their dictatorship in cinema, in Greenaway’s opinion.

If Greenaway’s idea about the tyranny of the actor is difficult to accept, he is completely aware that considering that the camera imposes also a tyranny, can be considered a blasphemy; thus without the camera there would be no cinema, has we know it. Although he points that has Picasso said, “I do not paint what I see, but what I think”, the camera is a “lazy, mimetic, passive recording eye” that represents an obstacle that should be jumped over to go “straight to the brain, the imagination, the seat of creation.”

Like Manovich, Greenaway complements its theory with an artistic practice that legitimates its claims. Its extensive film production, although conformed to a format that respects commercial constraints of the film industry, are challenging approaches to the mainstream cinema production.

In its attempts to free cinema from its constraints, Greenaway, has also created art pieces that could, under certain aspects, be considered un-remediated or, at least, difficult to categorize and to identify what could they be remediating.

Greenaway, *Stairs*, is an example of a piece where the medium cinema, besides what we could call an irony of the frame, is devoid of its constituent

⁸ Transparency is used here in the strictus sensus of Bolter’s definition, “the erasure of the medium”.

components. The only relation to cinema may come from the profile of the author and the conceptual framing from where it emerges. In this work from 1994, the author pretends, among other aspects, to free the cinema from the projection room, extending it to the size of a city. By spreading these “cuts” along one hundred sites in an urban area, Greenaway invites the viewer to discover his own film. In each of these points he placed a viewing device which was a kind of belvedere to which the viewer can access through some stairs. On top of that viewpoint, Greenaway puts a hole that framed the reality as seen from this point of view. This is, in his words, "a living image of the postcard, the picture-perfect film ". This is a movie without film and without a screen that merges the real space and the diegetic space of the “screen”. By creating this space through the sculptural device, he also affects the reality it presents. Greenaway explains that "The scenarios of this living cinema-film of 100 viewpoints for 100 days were anything that might happen. You could watch a man take a dog for a walk. You could, if you were lucky, watch a dog bite a man. If you were exceptionally fortunate, you could watch a man bite a dog -- the ordinary, the unusual and the extraordinary. ."9

What Greenaway wishes for the future of cinema may change it into something completely new. Something, that can, eventually, break away from its tyrannies and become another new medium.

*We should not want a cinema of appropriation, of mimesis, or reproduction of the known world, not even a cinema of virtual reality, but a cinema of virtual unreality.*¹⁰

In the introduction to the Future Cinema exhibition catalog, Peter Weibel prognosticates that, “Cinema has the possibility to become a medium without a referent, a mutation where each pixel can be manipulated”. In such a case, can’t we consider a medium without referent a non-remediated medium?

⁹ Peter Greenaway, Towards a reinvention of cinema, 2007: on-line

¹⁰ Ibidem.

Where does it leave remediation?

Be it from modesty or very high expectations, Bolter's acknowledges that the "the practical impact of *Remediation* has been small". Although is true that, as Bolter says, "designers and artists borrow from and refashion other media forms all the time, whether they are aware of this process or not"; the pursuit of unremediated forms can be, nevertheless, a challenging objective in essentialist new media creation. The challenge of breaking any referent and create something unique, where no remediation can be felt, even if unachieved, will definitely contribute to question and confront the forms of each medium.

Remediation can be understood as an important framework for media theory but cannot be reductive to the point of exhaustion and should be able to coexist with essentialist perspectives.

Without questioning the essential in new-media art, it can fall, passively, in the irony evoked by Jim Campbell, in his *Formula for computer art*. In this work, Campbell, reduces computer art to a simple schema of multiple inputs, from wind to sound, touch, among many others; a input interpreter – something that could be understood as Manovich's transcoding -, processes this data through algorithms in black computational boxes, and provides a processed output through different sensing modalities

Jim Campbell clever generalization formula for computer art, puts in evidence the continuity that Malcolm Le Grice detects in computer based arts, in relation with a variety of established art practices. Nevertheless, Le Grice points out that there are, at least, two aspects to this continuity: "One is the incorporation into computer art of forms drawn from existing practice, the other, more radically, sees a development of formal ideas in previous work which prefigures some of the concepts intrinsic to digital art."¹¹

¹¹ Le Grice, 1999: on-line

The only conclusion is probably the conscience that this debate is far from finished and arguments in both sides of this dissipating barricade should continue enriching the theoretical and practical aspects of modern media.

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