

Noha Hamdy

Recycling Culture Industries of the Sublime

Don DeLillo and Johan Grimonprez

Walter Göbel, Therese Fischer-Seidel, Klaus Stierstorfer (Hg.)

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To my mother and father, where everything begins [...]

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The author
Noha Hamdy

Foreword

Through the Looking Glass: Peeking Through Portable Worlds of the Sublime

Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all becomes transparency and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication. (Baudrillard, “Ecstasy of Communication” 130)

Narrative environments have increasingly been volatilized by the incessant encroachments of video culture and its ‘total flow’ axioms. The modernist dream of sustaining an aesthetics of non-representation has had to be aborted to accommodate the computer interface and the televisual into evolving notions of contemporary narrative. As the almost obsolete metaphor of proximity is revived again by a postmodernist politics of dislocation, all media are spurred on to display their expanded potential for recombination and translation, for recycling and remediation. Within this digital absorptive totality, media-specific distinctions erode and unfix ‘narrative’ in its classic instantiations, prompting questions about its role, status and location in the new media ecology.

The primary inspiration for this project has been a reader by David Bolter and Richard Grusin entitled *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999). Laying out a provocative theory for mediation, this thoroughly articulated exposé of the transition from media specificity to medium indifference plumbs the technical ‘obscurities’ of Baudrillard’s ‘ecstasy of communication’ in the new digital age. Gliding over the “smooth operational surface of communication” (Baudrillard, “Ecstasy of Communication” 127), Bolter and Grusin examine the ways in which contemporary media ecologies are structured around processes of remediation, in which the new visual media such as the World Wide Web, digital photography and virtual reality are constantly engaged in rivaling, borrowing from as well as refashioning older ones such as painting, film and photography. While this study has been criticized for its reductionist approach to the media in terms of a technical agency with no rhetorical function, it still gained popularity by offering a revolutionary theory on mediation. Bolter and Grusin frame their engaging debate around the twin logics of remediation, transparent immediacy and hypermediacy, thereby highlighting the uncanny paradox of a media-saturated culture which seeks to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them.

My interest in tracing remediation as part of the larger transformations that postmodern narrative has experienced over the last few decades was born in the middle of flipping through this inspiring volume. It was after reading Joseph Tabbi’s *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (1995), Michael Wutz’ *Enduring Words: Literary Narrative in a Changing Media Ecology* (2009), John Johnston’s *Information Multiplicity: American Fiction in the Age of Media Saturation* (1998) and *Reading Matters: Narrative in the New Media Ecology*

(1997), edited by Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz, that I began to think of the possibility of applying the versatile theory of remediation to my readings of Don DeLillo's fiction. Some questions haunted me for some time: How can Bolter's and Grusin's technical platform be extended to a consideration of the rhetorical as well as ideological function of remediation? What is the political/ideological relevance of a theory such as remediation to aesthetic categories in visual circulation like the news spectacle and the sublime? How did remediation gain momentum after global media events like 9/11 and the Iraq War? To what extent does postmodern narrative fiction partake of a remediatory visual rhetoric in its engagement with the encroachments of visual culture? In what way does remediation as transparent immediacy trade off a system of metaphoric exchange for the leveling effects of the technological media in literary narrative? And conversely, how might literature and film emerging from the European and American left use that very same machinery of recycling terror in their ideological battles against mainstream visual culture to debunk consensus 'sublimes' and 'histories'? It was also thanks to Grusin's subsequent volume *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11* (2010)¹, a follow up on the groundbreaking theory of remediation of the late 1990s, that my idea of extending the theory of (p)remediation to media emplotments of 'consensus sublimes' in narrative fiction and documentary film in the period preceding and following 9/11 began to take shape. As part of an on-going project, my aim has been to highlight some of the ways in which remediation and premediation as 'current media regimes' have been instrumental in governing and modulating collective affect in the preemptive War on Terror; but also and more significantly, to gauge their profound role in encapsulating the category of the sublime within a culture industry of sensational spectacle.

Yet, to say that this study centers only around remediation would be less of a transparent claim than it seems. I rather use Bolter's and Grusin's concept as a platform for my investigation of the sublime as a visual aesthetics whose transfer, circulation and exchange in film and narrative has been secured by contemporary practices of remediation.

Taking a cue from Adorno's metaphor of the 'culture industry' (*Kulturindustrie*), I seek to reframe visual and textual practices of remediating terror within the capitalist machinery of recycling images and narratives in the period preceding and following

1 Grusin's *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11* analyzes a shift in the cultural logic of mediation from the remediation of the older media by the new digital media to the premediation of disaster (the rehearsal of wars and catastrophes ahead of time) in the politically turbulent aftermath of 9/11. Grusin chooses to focus here on the Iraq War as a paradigmatic example of premediation, in which current regimes of surveillance, self-policing and security, or what he calls "post-9/11 biopolitics of securitization" (Grusin, *On Premediation*) have been instrumental in premediating the war and indoctrinating the audience into its inevitability. While premediation cultivates global affects such as insecurity and fear of an impending catastrophe or war, it also offers some reassurance through mobile and electronic networks.