Remediation: Understanding New Media by J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin

Written by Nell Farrell

A movie based on a novel, a written description of a photograph, a painting reproduced in a gallery in cyberspace. This is remediation. One media grows out of another, creating an entangled vine. None exists or even makes sense without those that came before. The computer game Myst creates a real world for so many people because all their lives they have been watching, and believing in, movies made from a similar point of view. So, reassuringly and somewhat disappointingly, the authors of Remediation convincingly explain how it is that there's nothing new under the sun; though to be sure we are experiencing exciting interpretations, variations, and renovations. This book is therefore accessible to those, like myself, with little experience, but much interest, in "new" technology. Sections on Theory, Media, and Self are connected by hyperlinks; the reader is invited to skip around or to just plain skip. And the graphics chosen explicitly illustrate the theories presented.

The authors have formulated what they dub the double logic of remediation: immediacy and hypermed

When the Pathfinder landed on Mars equipped with what served as Webcams, the Jet Propulsion Lab's site was jammed with millions of hits, although "there was nothing to see but a rocky desert and an undifferentiated sky." The fascination was with the media. (page 58) The authors call this hypermediacy. If relating directly to the story (immediacy) provides the satisfaction of locating one's self in the context of the world (or perhaps at times offering escape?), then primary contact with the medium (hypermediacy), gives one the feeling that he or she is taking direct action. The most interesting moment in all of this is when and where you draw the line between "mediated experience" and "real life."

Was Jurassic Park a good movie because you felt suspense and fear? Or was it amazement at the special effects? Well, both. "Hypermedia and transparent media are opposite manifestations of the same desire, the desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real." (page 53) And so a vicious circle begins. Everything is both immediate and hypermediate; all experience is mediated and mediated experiences are real. While reading this book in a café, I overheard two different tables discussing the Internet, later, I dreamed about a book, and now I find myself observing myself watching movies.

In its desperation to illustrate immediacy and hypermediacy, this book falls into a self-laid trap. In their survey of different media (ten in all, including digital photography, photorealistic graphics, digital art, and film), the authors deduce each to be either one logic or the other, and then admit that each is both. Additionally, after describing each media there is little room left for definition, proof, and further questioning of related concepts, cited but not developed, like the

theory of the gaze as masculine, self-identification through media, or results of communications contents (like pornography or violence). This book did hone my awareness of ways media presents itself and how we may respond, but the logic becomes circular. Media and reality, immediacy and hypermediacy; they eat each other's tails, and in the center but out of the loop, is I. Where is the human being in all of this?

For it doesn't only matter how a story's told or what kind of story it is, it's the person who's experiencing it that makes or breaks the success of the media. The authors give the sole visual experience overwhelming power, not taking into account how and why a person may suspend, or not, disbelief.

It is disappointing to read that we have not found a completely new form with which to express ourselves, and that with cyberspace we have not created a parallel universe. Perhaps this is a more realistic take. Still, I wonder, if we can experience immediacy and hypermediacy simultaneously, could they become one? What will happen when an artificial experience is so immediate that it cannot be categorized as hypermediacy? With new tools do we not create new forms, languages, and cultures? In addition to provoking questions such as these, this books raises others, known but now remediated, about self and knowledge of the world. It doesn't always answer them, but instead respectfully leaves that for the fast-approaching future.

Robert Lowell. Vanishing Point.
A work of digital art that vacillates between transparent immediacy and hypermediacy.
(c) Robert Lowell.

For other reviews of this book and related sites, please see:

Webzine book review and response review
http://www.altx.com/ebr/reviews/rev9/r9kir.htm

Excerpts of the book by chapter
http://www.lcc.gatech.edu/~bolter/remediation/book.html

Paper by the authors on "Remediation and the Cultural Politics of New Media"

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http://www.ntnu.no/sts/content/Papers/Remediation.html

http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/articles/nell/remediation.html