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A Tea for Two, Aristotle in the Amazon

Essay for the Second Thematic Project

Do Kindles Dream of Spirit Duplicators?

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“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

(T.S. Elliot, The Rock)

“The impious maintain that nonsense is normal in the Library and that the reasonable (and even humble and pure coherence) is an almost miraculous exception. They speak (I know) of the “feverish Library whose chance volumes are constantly in danger of changing into others and affirm, negate and confuse everything like a delirious divinity.” These words, which not only denounce the disorder but exemplify it as well, notoriously prove their authors' abominable taste and desperate ignorance. In truth, the Library includes all verbal structures, all variations permitted by the twenty-five orthographical symbols, but not a single example of absolute nonsense.”

(Jorge Luis Borges, The Library of Babel,

http://jubal.westnet.com/hyperdiscordia/library_of_babel.html)

The dark woods of the Amazon

The book has been our labyrinth, our touchstone of knowledge, our obligation and prohibition since the encounter of storytelling and the technical possibility for writing. It has walked a long a branched road of affirmation, evaluation, ultimate authority, challenge and rethinking. Finally it has been theoretically relativised by post-modernism, together with notions of authority, and today, in the time of changeability, anonymity and collaboration, walled gardens, individuality and authorship are knocking on our doors once again, together with the never ending discussion on the end of the book. It seems this process is

not a historical one, but a constant flux, where all views coexist, sometimes aware of themselves, sometimes ignoring each other, sometimes ignorant. After the dawn of digital writing, seen as a paradigm shift in writing, midday doesn't seem to have fully lived up to its expectations. Actually the devices called e readers, more and more well spread personal items in the past couple of years, are a controversial mix of the print and digital paradigm, as some might call them. These devices are personalized portable libraries, capable of containing more books in electronic format, than any classic bibliophile would dream of. They are the size of a book, they weigh as a book, and their display evokes the printed page in its peculiar, nostalgic technology. Unquestionably though, they do not feel as a book. They resemble more old, mechanical calculators, as well as notebooks, due to leather covers they usually come with. They differ from their complex multitude of media family surroundings in the first decade of the third millennium. Are these devices a remake of the medium of the book, any and every book, a remake of the familiar, almost archetypical experience of reading a book?

Play it again, Sam¹

The remake is an ambiguous and controversial form. It is a term taken from film studies, first coined in film journalism, referring to a film that is based on an earlier film. They are close in nature to adaptations and genre movies, often connected, although a remake implies following someone's footsteps in the process of unpacking and redoing, reusing an existing film. It is an institutionalized form of repetition. Remakes have existed since cinema has. They have an aura of lacking authenticity, presupposed to arrive as a means of facing the (un)predictable demands of the market and one's idealess state. With the remake we sigh and think of fake leather jackets, weekend novels, casting

¹ Reference to one of the commonly quoted lines from a favourite among films for quotes- Casablanca, and in this context also to the book of essays with the topic of remakes in cinema, see References

policies, momentarily showing our conservative side glorifying “the original”. It can also be viewed as an homage, or a satire. Redoing someone’s work, recontextualising, has also known to be connected to a filmmaker’s Oedipal complex related to the father movie (Horton, McDouglas, 1998), trying to annihilate, and surpass it, at the same time reaffirming the father figure. This questionable theory automatically sets different values to the original and the remake, nevertheless it is a useful analogy to consider.

The remake could be seen both as the necessity of the market and as a highly provocative post-modern art form. Post-modern because it explicitly quotes, and recontextualizes, it doesn’t claim authority, although in many cases this is purely by coincidence. That aspect will not be the main topic of these pages, as it can be applied more as an intellectual fashion of the post-society.

The remake relies on the experience of its audience, on triggering familiarity and emotions from memories. With the remake we instantly feel at home. It is a redigestion, a translation to more common ground, in this case, the screen.

I say tomato you say tomato

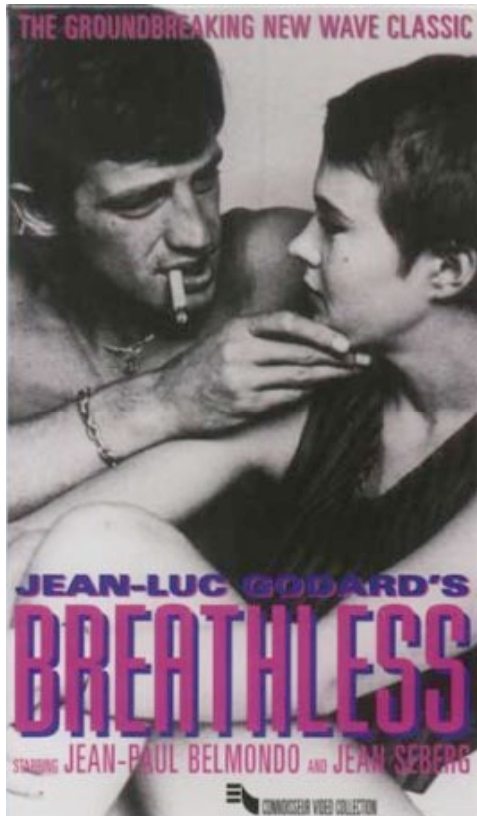
Bolter defines remediation as borrowing and refashioning an old media, that happens with every new media, at the same time paying homage and rivaling that occurs in both ways. Remediation is Jim Mc Bride (1983, USA), or Jovan Joca Jovanović (1971, Yugoslavia), remaking Godard’s *A bout de souffle* (1960, France) borrowing and reorganizing, imitating elements from the older medium, reforming its cultural space (Bolter, 2000, p23). Godard’s original is placed in Paris, Mc Bride’s in Los Angeles, and Jovanović’s in Belgrade. The original itself refers to Hollywood and film noir, carrying remains, possibly implicit, of a culture where surrealism flourished naturally.

Whereas in Godard’s version Michel Poiccard has an affair with an American student, Mc Bride’s Jesse Lujack has an affair with a French student- Monica Poiccard, therefore directly translating the domestic into foreign and vice versa. In the Yugoslavian version this is taken to the extreme, without any emotions

from the main character lasting enough for an affair. The only factor these movies have in common is constant referencing, and playing on the side of a petty criminal.

Mlad I zdrav kao ruža could be seen as an homage to Godard in general. In one scene when Dragan Nikolić, who even resembles Jean-Paul Belmondo, is interrogated by the police he says he was in the cinema at the time of the crime, and when the police asks what was the film about, he answers “There’s no story, it’s Godard!” with the whole conversation repeated again. Quoting is constant in the film (scenes of running through the woods, and group decadence recalling scenes from *Weekend*, references to American cinema, which paradoxically is the only influence Jovanović mentions in his interviews). Very shortly after the release, this movie was banned in Yugoslavia, and released again in 2006. Godard’s subversive energy was well fit for a subversive time in Yugoslavia, and a challenging role model for American cinema.

The example of a classic like *A bout de souffle*, and remakes of it in different countries is intentional. The authority of such a movie is that of a unique, memorable force, and to succeedingly recontextualize, remaking it requires both literal and conceptual translation. Leaving the question there is a possibility for translation open. This is a plastic example of the process remaking involves, were we can see the key element of translation that happens whenever in the process of mimesis.



Above: the poster from Godard's A bout de souffle; right: the poster for the Yugoslavian Mlad I zdrav kao ruža: Young and healthy as a rose



left: the poster for Mc Bride's Breathless, all images taken from Google images: <http://images.google.com>



Follow the yellow brick road²

Mimesis is a term in Aristotle's *Poetics* to define the process of all art, art that was in Greek times perceived as *techne*, a utilitarian craft. The term signifies two processes, one of imitating nature, and the other of presenting, the effect of which, if finding the appropriate distance from the observer-provokes the feeling of identification, therefore brings catharsis to power-the overwhelming instance of art since the dawn of myth until today.

Substituting catharsis with (commercial) success, we could broaden the field from a *techne* point of view and translate to common terms. Finding the right amount of mimesis, and the right way to recontextualize is crucial for all types of social activity. Commercial success comes with introducing a new product by awakening emotions, through the familiar process of identification. And how do we define the nature we are imitating? One could argue that when a film becomes known, when it succeeds (in its effect of catharsis), it is appropriated by the category of culture, therefore becoming itself a part of nature, opening the possibility of another process of mimesis and catharsis. Therefore, we drink from a constantly expanding bowl of nature.

As Aristotle defines the measure for distance from the observer, so we could observe the mimesis involved in remaking. If the translation is literal, as in translating a poem from one language to another, our model is simplified. Finding the measure and manner of quoting leads to the golden door of catharsis and history.

Another relict we have inherited from ancient Greece is the awareness of omnipresent mythological narratives. When observing dozens of remakes

² A quote from the film *The Wizard of Oz*, referring to the way to get to Oz, to

of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, Alice in Wonderland³, or Breathless (implemented in our culture enough to exist in a Word processor spell check), we ponder on what are the qualities of the original books the films were based on. Do those stories carry mythological aspects greater than time, or mode in which we read, observe it? Are these makers interested in finding the proper recipe for adaptation, secure income, or timelessness?

Is the e-reader in a battle with the myth of the book? Does it attempt in demystifying or recontextualizing the myth? And how does this process of translation happen from one media to the other? What allows us to label the e-reader as a remake of the book, and not as one of the armies of other devices we salute every day? Simply because of the image it is being sold with, the book you can take to bed, once again. Why can we not consider it an adaptation, more than a remake? Simply because it although entirely electronic, evokes the futuristic naivety we encounter in comics and movies from the middle of the 20th century. It is a *new* medium made in an *old* mindset. The e-reader does everything to stay faithful to the appearance of a book, it does not modify the content, and therefore we cannot call this process an adaptation of a book. It observes the book as a placeholder for reading elements. Is it trying to translate and remediate the feeling of reading a book to an electronic technological and social context, the context of screen and files? What could be the factor of success of such a device, if not the advantage of multiple books that you can not only take to bed with you again, but you also don't have to get out of bed even to order or receive them.

In Bolter terms, at the moment of high hybridity, factors that are in constant battle are the desire for hypermediacy and transparency.

³ List of film remakes, among which the ones based on the story by Lewis Carroll, from 1915. until Tim Burton's version, in cinemas from February 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Film_remakes

“The very association of hybrid representation with urban culture has provoked a contrary response within the current American cultural spectrum: There is in many quarters a notable resistance to hybridity and a desire for its opposite. The opposite of hybridity is transparency: those practices that strive for seamless, transparent representation of the real within a single medium or media form. “ (Bolter, 2006, p.110)

If we would flow through Bolter’s stream of thought, the e-reader would be an example par excellence of a transparent media, or, more precisely, the desire for transparency. The e-reader is the photo-realism of the book. It is a translation of the “old” to more understandable terms, to a common ground, at the same time reinforcing the notion of the former medium. The danger of this process of translation is simplification of the reality that is being painted.

Firstly the electronic ink display invokes the printed page. Secondly, unlike similar sized devices we change and exchange every day, it is one purposed, without Internet connections, side effects, and hyper-interactivity. Its only function is to read, and, possibly make notes. Is the e-reader an embodiment of nostalgia?

The technology behind our pocket libraries old as it is brings us to wonder why is it spreading at this moment, and not before? Is it because the readers are computer screen saturated? Or because screens have become our homeland, and paper books belong to a time before? Has simulation become more natural than nature, that we cannot tell the difference anymore?

The customer is (taught to) always (be) right

“Popular acceptance and therefore economic success can only come by convincing consumers that the new form improves on the experience of older ones.” (Bolter, 2000, p.69)

The e-reader is not trying to be our favourite book; it is trying to be all our favourite books at once. The ultimate book, the portable library, satisfying our need for possessing, in this case, portable knowledge, walking the line of book=knowledge. In Freudian terms it is fighting one of the great patriarchal figures, the book, by reproducing, and multiplying it. From the selling point of view, this seems good to go, but when observing the buyer, when does he have time to use what he has collected? Or have we substituted using with collecting, all becoming bibliophiles?

When searching for information regarding the politics *of* the e-reader, what Google offers are books on politics *for* the e-reader. This fact says much about this “back to the future” object, its presence and its habitat, implemented in the commerce of the World Wide Web. From our viewpoint as a viewer, an entire parallel market with its products is flourishing, being less visible. That it is a parallel meaning not connected to the physical market is far from true. That it is less visible, in comparison to its physical counterpart likewise is not true, though we feed our desire for transparency by believing our physical surrounding is tangible. This also

leaves an open question for the much dreamt about space of the hyperlink in revolutionizing the writing process.

“The technology of modern writing includes not only the techniques of printing, but also the practices of modern science, and bureaucracy and the economic and social consequences of print literacy. If personal computers, browsers and word processors, are part of our contemporary technology of writing, so are the uses to which we put this hardware and software. So too is the rhetoric of revolution or disaster that enthusiasts and critic weave around the digital hardware and software.” (Bolter, 2006, p.19)

The political is personal ⁴

Bolter himself falls into the enthusiastic rhetoric concerning digital writing, when writing how electronic and digital technology are refashioning the writing space, they are in struggle to either reconcile the space of print and digital technology, or definitely replace one with the other. He himself links hypertextuality and interconnectivity to empowering the reader, contrary to historical tendencies of magnifying the author (Bolter, p.4, Writing space: computers, hypertext, and the remediation of print). The rhetoric of revolution comes in this case with promises of changing literacy, the way we view the world, as it was with the fascination over hyperlinks and interactivity in the nineties (Coover,1992).

⁴ Inversion of words of the slogan “The personal is political” a paradigmatic sentence of the Second wave of feminism, therefore connected to post-modernist ideas, gender constructs, taken into practice by theorists and artists, among which Orlan’s direct use of the phrase and practice of carnal art

Tea for two

The rhetoric of revolution or disaster is a timeless one, and as such, present as in newspapers, likewise in theories, and people's minds. The discourse on the death of the book, now awakened by e readers, before by the World Wide Web, even before by TV, is such a rhetoric. The paradox lying in the contemporary assassin is that the e-reader does exactly the opposite, it reaffirms the book, both in quoting its appearance, and its uses.

In the case of the e reader, as in the remakes observed, we keep imagining scenes and sensations from the original, however the remake embodies as more understandable, practical, precisely because we recognize the quotes and references.

How many and what type of elements do we need to observe as similar or common to claim explicitly something is a remake? Or is it a matter of a (film)maker's statement? Turning to other media, what draws the borders between them? What makes an iPhone a phone, and not a gadget/mini computer, except its name? Does the problematic of classifying and defining adaptation, genre and remake apply to taxonomy of media?



A scene from *A bout de souffle*, images.google.com

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All literature used for this essay is from Internet sources, with all constraints that they carry with them. This isn't attempting to be a proof of concept, rather a writing experiment concerning availability and validity, does fragmentary text result in fragmentary conclusions, or is reading always fragmentary. Articles, which are partially available, and used here I include with the essay.

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