KULT_online. Review Journal for the Study of Culture
journals.ub.uni-giessen.de/kult-online
(ISSN 1868-2855)

KULT online

Issue 25 (October 2010)

Premediating the Future in an Era of Securitization

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Abstract:

In 2004 Richard Grusin coined the term 'premediation' in order to highlight that the overall media concern of post 9/11 America lies in remediating the future, i.e. in making sure that the future as such has already undergone profound remediation (see: “Premediation.” In: Criticism, 46, 1, 17–39, 21). In his 2010 monograph on Premediation – Affect and Mediality after 9/11, Grusin provides a concise theory of premediation as a strategy of securitisation that has made outdated the former media regime of surveillance (see p. 126). Building on recent findings in affect theory, embodied realism, and (media) philosophy, Grusin shows how media formations govern the distribution of affect and, consequently, human action and sentiment, and thus function as powerful political players.

How to cite:

Mohr, Christina: „Premediating the Future in an Era of Securitization [Review on: Grusin, Richard: Premediation: Affect and Mediality After 9/11. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.]“. In: KULT_online 25 (2010).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2010.552

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KULT_online. Review Journal for the Study of Culture
25 / 2010
journals.ub.uni-giessen.de/kult-online

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Christina Mohr

Richard Grusin: Premediation: Affect and Mediality After 9/11. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 191 pp., paperback, 25,99 Euro. ISBN: 978-0-230-24252-4

While remediation has long been a significant concept in the study of culture and media practices, premediation – and, most of all, its cognitive and affective implications – has not yet earned as much attention as it should have, being nothing less than the dominant media paradigm of Western societies. For Grusin, "premediation insists that the future is already remediated" (p. 39) by means of supporting collective imagination of as many future scenarios as possible, negative or positive. In contrast to his 2004 article, in which he insisted that premediation was a fundamentally American response to 9/11, he now explains that the current politics of securitisation and premediation started before the World Trade Center attacks and the subsequent war on terror, intended as preemptive warfare.

The preoccupation with prevention promoted the media to a position in which they began to function as "part of the [investigative, C.M.] juridical apparatus of securitization" (p. 42) and thus became "agents of governmentality" (p. 42). For Grusin, the major reason for this shift in power is the media's ability to generate collective fears by sketching potential future scenarios, rather than to simply detect such fears. By invoking the worst, the media – paradoxically – meet the purposes of reducing collective anxiety (see pp. 46, 53) and guiding future action (see p. 47).

In the first core chapter on "Affect, Mediality and Abu Ghraib" Grusin further develops his concept of premediation by examining how the continuity with consumers' everyday media practices fundamentally contributed to the shocking effects of the Abu Ghraib pictures showing the torturing of prisoners of war (see p. 70). Drawing on Katherine Hayles' concept of the "technological nonconscious" (Hayles in Grusin, p. 71), referring to the fact that many of our daily media practices have long since entered our modes of cognition and action, Grusin arrives at the conclusion that, for many recipients, the shock value consisted of the "feeling that one's media practices are connected in some way […] with the humiliation and dehumanization of others" (p. 72).

The second major achievement of the monograph is Grusin's ability to depict "The Affective Life of Media". In focusing mainly on Andy Clark's theory of the co-evolution of mind and technology (see pp. 91 f.) and Daniel Stern's concept of affective attunement (see p. 95), Grusin portrays humans as "affective as well as cognitive cyborgs" (p. 94). Such cyborgs seek the continuity and thus the security of "premediated ongoingness" (p. 107) provided by their media

interactions in order to maintain positive affect. In this context, however, recent work on multimodality promoting the coincidence of cognition and affect (see Gunter Kress: Multimodality. A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication. London/New York: Routledge 2010, 77-78), and experientiality would be essential for backing-up the argument.

Methodologically, Grusin here relies on experiments conducted by Rosalind Picard to reveal that it is precisely the human engagement in "a complex and overlapping network of heterogeneous feedback loops not only with other people but […] with our media as well" (p. 97) that is fundamental to positive affect and feelings of security. Since humans continuously seek the security of connectivity (with their social networks and media technologies), premediation is always characterised "by the gesture of anticipation" (p. 129) and by an inherent concern with "the future or futurity in general" (p. 48).

It is also in the last theoretical chapter on "The Anticipation of Security" that Grusin counters what can be regarded as an apparent argument against premediation. If all human knowledge, and even the way in which humans think, is already premediated, how can one preserve "the autonomy of the individual, focusing on tradition and cultural memory" (Mark Hansen in Grusin, p. 136)? For Grusin this question is beside the point, since within a paradigm that promotes the co-evolution of mind and technology there is no way to ever conceive of a mind that would be able to reason outside the premediated modes it has naturally acquired (see p. 138). Grusin therefore insists that political agency has to scrutinise the ways in which "the power of affectivity" (p. 142) can be deployed for its own means (see p. 141).

To sum up: the major achievement of Grusin's pioneering and very convincing study lies in two points. In a world that is striving for utmost interconnection and for the constancy of media-induced security, he challenges the importance of media content in favour of the cognitive and affective interplay of mind and media formats, and their performative and political powers. What is more, in emphasising the embodied technological mind, Grusin provides a groundbreaking model for rethinking how new media technologies impact what has traditionally been called the 'recipient'. In short, Grusin's work is a must-read for anyone interested in contemporary media studies, media sociology, Embodied Realism, and cognitive cultural studies.