

## ON PREMEDIATION

### Interview with Richard Grusin

Some years after *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Richard Grusin's forthcoming book *Premediation: Affect and Mediality After 9/11* argues that in an era of heightened security, socially networked media pre-mediate collective affects of anticipation and connectivity, while also perpetuating low levels of apprehension or fear. Geoff Cox anticipates its publication with some questions.

GC: You have been recently employing the term 'premediation' to refer to a shift in cultural logic from mediating the past to mediating the future before it settles into the present. Could you say a little more about the concept and how the present is affected or suppressed?

RG: Sure. Beginning in 2002, I began to develop the concept of premediation to account for what I saw as a confluence of cultural logics across different media. In particular the release of the Hollywood film *Minority Report*, which presented a near-future US society in which citizens were apprehended, prosecuted, and incarcerated for murders they were about to commit, coupled with the emergence of the Bush-Cheney administration's policy of preemptive warfare, got me thinking about the way in which media of all sorts were becoming increasingly oriented towards the future rather than the present or past. I first presented the idea of premediation in the Netherlands in 2003, just before the US invaded Iraq. My argument was that the incessant pre-mediation of the Iraq war in print, televisual, and networked news media, which had been under way for more than a year, produced in the global media public a sense of the war's inevitability, so that when the war began people would feel as if it had already been happening and resistance would be muted. The response I received to this argument was overwhelmingly affirmative, especially from those academics and students fresh from the worldwide protests of 15 February 2003. For despite the largest globally coordinated, socially networked anti-war protests in history, most people reported feeling that they were protesting a war that was inevitable or that had already begun. This premediation of the Iraq War helped to explain why television coverage of the war did not produce the kind of shock or outrage that had been produced

by other recent televised wars, like the US-led Gulf War of 1991. The emergence of premediation among print, televisual, and networked news media, I suggested, was a response to the overwhelming shock and trauma of the events of 9/11; premediating the future represented an attempt to protect the media public from the immediacy of another 9/11.

GC: It's an interesting paradox to imagine preemptive 'news', but in the case of art it sounds like the imaginings of the avant garde - something largely discredited. Is premediation simply another way to talk about the avant garde?

RG: Actually, just the opposite. Another concept I develop in relation to premediation is the concept of 'mediality', which I think of as one of the modalities of what Foucault calls 'governmentality'. Mediality is both an attempt to explain the ways in which media work to govern populations by modulating collective affect (in ways similar to that outlined by Brian Massumi) and an attempt to counter the 'avant-gardism' of the paradigm of 'new media,' which has dominated discussions of digital media for more than a decade now. Much of the best work on the impact of digital media on culture, society, or art has focused its energies on the new and the exceptional, particularly among art and artists—new forms of digitalized museum installations, web-based experiments in digital literature or cinema, new forms of mediatized dance, theater, and performance, and so forth. Such work singles out the aesthetic as providing a space within which certain kinds of experimentation and theorization can occur independent of everyday use or purpose or instrumentality. While such aesthetic experimentation is of great interest and value in thinking through the implications of new media technologies for art, culture, society, or the human, it is important not to lose focus of the more ordinary, quotidian implications of new media for our sense of what it means to be human at this particular historical moment.

GC: And how does it relate to your earlier concept 'remediation'? I ask this as I wonder how the historical dimension can be registered in the concept premediation.

RG: Remediation, arguably the first systematic attempt to define the field of new media studies, rejected avant-gardism in favor both of a commitment to history and the past and of a commitment to making sense of the ways in which new media

technologies manifested themselves through heterogeneous networks of social, political, technical, economic, aesthetic practices. Unlike some of the important theoretical treatments of new media that came out after Remediation, like Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* or Mark Hansen's *New Philosophy for New Media*, both of which work (albeit in different ways) to perpetuate a rhetoric of newness, or of the avant-garde, premediation is more concerned with what I call the 'media everyday', the quotidian ways in which we interact with socially networked digital media. In the current media regime of 'premediation', 'new media' has become a limiting concept. The product of certain late 1990s global post-capitalist economic and socio-technical formations, new media is a problematic analytical concept to make sense of our media everyday, particularly insofar as it continues to emphasize the 'newness' of digital media rather than their 'mediality'. The key to the creation of the field of new media studies was the intensification of mediation at the end of the twentieth century, not its newness. In our current historical moment there is still of course a sense of newness, and this newness participates in the info-media-capitalist need to sell more technical media devices by making them faster, more powerful, more interactive, and more immediate. But in our current era of wireless social networking the emphasis is less on radical new forms of mediation, on the avant garde, than on connectivity, ubiquity, mobility, and affectivity.

GC: These are qualities that are particular to contemporary capitalism. Indicative is the way that the pervasive use of social media can be seen to be a kind of self-policing. There are worrying implications here that refer to the wider field of social networking, the internet of things, open web and cloud computing (and to some extent this is something we have been trying to comment upon at Arnolfini). I think you refer to these as 'commodified premediation technologies'. Such examples help to establish the central importance of regimes of security and how this relates fundamentally to preemption. Are we effectively policing anticipation, spontaneity and imagination?

RG: Well, I don't think 'policing' is the right term for the operation of securitization in a society of control. 'Self-policing' is one of the effects of disciplinary juridical formations, where the panopticon is internalized so that individuals monitor their own behavior without the need of

apparatuses of surveillance. In developing the concept of 'mediality', I have had in mind Foucault's 1978 lectures on security, from which the well-known essay on 'governmentality' was drawn. In these lectures Foucault makes it clear that 'policing' is part of the apparatus of discipline which took hold in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Where discipline was concerned with individuals, governmentality concerns itself with managing populations. Although Foucault is careful to insist that these different juridical formations do not in any simple sense succeed one another, and that sovereignty and discipline continue to operate in an era dominated by governmentality and security, he does insist on the paradigmatic differences among these three juridical formations. Where discipline aimed at 'policing' individual behavior by limiting, confining, or surveying human action, security and governmentality function by encouraging, opening up, or enabling physical transactions and social interactions, with the aim of generating data which can be mined to govern effectively the flow of populations, commodities, and cultural productions, ideally to preempt terrorist and other acts of anti-state violence before they happen.

GC: That's clear, and encapsulates the politics of networks and how the combination of networks and sovereignty have become central to modern government. I can see how from this, and with an understanding of biopolitics and control, you can begin to reveal the underlying logic that justifies how those deemed a danger to national security can be taken into custody and detained in ways that erase the individual human rights - discussed in depth in Giorgio Agamben's *State of Exception* (2005). You also draw on the work of Agamben for an understanding of mediality and indeed this is central to your argument. Can you say more on this? I wonder how the concepts 'pure means' or 'means without end' relate to premediation and whether they can be seen to be resistant to some of the worrying tendencies you describe.

RG: Frankly, I'm not sure that 'pure means' is useful as a basis for everyday media resistance. In *State of Exception*, Agamben is concerned with exceptional forms of violence like those that govern the creation of 'the camp' or other spaces of sovereign exception. This focus on the pure mediality of violence runs the risk of ignoring the everyday violence involved in the impure mediality of our affective

interactions. Agamben's description of both gesture and violence as pure means, however, can be useful in suggesting the way in which violence resides not only in the powerful acts of the sovereign but also in the everyday gestures through which individuals relate to and are related to their media. Indeed in the current security regime of premediation, 'mediality without end' can refer not only to the founding acts of exceptional violence that make possible or establish juridical or political order, but also to the anticipatory gestures that are both produced by and produce our everyday affective medial interactions. Premediation transforms the pure mediality of the state of exception into the impure mediality of the everyday. The exception remains potential or virtual—it is always about to emerge into the present but never does. Premediation transforms the violence that establishes the state of exception as the rule from an externally imposed or enforced violence to one which is continuously in the process of being imposed and reimposed by our networked, affective interactions with our media everyday. In our post-9/11 biopolitics of securitization, premediation works simultaneously to foster and to fulfill an anticipation of security. While continuing to promote collective insecurity about future geopolitical catastrophes like terrorism, economic collapse, or global climate change, premediation offers a kind of network of reassurance through the proliferation of such media formations as the mobile web and the internet of things. The insecurity of premediated catastrophes is countered and overcome by the affectivity of security produced by the repeated anticipation of interaction with one's mobile social networks, coupled with the repeated relief in finding that those networks are still there. In a post-9/11 world, the production and reproduction of individual and collective affects of safety and security work to help global netizens to continue to function in an environment of potentially catastrophic risks.

GC: And this is part of the commodification of sociality, in which the production of subjectivity ceases to be only an instrument of social control but directly productive. In this way, the subject becomes a willing participant in their own subjectification. But I'm intrigued by your response to the issue of pure means or what you might call pure premediality. Just to be clear, Agamben is arguing for a political sphere that is neither an end in itself nor of means to an end but rather a means without end closely associated a 'purity' of human action. If you remain unconvinced by this, where do you

see hope? How does a recognition of the political logic of premediation allow for emergent political possibilities?

RG: These are obviously complicated questions to which I can only provide shorthand answers here. Insofar as premediation can furnish an oppositional politics, it operates both by identifying and working within individual and collective mechanisms for producing, fulfilling, and maintaining the anticipation of security in a post-9/11 world. If premediation is to have political efficacy or agency it will be through the political affordances or potentialities that the concept entails and the political uses that humans and nonhumans, individually and collectively, make of it. The political possibilities of premediation do not need a purified sphere of human action. Political opposition will happen as it already is happening—in movements like free software, in fights over the ownership and management of digital rights, in socially networked opposition to practices of securitization implemented by the Bush-Cheney administration in the US and in the UK by Tony Blair, as well as elsewhere in the securitized West. Unlike Agamben, I do not believe that hope needs to wait on the establishment of a counter-exceptional political sphere of pure means or pure mediality. Rather hope and resistance, like acquiescence and subjectification, are already part and parcel of our impure media everyday.

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#### BIOGRAPHIES

Richard Grusin is Professor of English at Wayne State University. He has published numerous chapters and articles and written four books: *Transcendentalist Hermeneutics: Institutional Authority and the Higher Criticism of the Bible* (Duke 1991); with Jay David Bolter, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (MIT 1999); *Culture, Technology, and the Creation of America's National Parks* (Cambridge, 2004); and *Premediation: Affect and Mediality After 9/11* (forthcoming Palgrave 2010).

Geoff Cox is a lecturer at the University of Plymouth (UK), an occasional artist, writer, adjunct member of faculty at Transart Institute (Donau University, Austria), and Associate Curator of Online Projects at Arnolfini, Bristol (UK). He is a founding editor for the DATA Browser book series and co-

edited 'Economising Culture' (Autonomea 2004), 'Engineering Culture' (Autonomea 2005) and 'Creating Insecurity' (Autonomea 2009).