

Book Review

Premediation: Affect and Mediality After 9/11

Richard Grusin

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Reviewed by Carlos Barreneche

University of Westminster, UK

Premediation: Affect and Mediality After 9/11 is primarily an account of the American media experience of the 2001 terrorist attacks and the subsequent military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Richard Grusin situates his analysis in the United States socio-political context during the Bush administration years. The book begins by precisely analyzing the different ways in which the significance of this media event has been elaborated, taking on arguments from Baudrillard, Žižek, and David Simpson. The main criticism Grusin raises against these accounts is that by focusing on the event's spectacular dimension and its derealization effects they exclude 'the materiality or agency of mediation' (19), as well as its historic specificity

In *Premediation* Richard Grusin returns to his co-authored book *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (MIT, 1999) in order to trace our current mediological paradigm. *Remediation*, Grusin argued in that first book, was the logic of mediation at play at the end of the twentieth century, with new media operating by mediating previous media forms. In other words, it involves the incorporation of one medium in another medium (e.g. the email remediates letter writing). This second study develops Grusin's ideas and ultimately claims the ontological inseparability of the real event and its mediations - 'the mediation of the real is always the mediation of another mediation' (39). The concept of premediation advanced in this book is presented as a continuity of that process of remediation, or at least as its counterpart: 'Where remediation entailed the refashioning of prior media forms and technologies, premediation entails the

remediation of future media forms and technologies' (57). Broadly, Grusin argues that global media today are primarily oriented towards the anticipation of future events rather than centering on the present or the recent past. A recent example of the logic of premediation is the media coverage of the so-called Arab Spring, which was often characterized by continuous anticipation and speculation about the potential unfolding scenarios of the revolts.

Although presented as continuities, the differences between the two conceptualizations - remediation and premediation - stand out in the theoretical framework developed to formulate our current media logic. Whereas Remediation was largely a McLuhanian account of new media evolution, the approach taken in Premediation involves a Foucauldian reading of our mediatized world, as the notions of governmentality and securitization developed by Michel Foucault in his later lectures at the Collège de France are the cornerstone of Grusin's argument. The book also draws from theoretical discussions of affectivity, particularly from the works of Deleuze and Guattari, Brian Massumi, and Silvan Tomkins. To Grusin, 'affectivity helps shift the focus from representation to mediation' (7), a turn that foregrounds the materiality of media and communication technologies and differentiates this analysis from those traditionally focused on media content or audience reception. In this way, the book links the modulation of affect produced by our communication media with governmentality, which is understood as the regulation of the social-biological body of the population.

Chapter two contextualizes the concept of premediation as the media regime underlying the so-called War on Terror campaign. Grusin claims that although the media actually played out as an ideological instrument of the Bush war agenda to gain public support, it is not the veracity of the media coverage that is more significant here but rather the formal aspects this mediation took - specifically the anticipation of different possible outcomes regardless of whether or not they became true. 'What was most important', Grusin points out 'was not that any particular military or political scenario was put forward but rather that so many different possible scenarios were pre-mediated that the war in Iraq came to seem an inevitable event' (43). He stresses that premediation should not be confused with prediction and argues that premediation encourages the presentation of not one but multiple potential future scenarios in order to pre-empt the anxiety that the occurrence of unexpected events such as 9/11 may cause.

There is another final sense in which Grusin understands premediation as an ontological condition of our world of ubiquitous media. In this hypermediated condition our media practices extend to the future -the argument goes- insofar as it will also be populated by media forms that are themselves the very remediations of previous media, rendering as a consequence 'impossible anything to happen outside its premediation' (48). In this sense the future is always already remediated, Grusin concludes. This line of thought extends the implications of the inseparability of reality and its mediations, and though compelling, it is not as sufficiently developed and illustrated by the author as the other implications of the concept are. The examples given are enumerated rather than individually analyzed.

Chapter three presents the richest case study in the book. It examines the public reaction produced by the release of torture photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Rather than centering on the horrific abuses of power the photographs depict, this original analysis focuses instead on the soldiers' media practices (e.g. posting photos on the web, sharing them with friends and so on). For Grusin, it was because those media practices mirrored our own daily life practices, that public outrage at the photographs was intensified. This differentiates the response to incidents in Abu Ghraib from the more moderate reactions to other publicly known torture cases (e.g. in Guantanamo Bay). Drawing from Hayles (2006) and Thrift (2004), Grusin suggests that the shock caused by the photographs signals the manifestation of our own 'technological unconscious'. That is, 'the unknown knowns built in to our media practices [...] (that are) unrecognized in everyday practices that we participate in and take for granted' (71).

Over the course of the chapter the author presents perhaps the core contribution of the book to media theory, namely the concept of mediality. With this concept Grusin accounts for how media work as a governmental form of power through the public mediation of affect. Here, following Masumi's take on affective power, Grusin distances himself from the ideological readings of media power of the Frankfurt School lineage of media theory. The fourth chapter, entitled 'The Affective Life of Media', expands this conceptualisation of the affective dimension of media. Building on neuroscience research, particularly Andy Clark's work on distributed cognition, this section's overarching argument is that throughout our quotidian relations with media we create feedback systems that shape our affective states, whereby we seek to potentialize positive affects while avoiding the negative. This vitalization of mediation ascribes agency to technical artifacts and puts forward the idea of non-human modes of

affectivity. Grusin, thus, brings to the fore the question of production and circulation of affectivity in our socio-technical networks. This research avenue is particularly pertinent today when networked media platforms have started to embody affect in their very architectures through the implementation of algorithms capable of measuring and responding to our affective clues. Nevertheless, Grusin's account of our affective relation with media would have benefited from considering not only how socio-technical networks distribute affect but also how they actually harness collective affectivity to produce economic value. That is, mediality as biopolitical production.

The book's final section brings together the book's arguments within the Foucauldian framework of securitization. The analysis is focused particularly on how social media enables the apparatus of security by promoting everyday media transactions. Despite its negative connotations, security is primarily productive. Social interactions, both digital and physical, are actively encouraged within the regime of securitization as they produce the transactional data that can be data-mined and later used for the effective control of populations, from preventing terrorist attacks to database marketing:

'Premediation operates in the current security regime to ensure that there will always be enough data [...] in any particular, potential, or imagine future to be able to know in advance, before something happened, that it was about to happen - enough transaction data to prevent (or pre-empt) future threats to national or international security [...] Premediation thus can be seen to represent a security desire' (124-125).

More broadly, premediation is argued to be a technology of control that 'works simultaneously to foster and fulfill an anticipation of security while continuing to promote collective insecurity' (141). In the book's conclusion Grusin offers an account of the politics of premediation. He argues that oppositional politics should go beyond the level of ideological critique and start instead by identifying and understanding the actual mechanisms at work producing this continuous anticipation of security: 'the politics of premediation is not chiefly a question of how premediation represents politics or is represented politically, but of the politics that premediation does' (141).

Throughout, the book offers detailed and engaging case studies to illustrate its arguments. And despite its focus on post 9/11 America, the scope of Grusin's analysis goes beyond the American media and its domestic politics. Overall the book provides a

compelling formulation of our present regime of media temporality that highlights the pertinence of interrogating how the mediation of the future operates within the regime of control societies (to use Deleuze's framework). *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11* is a thoughtful attempt to provide a theoretical foundation for a material politics of our contemporary media situation. As such, it is a useful, theoretical resource for future research looking at the intersection of media materiality, affectivity and power.

References

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