

Cinema Studies essay, using the Wachowski brothers as a case study (2008)

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Compare and contrast the notion of remediation in the works of Larry and Andy Wachowski.

Bolter and Grusin define remediation as “the formal logic by which new media technologies refashion prior media forms” (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p273). To put it simply, new media forms such as the Internet, video games and digital art have all been affected by the media that came before it but have now started to influence these older forms of media themselves. For example; upon its inception, animated computer graphics drew upon the traditions put in place by film and television but now film is beginning to draw upon the new ground that has been broken by computer graphics, it’s a cyclical effect. This is a theory that can be applied quite well to the work of *Andy and Larry Wachowski*, (also known as *The Wachowski brothers*). Bolter and Grusin’s theory will be analysed by looking at the Wachowski brothers’ films, *The Matrix* (1999) as well as its sequels and spinoff’s, *V for Vendetta* (2006) and their most recent work *Speed Racer* (2008), and how these movies have affected other forms of media.

The Matrix, the Wachowski brother’s most prominent film, presents a world two hundred years into the future where technology has become so seamless that it is almost invisible, an “invisible immediacy” of technology (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p272). People believe they’re living out their everyday lives in the year 1999 but in fact are unknowingly connected to an extremely advanced computer simulation. Bolter and Grusin examine this idea by stating “our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them.” This is a film that Bolter and Grusin would refer to as exploring the “double logic of remediation.” (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p5), where it seems society’s ultimate goal is to eliminate any interface with technology by creating newer and better technology. The Matrix and the other stories in The Matrix franchise, lend themselves greatly to the exploration of remediation. Not only do they focus on this very idea in their storytelling but the films themselves are responsible for remediating other forms of media in many ways.

When it came to making a follow up to The Matrix, the Wachowski’s came up with the notion of making more than just a single film that continued the events of the first movie. In fact they decided the story could continue and spread into other mediums and not just be told on the cinema screen. *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003) while screened as two separate films, told one story that completed the trilogy of films and were shot at the same time and released within six months of each other. *The Animatrix* (2003) was a DVD release, consisting of nine short films set in the world of The Matrix and *Enter the Matrix* (2003, Shiny Entertainment) was a videogame release that told the events of The Matrix Reloaded from the point of view of the characters Ghost and Niobe. The Wachowski brothers wrote and directed all of these films, the videogame and five of the nine Animatrix shorts and to get the full experience and understanding of the story, viewers had to watch (and play in the case of the videogame) all of these elements. This could almost certainly be seen as an exercise in

remediation, as it was the original film that inspired these continuations of the story and sequences such as the famous ‘bullet time’ events of the first film, were made into integral parts of the gameplay in the Enter the Matrix videogame. Additionally several games and movies outside The Matrix universe used this technique and it has become almost commonplace in many action movies now. The videogame *Max Payne* (2001, Remedy Entertainment) even based their whole game around the notion of bullet time, which lead to Enter the Matrix labeling the technique as ‘focus time’, which ironically was seemingly to avoid copying a technique they had invented. Furthermore the Enter the Matrix games contained scenes that featured the actors from the film, portraying their characters in scenes that weren’t in the feature films. This could all been seen as a case of remediation, where the success of the original movies meant that the Wachowski’s had to not only come up with bigger and better uses for their cinematic techniques, (which were employed in the sequel films) but also spread their story across multiple interlinking formats.

The animated format that was used in The Animatrix, is one in particular that has evolved through the process of remediation over the years. While it is obvious that the nine short films on the DVD collection all have very distinct and different visual styles and therefore influences, the majority of the short films used in The Animatrix come from a Japanese anime background. In fact there were many successful Japanese film makers working on the project with the Wachowski’s. These included *Shinichiro Watanabe* who is most famous for creating the *Cowboy Bebop* and *Samurai Champloo* anime series. He directed the *Kid’s Story* segment and also wrote and directed *A Detective Story*. On top of this the *Beyond* short film was directed by *Koji Morimoto* who is responsible for the Japanese movie *Akira* (1988), which is largely credited with popularising anime in many international markets in the late 80’s (Kinsella, 2000, p5). So while the Wachowski brothers were working closely with these and many other successful Japanese artists, on a remediation of Japanese anime, it is also worth noting that anime was originally influenced by American animation and it could be argued that Japanese anime itself is a remediation. *Osamu Tezuka* is largely credited with the honor of creating manga (Japanese comics) and in particular the notable features such as the large eyes that are now synonymous with the medium today. However he originally drew the inspiration for such designs from American characters like *Betty Boop* and *Walt Disney’s Bambi* (Kinsella, 2000, p11). This is evidence of the cyclical effect that remediation can have on different forms of media. Not only are the Animatrix films a remediation by affecting modern media themselves but anime is a remediation because it drew on past media and in turn affected new media such as The Animatrix.

This could also be said about the Wachowski brothers’ latest cinematic effort, Speed Racer. Speed Racer is a modern adaptation of the 1960’s anime series of the same name. It obviously draws its influences from the popular series as several distinctively Japanese traits are present in the film. Along with the ideals of ‘being the best’, something that is common throughout many Japanese series’, the most obvious being the inclusion of ‘speed lines’. This is usually represented by a character moving in front of a background made of blurred coloured stripes and originally comes from the Japanese manga, to demonstrate that a character was moving fast in a medium where such an event is often hard to portray (Schodt, 1986, p30). In anime it also saves the animators having to draw a full background that would only be seen for a few seconds. However with film being a live, visual medium, normally any

backgrounds would simply be shot on camera at the same time as the foreground shot. Obviously this is not the case with Speed Racer and the Wachowski's went out of their way to add visual effects to recreate this technique in a live action format (Bowles, 2008, p2). Again this relates to remediation by the new media form of anime which as discussed was refashioned by prior forms of media, has also now been an influence on the new media of modern cinema. The movie will no doubt also have a hand in refashioning the new upcoming television series *Speed Racer: The Next Generation* (2008, Nickelodeon), which also helps back up Bolter and Grusin's remediation theory.

V for Vendetta is another of the brothers' films that lends itself to the examination of remediation quite well. As mentioned when discussing the Matrix trilogy, with each new film in the series, the Wachowski's had to keep coming up with new and interesting ways for the bullet time technique which was a staple of the franchise, to be used. V for Vendetta is a much less action oriented piece but it does include one fight scene that is arguably similar to those featured in The Matrix. The fight is shown almost entirely in slow motion and features the titular character V fighting his way through a series of armed guards using only his knives. Blood is sprayed through the air and it features some very stylistic close up slow motion shots of the knives being thrown through the air. There is obvious inspiration to the Wachowski's earlier work with the air being pushed out of the way of the knives, similar to the bullets in The Matrix. And since the film's release, other films such as *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006), have used exaggerated slow motion blood splatters quite similar to that of V for Vendetta. Whether or not Zack Snyder was influenced by the Wachowski's fight scene or not, it is likely that these movies will go on to influence further works in the future and continue the process of remediation. The fact that the film was based on a graphic novel, also lends credence to the theory in a couple of ways. As the film was very successful and made US\$132 million at the worldwide box office (Gray Brandon, 2006, p1), it proves that comic book movies with darker themes than those featured in the *Spider-man* series for example, can succeed and may have helped refashion later graphic novel adaptations such as the upcoming Batman film, *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) instead of having something more along the lines of the campy *Adam West* style Batman from the 60's TV show. The other way the theory is given some credibility is that older media such as graphic novels have had to evolve because of the emphasis on new media. Because of the limitations on movement and interactivity that the comic book medium has compared to many forms of new media, a greater importance has been placed on elements such as art style and creating sequences on the page that would cost millions of dollars to produce on screen, but can be easily drawn by hand, can be seen in many modern comics compared to their predecessors (Manovich, 2002, p23). Comic series' such as *Metal Gear Solid* (2006, Hideo Kojima) have also experimented with the medium, combining new media with the old to create remediated interactive graphic novels that are created for portable game consoles and keep the comic book look and feel but add sound effects, frame transitions and basic animations.

By studying the concept of remediation in conjunction with Andy and Larry Wachowski's films, as well as their videogame and animated work, it's quite easy to argue that Bolter and Grusin's theory is a well founded one. It seems that new media like modern cinema and interactive entertainment have almost always been influenced by the older forms media that came before them but are also affecting the media in their own ways as well and will continue to do so for a long time to come. Perhaps we are

coming closer to the “invisible immediacy” of technology put forth by The Matrix, or who knows, maybe we’re already there.

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