



reed anthropology review

PROJECTIONS:
AN EXPLORATION OF REMEDIATION, CAPITALISM, AND POETICS

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ABSTRACT

Referring to the accompanying short film *Projections*, this piece interrogates meanings of “remediation”. The film is a compilation of short clips, music, and narrative working to create a multi-sensory experience to challenge the perceptions we have of ourselves and others in a media-centered view. Through the incorporation of theoretical anthropological texts, this piece touches on co-occurring capitalist and poetic remediation. The former creates an imagined depiction of what a product is, utilizing the screen to do so; the latter suggests a form of poetry is invented by using media.

Keywords remediation · media · video

Introduction

This essay accompanies *Projections*, a short film based on the practice of remediation. Media theorists David Bolter and Richard Grusin define remediation as “the representation of one medium in another,” and “argue that remediation is a defining characteristic of the new digital media.”¹ For Bolter and Grusin, all media is always already remediated: “just as there is nothing prior to the act of mediation, there is also a sense in which all mediation mediates the real. Mediation is the remediation of reality because media themselves are real and because the experience of media is the subject of remediation.”² In one sense, then, even the simplest film project is an example of remediation. At the same time, films, along with many forms of remediated art, tend to make remediation invisible by relying on editing processes and creative techniques that obscure their own fractured genesis. With *Projections*, I attempt to make remediation hyper-visible by combining video and audio clips in a way that disrupts the smooth flow of narrative filmmaking and foregrounds the piecemeal, cobbled-together nature of video editing.

Briefly, *Projections* consists of a variety of video clips—most of which are original content and some of which are borrowed advertisement footage—combined with audio and brief sections of dialogue. A number of scenes depict words cast on a wall by a digital projector; these words are taken from theoretical texts by Paul Preciado, Donna Haraway, Tara McPherson, and Edouard Glissant. The film has relatively little narrative and is intended to be

1. J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 45.
2. *Ibid.*, 59.

an ambient, exploratory combination of digital bric-a-brac. Audio from three sources is layered over the video: two songs by musicians Daniel Bachman and Kamasi Washington, and a segment of the soundtrack from the 1982 film *Blade Runner*, a seminal piece of pop culture that revolves around blurred lines between human beings and robotic “replicants.” Asif Agha has written that “figures of personhood...can be sedimented in layers upon the user through the habitual of a mediatized commodity,”³ pointing to the ways in which we conceive of selves and others as conglomerations of various forms, advertisements, and mediated characterizations. In a similar way, *Projections* is an attempt to create a composite, sedimented sensory experience by incorporating not just visual and aural sources, but also textual sources, into a fractured whole. The following paragraphs are not a rigorous attempt at theorizing remediation or explaining the ideas behind *Projections*. Instead, with both the film and the textual accompaniment, I borrow bits and piece from various media theorists to reflect on the anxieties and confusions that I have found to be personally significant when thinking about remediation, creativity, and digitization. With *Projections*, I try my hand at what might be called a “poetics of remediation,” which is less focused on analytic filmmaking than on the intuitive creation of a collage of visual, textual, and audio artifacts. Likewise, this essay is an attempt to open up lines of thought and access imagined spaces, rather than a strictly academic justification for a project.

Remediating Theory

Projections features four excerpts from works of analysis or theory. The first is a paragraph from Paul Preciado’s 2013 essay “Pharmaco-Pornographic Regime;” the second is a snippet from Donna Haraway’s seminal “Cyborg Manifesto;” the third is drawn from Tara McPherson’s 2012 article “U.S. Operating Systems at Mid-Century;” and the fourth is a line from Edouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*. Each text deals with some aspect of mediated selfhood – pharmacological disciplinary regimes, emergent forms of nanotechnology, digital capitalism, the effect of computing on poetic expression. By remediating scraps of theoretical texts that take remediation or digital selfhood as subject matter, I try to point to the fact that such texts are themselves forms of media, and are just as malleable as video or audio clips. Indeed, in *Projections*, text *becomes* video by way of a digital projector and a camera. The digitally-projected phrases of theoretical texts are an important component of this project for two reasons. First, they inject scattered, manic bits of analytical language into the filmic soup, outlining (albeit in a haphazard and opaque way) the film’s basic thematic ideas. Second, and more importantly, the theoretical texts are revalued by their inclusion. The power that accumulates around such texts in academic settings is stripped away; the text becomes a title of sorts prefacing a more visceral set of images and sounds; the text’s meaning is at the mercy of the visual and auditory impressions that accompany it. Theory is pulled out of context by its remediation as film titles or video clips, opening the way for a generative tension between the expectation of rigorous intellectual analysis and the offering of rapid-fire pseudo-meaning.

Capitalism and Remediation/Marlboro Man

Most of the video content of *Projections* is original work. However, the film also includes several video clips lifted from vintage Marlboro advertisements. The ads depict horses, cowboys, beautiful landscapes, and, of course, Marlboro cigarettes. “Come to where the flavor is,” urges a disembodied masculine voice, “come to Marlboro Country.” The role of these clips in *Projections* is hinted at by one of the remediated bits of theory, a quote from Tara McPherson’s *U.S. Operating Systems at Mid-Century*. “Capital,” writes McPherson, “is now fully organized under the sign of modularity. It operates via the algorithm and the database, via simulation and processing. Our screens are cover stories, disguising deeply divided forms of both machine and human labor.”⁴ Cigarette advertisements are the quintessential example of successful branding and marketing. As McPherson notes, capitalism morphs into new and powerful forms in the digital age, and corporate information flows can target potential customers through an increasingly diverse array of platforms. The Marlboro Man rides not just across our television screens and billboards, but also through our social media feeds, our phone alerts, and our web browsers. Acts of remediation can serve artistic ends, but can also entail the transformation of outmoded capitalist icons into new, vital, persuasive characters of consumption. The ads I incorporate into the film are outdated relics of another time—grainy, oversaturated, full of static. They are not entirely convincing in their appeals to untamed American masculinity and rugged nicotine-fueled individualism. At the same time, their status as artifacts of a recently-passed era of consumer capitalism grants them a nostalgic power. As I remediated the ads into a new format, I was struck by the beauty of their running horses, the pleasing analog echoes of their color palettes, the un-ironic (though entirely fabricated) coolness of the cowboy-hat-wearing smokers. Especially with new affordances for retrieving and disseminating

3. Asif Agha, “Large and small scale forms of personhood,” *Language and Communication* 31 (2011): 176.

4. Tara McPherson, “U.S. Operating Systems at Mid-Century: The Intertwining of Race and UNIX,” in *Race after the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), 34.

advertisements from the past—via social media, Youtube, etc.—it is easier than ever to weave dated languages of capitalism into the rivers of information and sensation that comprise our digital lives. Sentimentality and nostalgia have great potency for motivating consumption in their own right; indeed, an old Marlboro ad feels, to me, less like a corporate intrusion and more like a dream—subconscious, subcutaneous, working its magic through the circuits of memory and longing, exploiting my desire to wallow in an analog, smoke-filled past. Michael Taussig nicely captures the unsettling capacity for intersections of dreams and advertising in the modern age when he writes of his own Marlboro-induced fantasies:

In leather and denim he sits, high on his galloping horse, way above the freeway, swinging his lariat yet perfectly relaxed as the cars hum and the semis scream past underneath, their drivers half in and half out of consciousness in that funny semi- awake/semi-dreaming state of near hypnosis that characterizes not only highway driving but much of modernity as well....Tobacco: a capital substance, and a mystical one too; a killer and a necessity. It enters not only the freeway of our imagination...but the blood that is our biological life-stream. Its meanings overwhelm us. Up there in the sky with his lariat and with the gods, more alive than you or me, the Marlboro Man.
—Taussig, “History as Commodity in Some Recent (American) Anthropological Literature,” 495

By remediating Marlboro ads, I am indulging in a bit of auto-hypnosis. I have let myself sink into an imagined swamp made of late-night-TV commercials and yellow-stained teeth and the stench of four packs a day. But I have also tried to highlight the ridiculous, melodramatic nature of the ads. The world they conjure up is at once enticing and saccharine. The dreams they produce/induce can bring on a loss of will and control, a surrender to false pasts. However, if approached with lucidity, dreams can also be the first step towards demystification. Remediation plays a distinctive role in such demystification by placing advertisement-dreams alongside strikingly different images and sounds, thereby accentuating the contingent and context-reliant nature of “successful” advertising.

Digital Poetics

By remediating text, video, and audio in *Projections*, I have tried not so much to create a coherent or rigorous commentary on remediation as to draw out the potential for intuitive, poetic meanings in digital media. Media anthropologist Daniel Fisher has employed terms such as “poetics of the screen,” “poetics of voice and sound,” and radio’s cultural poetics⁵ to point to the ways in which cultural meanings and enactments employ emerging technologies to produce distinctive networks of meaning. Drawing inspiration from Fisher’s use of the word “poetics,” as well as theorist Edouard Glissant’s writings on notions of poetics and post-colonial relationality, I have approached *Projections* as an opportunity to explore the creative, playful side of remediation—what might be termed a “poetics of remediation.” For Glissant, the promise and pitfalls of relationality are bound tightly together. An encounter between self and other is, historically speaking, just as likely to end in violence or dehumanization as mutual understanding. Glissant reflects on the dynamics of selfhood and relationality, seeking a poetics—intuitive yet critical, multifaceted and multilingual yet woven up in spatial specificities—that can mediate (in one sense of the word) this self-other encounter. His discussion of digital relationality and computing is limited to just a few paragraphs, yet it is instructive for considering the tensions between poetry, digital media, and artificial intelligence in a time when life itself has begun to be taken up as the subject and object of digitized coding. “We have at our disposal computers capable of following the flow of cultures, the poetic nodes, the dynamic of languages, the phases of cultures in confrontation,” writes Glissant. “Should we hope that our imaginary construct of Relation might someday be “confirmed” in formulas we can read on the monitor screen?”⁶

For Glissant, the possibility of a complete comprehension of social, cultural, and relational dynamics by way of computers raises dangerous specters of totalitarian smoothness. Yet he also maintains that even the best-engineered machines are haunted by ghosts of imperfection and disorder:

Every “virus” (every accident)...is injected into a computer system; but it would also be possible for it to have been secreted by the system itself. In this case it would be proof that the system “thinks,” that, in short, accident is part of its nature. This outcome would also be invaluable for safeguarding freedoms, the guarantee that no law could ever be founded on such a system. What’s more, taking a wild tack with this hypothesis, the virus would manifest the fractal nature of the system; it would be a sign on the intrusion of Chaos, the irremediable indicator, that is, of

5. Daniel Fisher, *The voice and its doubles : media and music in Northern Australia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 43,56,76.

6. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 139.

the asynchronous nature of the system....Chaos, turning back around upon itself, would shut the doors. It would be God.

–Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 139

Glissant is not a media theorist, per se. But I find his musings to be a fruitful source of inspiration for predicting the shape of poetry, imagination, and non-rational thought in the digital age. The last textual remediation in *Projections* is one of Glissant's questions for the would-be poets of binary code: "Can accident, which is the joy of poetics, be tamed through circuits?"⁷ Glissant's fear, and mine as well, is that the answer to this question may be "yes." But beyond the fear of possible perfection is the realization that unforeseen influences—chaos, ghosts in the machine, coding errors, bugs, glitches—will inevitably remain to trouble the mirror-like water of the screen. In other words, digital remediation is disturbing because it threatens to corrupt analog media by stripping off its "aura" of truth.⁸ Yet remediation is not unidirectional, but rather multi- or bi-directional: the apparent digital smoothness of the newly remediated artifact is, in fact, a messy, hybrid creature, fusing different (im)materialities, aesthetics, and temporalities. The insertion of analog media into a digital format raises the possibility of productive corruption, emergent fractures, pleasing roughness, reassuring disjuncture. In the same way that Donna Haraway's cyborgselves are "chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism,"⁹ remediated fragments of text, image, audio, etc. can be potent fusions of meaning with the power to enact and maintain fruitful creative tensions. These are the promises of a "digital poetics" or a "poetics of remediation"—new fields of disruptive inquiry; new modes of artistic renewal; new doors that open onto chaos and comprehension.

7. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 139.

8. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 1935-1938*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002), 104.

9. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 150.

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