. . . . *The Book*

Remediation: Understanding New Media

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Introduction

The double logic of remediation

Strange Days trailer
at hollywood.com

"This is not like TV only better," says Lenny Nero in the futuristic film *Strange Days.* "This is life. It's a piece of somebody's life. Pure and uncut, straight from the cerebral cortex. You're there. You're doing it, seeing it, hearing it… feeling it." Lenny is touting to a potential customer a technological wonder called "the wire." When the user places the device over her head, its sensors somehow make contact with the perceptual centers in her brain. In its recording mode, the wire captures the sense perceptions of the wearer; in its playback mode, it delivers these recorded perceptions to the wearer. If the ultimate purpose of media is indeed to transfer sense experiences from one person to another, the wire threatens to make all media obsolete. Lenny mentions television, but the same critique would seem to apply to books, paintings, photographs, film, and so on. The wire bypasses all forms of mediation and transmits directly from one consciousness to another.

Figure 1: VR helmet, GVU Center, Georgia Institute of Technology

However, the film *Strange Days* is less enthusiastic about the wire than Lenny and his customers. Although the wire embodies the desire to get beyond mediation, *Strange Days* offers us a world fascinated by the power and ubiquity of media technologies. Los Angeles in the last two days of 1999, on the eve of "2K," is saturated with cellular phones, voiceÐandÐtextÐbased telephone answering systems, radios, and billboardÐsized television screens that constitute public media spaces. In this media-filled world, the wire itself is the ultimate mediating technology, despite or indeed because of the fact that the wire is designed to efface itself, to disappear from the user's consciousness. When Lenny coaches the "actors" who will appear in a pornographic recording, it becomes clear that the experience the wire offers can be as contrived as a traditional film. Although Lenny insists that the wire is not "TV only better," the film ends up representing the wire as "film only better." When Lenny himself puts on the wire and closes his eyes, he experiences the world in a continuous, first-person point-of-view shot, which in film criticism is called the "subjective camera."

Figure 2: Webcam
© 1997, Wild Birds Unlimited.

Figure 3: Webcam
© 1998, Sulphur
Mountain Gondola

Figure 4: © 1995
Urban Desires

Figure 5: Web jukebox © 1998,
Kamal A. Mostafa

Figure 6: Book of

Strange Days is a compelling film because it captures the ambivalent and contradictory ways in which new digital media function for our culture today. The film projects our own cultural moment a few years into the future in order to examine that moment with greater clarity. The wire is just a fanciful extrapolation of contemporary virtual reality, with its goal of unmediated visual experience. The contemporary head-mounted display of virtual reality is considerably less comfortable and fashionable (Figure 1), and the visual world it generates is far less compelling. Still, contemporary virtual reality is, like the wire in *Strange Days*, an experiment in cinematic point of view. Meanwhile, the proliferation of media in 2K L.A. is only a slight exaggeration of our current media-rich environment, in which digital technologies are proliferating faster than our cultural, legal, or educational institutions can keep up with them. In addressing our culture's contradictory imperatives for immediacy and hypermediacy, this film demonstrates what we call a double logic of "remediation." Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them.

In this last decade of the twentieth century, we are in an unusual position to appreciate remediation, because of the rapid development of new digital media and the nearly as rapid response by traditional media. Older electronic and print media are seeking to reaffirm their status within our culture, while digital media are challenging that status. Both new and old media are invoking the twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy in their efforts to remake themselves and each other. To fulfill our apparently insatiable desire for immediacy, "live" point-of-view television programs show viewers what it is like to accompany a policeman on a dangerous raid or to be a skydiver or a race-car driver hurtling through space. Filmmakers routinely spend tens of millions of dollars to film "on location" or to recreate period costumes and places in order to make their viewers feel as if they were "really" there. "Webcams" on the Internet pretend to locate us in various natural environments--from a backyard bird feeder in Indianapolis (Figure 2) to a panorama in the Canadian Rockies (Figure 3). In all these cases, the logic of immediacy dictates that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented: sitting in the race car or standing on a mountaintop.

Yet these same old and new media often refuse to leave us alone. Many web sites are riots of diverse media

Figure 6: Book of Hours © Woodruff Library, Emory University

Figure 7: Multimedia splash screen

forms, including graphics, digitized photographs, animation, and video -- all set up in pages whose graphic design principles recall the psychedelic 1960s or dada in the 1910s and 1920s (Figure 4). Hollywood films, such as *Natural Born Killers* and *Strange Days*, mix media and styles unabashedly. Televised news programs feature multiple video streams, split-screen displays, composites of graphics and text--a welter of media that is somehow meant to make the news more perspicuous. Even webcams, which operate under the logic of immediacy, can be embedded in a hypermediated website (Figure 5), where the user can select from a "jukebox" of webcam images to generate her own paneled display.

As this webcam jukebox shows, our two seemingly contradictory logics not only coexist in digital media today, but are mutually dependent. Immediacy depends upon hypermediacy. In the effort to create a seamless moving image, filmmakers combine live-action footage with computer compositing and two- and three-dimensional computer graphics. In the effort to be up to the minute and complete, television news producers assemble on the screen ribbons of text, photographs, graphics, and even audio without a video signal when necessary (as was the case during the Persian Gulf War). At the same time, even the most hypermediated productions strive for their own brand of immediacy. So, for example, directors of music videos rely on multiple media and elaborate editing to create an immediate and apparently spontaneous style: they take great pains to achieve the sense of "liveness" that characterizes rock music. The desire for immediacy leads digital media to borrow avidly from each other as well as from their analog predecessors such as film, television, and photography. Whenever one medium seems to have convinced viewers of its immediacy, other media will try to appropriate that conviction. The CNN Interactive site is hypermediated--arranging text, graphics, and video in multiple panes and windows and joining them with numerous hyperlinks; yet the website borrows its sense of immediacy from the televised CNN newscasts. At the same time the televised newcasts are coming to resemble webpages in their hypermediacy. The team of web editors and designers, working in the same building in Atlanta from which the television news networks are also administered, clearly do want their technology to be "television only better." Similarly, one of the most popular genres of computer games is the flight simulator. The action unfolds in real-time, as the player is required to monitor the instruments and fly the plane. The game promises to show the player "what it is like to be" a pilot, and yet in what does the immediacy of the experience consist? As in a real plane, the simulated cockpit is full of dials to read and switches to flip. As in a real plane, the

experience of the game is that of working an interface, so that the immediacy of this experience is pure hypermediacy.

Remediation did not begin with the introduction of digital media; we can identify the same process throughout the last several hundred years of western visual representation. A painting by the seventeenth century artist Pieter Saenredam, a photograph by Edward Weston, and a computer system for virtual reality are different in many important ways, but they are all attempts to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation. All of them seek to put the viewer in the same space as the objects viewed. The illusionistic painter employs linear perspective and "realistic" lighting, while the computer graphics specialist mathematizes linear perspective and creates "models" of shading and illumination. Furthermore, the goal of the computer graphics specialists is to do as well and eventually better than the painter or even the photographer.

Like immediacy, hypermediacy also has its history: a medieval illuminated manuscript, a seventeenth-century painting by David Bailly, and a buttoned and windowed multimedia application are all expressions of a fascination with media. In medieval manuscripts, the large initial capital letters may be elaborately decorated, but they still constitute part of the text itself, and we are challenged to appreciate the integration of text and image (Figure 6). In many multimedia applications, icons and graphics perform the same dual role (as in Figure 7), in which the images peek out at us through the word ARKANSAS. Today as in the past, designers of hypermediated forms ask us to take pleasure in the act of mediation, and even our popular culture does take pleasure. While some hypermediated art has been and remains an elite taste, the elaborate stage productions of many rock stars are among many examples of hypermediated events that appeal to millions.