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Book Review

## Telling our stories in new ways

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### Abstract

This review article discusses visual and rhetorical issues as handled in three books: *The Rise of the Image the Fall of the Word*, Mitchell Stephens (1998); *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Janet H. Murray (1997); and *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999). Visual media, the kinds of documents we create with them, and technology's effects on our perceptions of the media and of ourselves are central to all three texts, though each has a different emphasis. Stephens argues for the influences on communication being affected by moving images, Murray describes characteristics of digital environments and the opportunities they offer to writers, and Bolter and Grusin help us understand relationships among media through their theory of the developmental processes of media. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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This review article should be amply illustrated with graphics. Or perhaps I should be writing it with images, rather than with words. Such a technique would fit a prediction by Mitchell Stephens (1998), the first of the authors discussed here. In *The Rise of the Image the Fall of the Word*, Stephens declares that one day we will use moving images for our communications. Children will learn to write with video just as they learn to draw or use the Internet. Stephens argues that “images—fast-cut moving images mixed with some words and music—have the potential to communicate at least as efficiently and effectively as printed words” (p. 5). His argument moves through the history of written language, the development of photography and film, and the rising importance of images in our (i.e., North American) society. He also raises important points to be considered by anyone using words and images

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to communicate—points concerning which functions of communication images, especially moving images, can perform better than words, and which ones they don't perform as well.

Stephens leaves no doubt about the rising importance of images in North American postmodern culture. He compares the relatively slow acceptance of personal computer technology, based largely on verbal command lines, with that of television, which was found in half of American homes within 8 years after the arrival of full-scale commercial television. Personal computers have finally reached the level of being in half of American homes more than 20 years after they were first marketed by Apple in 1977, a change at least partly due to the Web and its visual communication. Although Stephens admits that reports of the death of the book have been exaggerated, he cites a 30% decrease in time spent reading between 1965 and 1985 as evidence that the importance of the word has fallen while that of the image has risen. One problem with Stephens' argument is that he doesn't evaluate how computers and the Web have influenced the reading and writing of words. His reading statistics include books, magazines, and newspapers, but not email, chat rooms, or Web sites.

Stephens, who teaches journalism and mass communication at New York University, is well grounded in rhetorical theory and often refers to classical rhetoricians to support his points. His history of the development of writing and of various forms of visual communication is thorough and enlightening. Though the moving image is his main interest, Stephens devotes much of his book to discussing the development and valuable contributions of writing. "With writing," Stephens says, "it became possible to invent new ideas, embodied in new poems, dramas, dialogues and even prose accounts. The written word began to tear down the walls of tradition with which human culture had been protected and constrained" (p. 22). In fact, Stephens says, writing "deserves much of the credit for the development of science and history" (p. 22). He supports his claims with solid research into the works of Walter Ong and others. Stephens credits writing as being responsible for the first revolution in communications, and moveable type with creating the second revolution: Less than 50 years after Gutenberg printed his first books in the 1450s, approximately twenty million books were printed, and "by one estimate more than three hundred thousand copies of Luther's works were printed between 1517 and 1520" (p. 30).

Although such a history of the development of writing is enough to make this book worthwhile for writers and writing teachers, Stephens takes us into new territory. Stephens believes the moving image is producing a third revolution in communication and may become the twenty-first century's form of writing. "I suspect that, in retrospect," he says, "we will conclude that sometime in the twentieth century the print method of analyzing the world began to exhaust itself, that its magic began to run out" (p. 201). The reason for this change, Stephens suggests, has to do with the nature of writing and images: "Print took the world apart and reassembled it in straight, regularly shaped, black-and-white lines. The problem is that not everything can be made to fit" (p. 210). Our postmodern world no longer sees the world in straight, regular shapes. Moving images may offer us a way of communicating that can more accurately reflect our world. Rather than looking inside people, which writing does well, "the new video observes a ballet of behaviors. It sees not consciences and unconsciousness squaring off in private chambers within, but connections and the absence of connections overlapping in society without" (p. 217). The ways in which we will explain our

world will change with more visual language and moving images that allow us to present information differently to make a point.

Whether or not we use moving images to write, the greater emphasis on images, already occurring, will involve us in learning new skills of interpretation and in teaching new skills required to think and communicate more visually. To describe some of the abilities we might develop, Stephens considers possibilities raised by *Natural Born Killers*, a film in which the director cuts suddenly to black and white or to slow motion or mixes in a few frames that belong to another context. Stephens asks,

Might we learn to think more analytically about the relationships among scenes? . . . Might these constant variations in approach increase the range of variation in perspective? Might we become as efficient at stepping back from perspectives as we now are at stepping back from situations? (p. 38).

Communicating through images offers some advantages to authors. Writing, Stephens says,

ignores our ability to find spatial and temporal connections between objects in the world. . . . In reading it, rather than seeing it, we sacrifice our ability to quickly and intuitively spot relationships—between here and there, this and that, words and gestures, ideas and expressions (p. 63).

Does Stephens' future have any place for writing with words? He would respond with a definite "yes." Stephens sees communication as neither words nor images alone but as both working together. He believes the role for words will change, however, as images assume a more dominant role in communication. Video, Stephens says, will present a "new kind of logic—a logic of discontinuous peak moments. . . . Video . . . needs narrative less. Information can be scattered, stacked, swirled and layered in moving images without causing viewers to flee" (p. 189). To help us work effectively with visual logics, we will need new conventions, some of which are already being developed. Stephens finds the frequent use of music in our media as one possible example.

Stephens concludes that "the language our descendents write and speak will increasingly be a less precise, less subtle language—one designed for use with images" (p. 207). If he is right, or even partially right, the implications for writers and the teachers of writing are impressive.

Whereas Stephens focuses his attention on how moving images may affect our ways of writing, Janet Murray (1997), in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, brings us a fascinating account of new possibilities opened by the computer for telling our stories. With our postmodern view of the world and ourselves as having momentary and multiple identities and lives, we need a way to present our stories that fits the multiplicity of our needs. Murray, who teaches interactive fiction writing at MIT, sees computers as offering a much sought-after opening for narrative:

Now, in the incunabular days of the narrative computer, we can see how twentieth-century novels, films, and plays have been steadily pushing against the boundaries of linear storytelling (p. 29).

We find initial changes occurring as multiform stories, "linear narratives straining against the boundary of predigital media like a two-dimensional picture trying to burst out of its frame"

(p. 29). Like Stephens, Murray believes that linearly based media can no longer adequately represent the ways we now see our lives as full of possible selves and alternative worlds.

In addition to needing a medium that will offer the opportunity for multiple story lines, writers need a medium that will allow for levels of spontaneity and audience involvement. The computer, Murray argues, can offer such options, helping to create a sense of being “in” the story, not simply observing it. (Our “desire” for a sense of being part of the story is explored in more detail in Bolter and Grusin’s theory of immediacy, discussed later in this article.) To illustrate her belief that our visual media have been moving toward putting us into the story, Murray describes the feeling she got watching a 3-D film in which a boy stows away on a ship, and a stranger opens the door of his hiding place to offer him a lunch bag.

Sitting in the audience I could almost feel the lunch bag in my lap, and I experienced the generosity of the moment almost personally because I was so physically grounded in the boy’s surroundings. In a conventional movie such a moment would have to be emphasized by close-up shots of the boy’s face expressing his feelings of gratitude. In a 3-D film, the audience can be so closely identified with the situation of a character that such reaction shots are unnecessary (p. 47).

Filmmakers attempt to create a sense of immersion in a scene, but the shifts of scene and point of view required with film make us aware of the director’s hand breaking the spell.

Creating an artistic experience that will immerse us in the action requires more than advanced technology—it requires a story. Murray illustrates the difference by referring to the “movie rides” that are “carefully engineered to provide maximum thrill” (p. 50). One such ride “cost \$16 million and uses 300 speakers, 20 laser disc players, 50 miles of electrical wire, 60 video monitors, two 80-foot projection screens, and 20 computers” and can “exert up to 1.8 Gs of force” (more than an airline jet) “as it tilts and twists” (p. 50). Nevertheless, “the movie-rides are providing evidence that audiences are not satisfied by intense sensation alone. Once people do go ‘into’ the movie, they want more than a roller-coaster ride; they want a story” (p. 50). Without a story, Murray argues, films create an “emotionally impoverished narrative form” (p. 51).

Some exploration of narrative form in an electronic environment occurs in game formats, especially the puzzle games, such as *Planetfall*, which can create dramatic experiences for players. Murray describes one such experience playing *Mad Dog McCree*: The game created for her a “moment of self-confrontation. . . in which I was suddenly aware of an authentic but disquieting side of myself” (p. 54). This experience showed Murray that even in a game format, developers can use digital environments to create stories that “have more dramatic resonance and human import to them, stories that. . . mean something” (p. 54). Another area in which writers have explored the possibilities of electronic environments is hypertext, a structural concept that is not new but one that is taking on new form in digital media.

However exciting these attempts at moving narratives into computer spaces may be, Murray describes them as still incunabular—as artifacts of an earlier period. “To understand the new genres and the narrative pleasures that will arise from this heady mixture,” she says, “we must look beyond the formats imposed upon the computer by the older media it is so rapidly assimilating and identify those properties native to the machine itself” (p. 64). We must learn to understand the essential features of computer environments. Stephens chron-

icled a similar path taken by filmmakers to change what had been a recording technology into an expressive medium. Murray could not describe a history, but instead provides guidelines for the steps that must be taken to develop computer narrative as an art:

If we want to see beyond the current horizon of scrapbook multimedia, it is important to identify the essential properties of digital environments. . . that will determine the distinctive power and form of a mature electronic narrative art (p. 68).

Concerning the computer's essential properties, Murray says that digital environments are procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic. The computer is an engine that runs by exact and general rules that describe a process. Hence, computers exhibit rule-generated, or procedural, behavior. Computers are participatory in that they are responsive to our input. Referring to Infocom games, Murray says, "The lesson of *Zork* is that the first step in making an enticing narrative world is to script the interactor" (p. 79). The challenge will be to create linguistic scripts "formulaic enough to be easily grasped and responded to but flexible enough to capture a wider range of human behavior" (p. 79). A digital environment also represents a space, not only a navigable space, but a kind of space that "suits dramatic engagement" (pp. 79–80). As a player/interactor, "You are not just reading about an event that occurred in the past; the event is happening *now*, and, unlike the action on the stage of a theater, it is happening to *you*" (p. 81). Finally, digital environments have extended human memory to encyclopedic proportions. Whereas the average book contains 100,000 words, equivalent to approximately one megabyte of space, a 5.3 gigabyte digital videodisc is equivalent to 5,300 books.

Understanding and learning to use these technological features are only parts of the process for developing computerized stories into narrative art. Another part asks writers to develop conventions for constructing these narratives that readers can navigate successfully, as this part asks readers to develop conventions for following the narratives comfortably. Hypertext has been famous for losing or overwhelming readers or miring them in a dead end, problems the new narratives will need to avoid. An additional challenge will be to develop a sense of esthetics for a digitized narrative. Murray says that we should "look more closely at its characteristic pleasures, to judge in what ways they are continuous with older narrative traditions and in what ways they offer access to new beauty and new truths about ourselves and the world we move through" (p. 94). Expanding on the esthetic dimension, Murray provides an investigation and discussion of immersion in a digitized environment, agency exercised within that environment, and the transformative powers these environments bring us. As a further challenge, she says, writers will have to ask, "how can we have catharsis in a medium that resists closure?" (p. 175).

Murray strongly advocates that writers and those interested in narrative form should pursue the potentials of digitized environments for narrative art despite the challenges. This medium holds unique advantages for writers to explore and use to their advantage in developing their stories. Though we are still far from able to present a meaningfully complex drama like *Hamlet* through a digital medium like the Holodeck, and our authors haven't yet become cyberbards, Murray's descriptions of the narrative potentials for computerized environments are exciting and inspiring.

Murray has two primary concerns: stories—which she believes help define how we think,

play, and understand our lives and culture—and the computer—which she contends is the medium changing the shape and nature of our stories. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) add another dimension to Stephens' discussion of images and Murray's accounts of digital environments in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. "If the ultimate purpose of media is indeed to transfer sense experiences from one person to another," Bolter and Grusin begin, "the wire threatens to make all media obsolete" (p. 3). The "wire" they refer to is, of course, itself a piece of media technology, presented in the film *Strange Days*. Supposedly the wire "bypasses all forms of mediation and transmits directly from one consciousness to another" to give the user "a piece of somebody's life. . . . You're there. You're doing it, seeing it, hearing it. . . feeling it" (p. 3). Possibly every writing teacher who has counseled students "don't tell them; show them" would marvel if students could create such a sense of lived experience with their writing.

In *Remediation*, Bolter and Grusin investigate the phenomena of transferring experiences by comparing the logic of immediacy (which produces the sense of a lived experience) with the logic of hypermediacy (which makes us aware of the technology used to create such an experience). The underlying theory of remediation presented in this book appears at heart to be a simple one, as elegant theories go: Media exist in a reciprocal relationship of immediacy and hypermediacy as they move through a process of invention and reform, each medium enfolding others within it. Every medium includes its predecessors within itself even as it appears to be new and improved. A new medium remediates an older one, as photography remediated painting and film remediated photography. In a competitive move, older media refashion themselves in response to new media, as digital photography has remediated photography in response to computer graphic software. It is the representation or refashioning of one medium in another that Bolter and Grusin refer to as remediation.

As simply as I may state the underlying principle of *Remediation*, the presentation of their theory involves Bolter and Grusin in a detailed and carefully researched discussion of representation, a complex issue in itself; our relationships with "the real," however that may be defined; and our perceptions of our own processes of viewing. Their theory developed out of their discussions of two logics, immediacy and hypermediacy. According to the logic of immediacy, we want to have the impression of direct connection with a thing, with its immediate presence, even though it is being presented to us through media. We want the medium and the act of mediation to "disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented" (p. 6). Ironically, achieving this goal of immediacy often requires the use of several types and levels of media. That is, immediacy most often requires hypermediacy.

The logic of hypermediacy refers to our awareness of the mediation occurring in a media experience. Some media present us with a unified, transparent view that gives us the sense of being in the experience; others give us a fragmented space that clearly places us outside the experience. As rhetoricians, it's interesting for us to speculate on the ways in which developers of hypermediacy relate to their audiences as insiders who must grasp at least some of the principles of technology to "get the joke." To understand how immediacy and hypermediacy can be found working together, imagine our sense of immersion in a film scene, which the film crew works hard to achieve. To create our sense of presence in a scene, not only does the crew employ multiple media to create the film itself, but its presentation to us in the theater requires further media, such as surround sound and perhaps even smell.

Bolter and Grusin trace our desire for immediacy through the historic development of diverse visual media, such as painting, photography, film, television, and digital media. Along the way they contrast the transparency of immediacy with designers' intentional highlighting of the act of mediation and thus to the hypermediated forms that make the experience possible. With hypermediacy the designers create an opacity, or a kind of play with the act of mediation, which can add to a viewer's pleasure. Bolter and Grusin suggest the example of a postcard with big, outlined letters spelling out Coney Island, each letter's outline containing a picture of some feature of the park.

The oscillations between "immediacy and hypermediacy, between transparency and opacity" (p. 19), of course, are not new to media. Long before we had movies about movies or the wink to the camera, we had asides to the audience in theater performances. When media produce opacity, however, it serves to remind us that the media we tend to forget are tangible artifacts of culture as well as tools for our use. As such they interact with social, cultural, and economic systems, exerting pressures on us that we need to remain aware of. Bolter and Grusin offer film as one example, which exists as real celluloid, but also as "the social meaning of celebrity . . . [and] the economics of the entertainment industry, as well as the techniques of editing and composing" (p. 58). We might also add all of the social relationships, conventions, and pressures surrounding date films, family movies, skin flicks, and so forth. As Bolter and Grusin express it, "the events of our mediated culture are constituted by combinations of subject, media, and objects, which do not exist in their segregated forms. Thus there is nothing prior to or outside the act of mediation" (p. 58). This is a sobering thought, especially for those of us teaching in computerized classrooms. How many areas of mediation are actually occurring in our classrooms and to what degree are we and our students aware of them?

After discussing theoretical issues involved with various technologies for communicating experience (from paint brushes and pencils to keyboards), Bolter and Grusin describe several media in detail, discussing the ways each mediates communication and the spaces each works within. Many media converge in the hypermediated environments of the Internet and the Web, and we are only beginning to understand the implications of these convergences for communication.

In the book's final section, Bolter and Grusin relate their theories of the media to cultural definitions of the self, again an important area for teachers of writing who work in computerized environments. Throughout the book they also touch on issues of gender and other cultural concerns. I wish, however, that they had spent more space and thought on relating their theory and its implications for the self to our current understandings of community and group influences. They describe, for example, a movie viewer oscillating "between a desire for immediacy and a fascination with the medium" (p. 82), a process reminiscent of an educated book reader responding to the narrative experience and also to the writer's style and structuring of plot. What I don't find is any discussion of why our experience watching a movie in a nearly empty theater is so different from watching it in a comfortably full one. Is it our feeling of isolation, without a community of similarly focused participants, that keeps us separate from immediacy and more conscious of hypermediacy, or is it something else? The setting clearly mediates our experience, but does that mean we should view the

community or group as a medium? And to what extent does the class group mediate our classroom projects?

This book and Stephen's book are both thoughtfully designed with a narrowed text column and several sidebars and images. The Bolter and Grusin book is particularly handsome with its small but attractive font, ample use of white space to ease the eye, high quality gray scale illustrations, and colored, glossy graphics. It also has links (special highlighted notations) between sections of text and other pages where further discussion of a topic or a graphic example can be found.

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have much to tell us about media that helps us place technology, even writing as an early technology, into a theoretical and historical context, as their discussion continually makes connections between old and new technologies. *Remediation* provides the theoretical perspective that further elucidates the technologies discussed in the other two books reviewed here, *Rise of the Image Fall of the Word* and *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Stephens is perhaps the most radical in his vision of the future, for he sees a time when we might actually develop a visual language. Murray illustrates her thoughtful discussion with vivid descriptions of digital environments that many of us don't have the opportunity to view first hand. Each of these books takes us beyond the boundaries of our current classrooms to speculations of what may be coming in the future. Though they may not give us lesson plans that we can use in next Monday's class, they do alert us to what we might find in five years and give us conceptual understandings that will better equip us for today. I highly recommend these books to anyone interested in narrative form and/or the future of writing with computers.

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