



Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

Video transcript

How do print books change in face of the digital challenge?

PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER:

In 1999, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin published a book entitled *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. As the subtitle of the book, *Understanding New Media*, indicates, they aim at updating McLuhan's insights for the 21st century. Bolter and Grusin's main focus is on new media such as computer games, Skype, and the world wide web. And they ask themselves how these new media relate to older media such as films, the telephone and television. And one of their central claims is that new media do not simply replace older media. Instead, they rework and redeploy older media, retaining some of their features and functions while discarding others.

Media history is, in other words, not a series of radical breaks and ruptures. Media history, in their view, is much rather a series of continual refunctionings and redeployments of older media by new media. They call this process 'remediation', which they define as 'the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms.' Thus, Skype remediates the telephone, email remediates the letter and digital photography remediates analogue photography.

In this view of things, the world wide web plays a special role because it functions as a veritable remediation sponge that sucks up and refashions all kinds of older media. In the world wide web, the telephone is transformed into Skype, the letter into email, the television into Netflix and the radio into internet radio.

Bolter and Grusin note that these changes in media history are not without conflicts. Older and more recent media compete with each other.

So one question they have is: how do older media respond to the challenge that more recent - and in many ways, more powerful media - present? Well, older media don't go down without a fight.

It's not only that new media remediate old media. Old media such as films and books also remediate new media such as computer games and hyper texts. Bolter and Grusin call this 'retrograde remediation' and by this they mean how older media respond to the challenge of more recent media by remediating them.

Thus, Hollywood movies remediate computer games by an increasing use of computer-generated imagery and a fast-paced shift from scene to scene that gamers are accustomed to. This is an example of retrograde remediation.

But what about books? How do they respond to the digital challenge? Let me give you an example.

This is Issue 19 of the San Francisco based publisher McSweeney's, which was founded by the prolific American writer Dave Eggers. Let's have a look at it.

First of all, it doesn't really look like a book, does it? It looks more like a cigar box. But what's in it?

Well, we find a pocket guide to the Middle East issued by the Department of Defence in 1957. We find a leaflet explaining to us 'Some Things You Should Know if War Should Come' from 1939. So that's before the second World War. We find a number of facsimile letters, handwritten letters. We find political advertising. I like this one. 'Your Horoscope Tells You How You Can Help Republican Party Win!' And we find 'The Stuff That Wins,' a propaganda booklet by YMCA published in 1918. So that's the first World War. We find an info card on air raid instructions.

What else is there? We find a description of a military mission, the Rainbow mission. Quite detailed typescript and including maps. We find a leaflet by the National Nonpartisan Committee to defend the rights of the 12 Communist leaders. McCarthy era. We find more facsimile letters, these ones in typescript. Nicely made.

We find a recruitment card: 'Young men of 17 - join the Marines today.' We find photographs. This one, it seems, of a Jewish summer camp. We find a little leaflet explaining how military pensions work. We find a booklet that tells us what to know and do about a nuclear attack. Well, I'd like to know that. And we find the dental records of George W. Bush. And we also find a book. A book that contains short stories and a novella by American writer T.C. Boyle.

So how does this book remediate newer media? By giving us a range of texts and images in various forms and formats, McSweeney's Issue 19 imitates and puts to new uses the multimedial quality of newer media, such as the world wide web. And by giving us the freedom to read these various texts and images and look at them in any order, this literary cigar box gives us the freedom to combine text and images in multiple ways. And that's precisely the kind of freedom that we have learned to appreciate from hypertext. But this literary object here, all of this together, does something more than imitate hypertext and the world wide web. It also does something that these newer media cannot do.



It gives us a very sensuous and haptic access to these texts, these images here. We take these various artefacts into our hands, marvel at how well they're made, and position them on the table next to each other, combining them in various ways.

So McSweeney's meets the challenge of new media by creating beautiful, tangible literary objects. These material haptic qualities are well-nigh impossible to reproduce on the computer screen. McSweeney's takes up the glove and competes in the medial arena, following its own maxim to create 'little, heavy, papery, beautiful things'.