REMEDIATION IS THE MESSAGE:
TECHNOLOGICAL DESTINY AND THE FANTASY OF MODERNITY

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The discourse is a steel serving at both ends: of killing for the tip as a safeguard for the knob.

If you, knowing the danger, choose to use it for the tip, how can you blame the steel for your hand’s misuse?

Sor (Sister) Juana Inés de la Cruz

Introduction

In the XVII century, from a remote convent in what then was called ‘New World’, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz would associate ‘discourse’ with the properties of (a knife’s or sword’s) steel. In her metaphor, the resultant instrument (an alloy of words and technology) is granted a neutral quality, for its meaning stem from the use we make of it and not for any intrinsic, pre-programmed, unknowable cultural pattern or paradigm related to the ontology of that instrument per se. Today, in George Grant’s (1986) opinion, this situation has dramatically changed; modern technology is no longer a neutral instrument, nor “a simple extension of human making through the power of a perfected science” (p. 13), but a co-penetration of the sciences and the arts “into a new unity in our will to be masters of the earth and beyond” (p. 12); it is a new account of what it is to know and to make in which both activities are changed by their co-penetration in a way that has never before existed, so that technology becomes “the ontology of the age” (p. 32).
In this article, I will try connect the common dots between the readings of Janine Marchessault (2007), Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin\(^3\) (2000), and George Grant (1986), while analyzing their main arguments in the light of their relationship with two Marshall McLuhan’s ideas: that all media are extensions of the human senses, and that the content of a medium is always another medium. Both Marchessault (p. 35) and Bolter-Grusin (p. 45) refer explicitly to McLuhan’s *The Medium is the Message* in their texts; instead, Grant seems to tackle McLuhanian’s ideas in a more tangential but no less clear way: by refuting that technology (thus media) are simple extensions of human making, and by agreeing that technology is not neutral, although Grant goes further in revealing the moral, social, and political implications of the naturalization of technology.

I

In order to locate where these authors bifurcate or converge in their stances on communication and technology, it is useful to begin by citing the introductory lines of *The Medium is the Message* (McLuhan, 1964): “In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message” (p. 7). The crux of the matter here is “means of control” and “in operational and practical fact”. On the one hand, George Grant seems to consider the first phrase with a double purpose: to explain
how technology has become the ‘civilizational destiny’ of the Western world, and to unveil the ‘natural’ (thus invisible) impositions of that destiny upon our notions of freedom and justice. Conversely, Bolter-Grusin and Marchessault follow the operational and practical side of the idea of the medium as a content of another medium, by theorizing about new media and digital technology (Bolter-Grusin) or by revisiting a specific moment in our recent past (Expo 67) in order to explore its cultural connexion and legacy to our twenty-first-century hypermediated culture (Marchessault).

II

Bolter-Grusin try to decipher and get to the core of ‘what’ actually makes ‘new’ a digital medium in order to characterize their different contemporary manifestations. Their analysis is influenced by some poststructuralist literary theories and in particular by the idea that all interpretation is reinterpretation. “So as for them there is nothing prior to writing, so for our visual culture there is nothing prior to mediation.”14 The authors approach their subject as if studying a new chapter in the history of art, describing historical changes and the mechanics of media with a particular emphasis on their aesthetic aspects. Bolter-Grusin’s analysis is deployed on the basis of three main concepts: transparent immediacy, hypermediacy, and remediation. Transparent immediacy refers to human aspiration (so far utopian) for a true ‘virtual reality’ experience; that is, an
experience in which the medium erases itself or renders automatic the act of representation, making us no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead standing in an immediate relationship to the contents of that medium. 

_Hypermediacy_, on the other hand, multiplies the signs of mediation and tries to reproduce the sensorium of human experiences. It can also manifest in the creation of multimedia spaces such as theme parks or video arcades, thus becoming an ‘authentic’ experience. Finally, _remediation_ refers to the representation of one medium in another medium. Since all mediation is _remediation_ (“no medium can now function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning” [p. 55]), remediation is a defining characteristic of the new digital media, which can remediate or be remediated explicitly or implicitly.

**III**

In contradistinction to Bolter-Grussin, Janine Marchessault (2007) freeze-frames and zooms in on a specific moment of our recent past in order to understand its cultural and technological legacy. She studies the case of Expo 67 (and in particular its _Labyrinth pavilion_), an event that she describes as “a utopian non-place that combined a unified system of signs with a highly diverse visual culture representing a new sense of globality” (p. 30), an event she considers “an important precursor of the multiplication and interconnectedness of screens that
characterize twenty-first-century digital architectures” (p. 29). Throughout the article—where McLuhan stands out as an overt presence—, Expo 67 appears as a conceptual, operational, and institutional effort to translate to and to build in the realm of the physic “a profound awareness of the world as an organic interconnectivity and simultaneity as communicative possibility” (p. 30). At once utopian and pragmatic, Expo 67 seems to have created a new architectural grammar—“the screen as architecture”—relying on the “flexibility of the screen and the new synaesthesia of the visual cultures of the world mediated through technology” (p. 29). In spite of the fact that the chief purpose of this technological inventions was to expand the experience of film, I think the term hypermediacy seems inappropriate or at least inaccurate to embrace some characteristics Marchessault construes of paramount relevance to understand the experience of Expo 67, such as ‘interconnectivity’, ‘simultaneity’, and ‘synaesthesia’, even when all of them suggests (as hypermediacy does) excess, multiplicity, and reproduction of the sensorium of human experiences. Nonetheless, Marchessault’s approach to these ‘entirely new architectures for sensory immersion’ that were developed in the framework of Expo 67, as well as her explanation of how technology, logistics, architecture, and urban space were conceived as part of an ‘organic’ idea of communication, are important contributions that make us more cognizant of the ‘ecology’ of the medium and of this new relationship between medium, space-time, and sign characterizing our ‘technological civilization’.
IV

The fascination for the medium has become pervasive and may well be considered a distinctive feature of today’s world. What has drastically changed in comparison to, let’s say, Expo 67 is that in our digital age we need not move to a specific physical space (a computer or a mobile phone suffices) to participate in the incessant flow of immediacy, hypermediacy, and remediation that characterizes today’s society. Moreover, the vertiginous rhythm of complex technological innovations have ‘imposed’ a new language; hence the need to talk about ‘digital literacy’. This dynamic is one of the forces that push the wheels of remediation in modern mass communications, and its logic is described by George Grant in a simple way: “… more technology is needed to meet the emergencies which technology has produced” (p. 16). And this is what he calls ‘technological destiny’. In contradistinction to Bolter-Grusin and Marchessault—who seem fascinated by the same phenomenon of fascination with the medium which forms part of their object of study—, Grant is concerned for the high level of complexity that our civilization has attained. In spite of the fact that much of the new technologies are developed by people interested in human betterment, this race usually results “in the proliferation of new arts and sciences directed towards human control” (p. 16), unfolding us “in its own conceptions of instrumentality, neutrality and purposiveness” (p. 32). Grant (1986) argues that
when we represent technology to ourselves as an array of neutral instruments, invented by human beings and under human control, we are expressing a kind of common sense, but it is a common sense from within the very technology we are attempting to represent. So alongside with the inevitable homogenisation that comes with the logic of information and computers, Grant fears that the combination of an unlimited will ‘to become masters of the earth and beyond’ with an erroneous understanding of what actually makes technological our civilization (the fact that technology and its reasoning does impose) in comparison to that of our predecessors may lead to a covert justification of ‘the end justifies the means’ and turn ‘goodness’ into a mere synonym of ‘quality of life’, thus objectifying human relations and the very fundamentals of justice. All in all, Grant demystifies the idea of the medium as a neutral instrument and opens the door to difficult but essential questions regarding the ethics and morals behind the use and control of those new technologies created for ‘human betterment’.

Conclusion

Paraphrasing McLuhan, one could say that in our digital age remediation is the message, that is, a mediation of mediation that is experienced as real and becomes self-justifying. But that ‘message’, to use Marchessault’s words, forms part of a modern notion of simultaneity as a space to be controlled, a space (again McLuhan) where “there is no continuity or connectedness let alone depth and
perspective” (p. 38) – what McLuhan calls an ‘acoustic’ space (space-time). In a voracious act of appropriation, we have phagocytosed the realm of the physic to add it to our catalogue of ‘new’ media (see Times Square, for instance), and despite Grant’s highly relevant concerns about the social, cultural, and political consequences of our ‘technological destiny’, it seems that the desire to make real at all cost our fantasy of modernity (with its benefits and dangers) will continue to be a powerful drive in the discovery of our own ‘New World’.

NOTES

1 Excerpt from the poem Finjamos que soy feliz (Let’s pretend I am happy—I made a free translation into English for illustrative purposes only). Sor (Sister) Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695) was a self-taught scholar and poet of the Baroque school and nun of New Spain (today’s Mexico). Her focus on sciences, her defense for the rights of women to education, her erudition, and the high quality of her literature granted her early fame all over the Spanish Empire, but also made her a problematic case for the Catholic Church (engaged by then in a Counter Reformation), which finally forced her to confinement and penitence. Some scholars (Merrim, 1991) consider Sor Juana as “The First Feminist in the New World.”

2 Obviously, Sor Juana’s use of the word ‘discourse’ has nothing to do with the use and meanings that modern Semiotics has given to that term. However, as a metaphor, I found it both interesting and provocative.

3 Hereafter, when referring to Bolter and Grusing, I will supreme the conjunction ‘and’ to avoid some cumbersome grammatical constructions. I will refer to them as Bolter-Grusin.

4 The whole paragraph reads as follows: “Readers may already see an analogy between our analysis of media and poststructuralist literary theory of the past four decades, for Derrida and other poststructuralists have argued that all interpretation is reinterpretation. So as for them there is nothing prior to writing, so for our visual culture there is nothing
prior to mediation. Any act of mediation is dependent on another, indeed many other, acts of mediation and is therefore remediation.” (Bolter, J.D. and Grusin, R., 2000, p. 56.)

5 According to Peter E. S. Freund (2009), “In synaesthesia, barriers between sensory modalities ‘break down’ and one modality of sensory experience, such as sight, is experienced through another one, such as hearing – one hears colors, sees sounds. While rare, synaesthesia is not a form of pathology, but a normal human capacity (Cytowic, 1993). It is possible to argue that we are socialized not to experience the world in a synaesthetic fashion but still have the capacity for such experiences.”

6 The neutrality of technology is entrenched in our culture. The following lines clearly exemplify the latter, while exposing the ethical/moral ambivalence of any technology: “The technology involved in various crowdsourcing techniques [the act of outsourcing a task to a large, undefined group of people through an open call] is, of course, neither good nor bad. What started as a legitimate methodology to tap the wisdom of crowds for the betterment of business and science has unfortunately been adopted by the criminal underground…. Organized crime groups clearly understand how to employ these techniques to commit more crime with less risk.” (Goodman, 2011)

7 Here goes an example taken from the NASA (2011, October 8) website that serve to illustrate in practical terms some of Grant’s concerns about the new co-penetration of the sciences and the arts. It is also a good example of hypermediacy and of our relationship with space and time. The note says: NASA “will conduct a global competition for students [from 14 to 18 years] to design experiments that will be performed in space and broadcast around the world…. The experiments will be performed on the U.S. portion of the space station that has been designated as a national laboratory…. The goal is to develop creative and analytical abilities by working on teams to solve problems using the latest information technology and tools. "The space station really is the greatest science classroom we have," said Leland Melvin, associate administrator for education at NASA Headquarters in Washington…. NASA representatives will join a panel of internationally renowned scientists, astronauts and teachers to judge the entries with input from the YouTube community…. The public will be able to follow the competition and watch the experiments via video streaming on YouTube's website.” (Italics are mine.)