

TEMPO RUBATO

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Pizza Carpet Diamond Transition Loop

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In their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000), Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin set out to describe what they see as “the double logic of remediation”. Remediation is described as the process of one media burrowing or re-purposing the “property” of another media (for instance - a book turned into a film). Remediation’s double movement can be summarized so: media asserts itself as a medium (hypermediacy - opaque) while at the same time erasing its own act of mediation (immediacy-transparent).

A simple example of this would be the TV movie. On the one hand, TV evacuates itself and becomes transparent, to let the older medium of cinema be experienced through it. Yet on the other hand, paradoxically, in the corner of the screen, the opaque icon of the TV channel appears, breaking the illusion of cinematic space, and calling attention to this being a flat television screen. In a TV movie, both TV and cinema appear as if superimposed one on top of the other. The movie renders the experience of TV recognizable, and the TV renders the experience of cinema unrecognizable, or - new.

Remediation is not a simple chronological process, the logic goes both ways, as old-media must remediate the new in order to assert itself further. Think of news-promos adopting internet aesthetics and imagery, or think of the “isms” of painting in the 19th and 20th century as constantly renewing the question: What can painting do that photography can’t? How can it generate greater immediacy by paradoxically calling more and more attention to its materiality as medium?

Bolter and Grusin are elaborating on an idea popularized in the 1960s by Marshall McLuhan and his often quoted “the medium is the message”. For McLuhan the content of all media is always other media. But if the double logic of media is the message or the actual content of media, is what we traditionally think of as content an illusion? What is that which we experience as immediate through media? Is the history of painting one of decorating canvases or one of decorating walls? Is it possible to speak of decoration as the content of media, not cynically, but in order to affirm it as part of an old and complicated tradition, with its own particular entanglements, questions and history?

Cut with diamond transition to 1860, the British Library. Gottfried Semper, a successful and influential architect exiled from Germany, is writing his never completed magnum opus, *Style in the technical and tectonic arts; or, practical aesthetics*. Semper's practical user's guide is also a theory of architecture as originating from the act of clothing, and from cloth technically. He writes: “I think that the dressing and the mask are as old as human civilization... The destruction of reality, of the material, is necessary if form is to emerge as a meaningful symbol... in times of high artistic achievement these individuals (artists) masked the material of the mask.”

Semper's book, obsessed as it is with origins, is also a theory of decoration, or ornament. In it, practical techniques, like hems, trims, strings and bands, lose their original connection to their function (in a weave, a pattern is identical with the material), becoming symbols, and evolving as ornaments superimposed on other material, say walls, or furniture, animating them. Without them, a temple “would have remained incomprehensible to the masses, or had a chilling affect”.

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But something strange happens to the ornaments when they get divorced from their original function. In describing wall paintings in a temple, Semper writes “It was merely a matter of transforming the forms of the Asiatic construction that were based on mechanical necessity into dynamic, even organic forms, a matter of endowing them with a soul“. Divorced from its original use, from its body and original function, and used to animate and mask another body, ornament is granted a soul.

Cut with page peel transition, same time, British Library, same reading room, next desk. Karl Marx is writing *Das Kapital*. Marx is describing a complicated process wherein disembodied labor, superimposed on objects, comes to be embedded within them as their “fetish character” - animating them, turning them “mysterious” and “mystical”, both “sensory” and “extra sensory” objects. For Marx, commodity-fetishism reverses the history of fetishism, since what is fetishized in them is not their visual appearance but their exchange value, something invisible - dead labor, a ghost. But if we put the term “fetish” aside, we see that what animates commodities, decoration, and media is absent bodies animating present bodies into recognizable forms - an experience of material as immaterial or of material as being ghosted - of masks masking their own materiality.