The Future of 21st Century Studies

A talk

Richard Grusin (Director, Center for 21st Century Studies)

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Curtin 175

New C21 director Richard Grusin formally introduced himself to the UWM community with his inaugural talk on “The Future of 21st Century Studies.” Greeting audience members upon their arrival was a _sotto voce_ David Byrne from Knee Play 12: “In the Future” (1984, 2007), in which Byrne dramatized the contradictory ways in which people anticipate the future: “In the future TV will be so good that the printed word will function as an art form only. . . . / In the future no one will be able to afford TV.”

_The Future_

“As for the future, your task is not to foresee it, but to enable it.” — Antoine de Saint-Exupery

After a warm introduction by Richard Meadows, Dean of the College of Letters & Science, Grusin wittily noted the paucity of “Centers for 21st Century Studies” on Internet searches, suggesting that _21st century studies_ was certainly a wide-open, growth field. But with that entertaining excursion aside, Grusin presented some of his own preliminary definitions of the burgeoning academic field known as 21st century studies:

_21st century studies can be defined as the interdisciplinary studies of the humanities as they are currently being practiced in the 21st century._ Here, Grusin expressed less interest in establishing an overarching coherency or unity and more in being engaged actively with a multitude of contemporary thoughts and criticisms. A commitment to the contemporary, however, does not mean concerning oneself only with the present: echoing Walter Benjamin, Grusin contended that “it is often the past that can most effectively illuminate the present moment in its specificity.”

_21st century studies can be defined as the study of the 21st century._ This, naturally, refers to studies of the present and recent past, of issues of pressing concern to us now. But the study of the 21st century now also means studying the 20th century as its “incarnation as the century prior to ours, as well as its role in the final century of the second millennium. In this sense, the twentieth century is the new nineteenth century.”
21st century studies can be defined as a synthesis of the first two definitions. For Grusin, by “studying what is distinctive about the issues of the present, we are also able to rethink or reconceptualize our study of the past, which in turn allows us to understand our present situation in a different light.”

The Future of “21st Century Studies”
“The future is here. It’s just not widely distributed yet.” – William Gibson

Having established some working definitions of 21st century studies, Grusin next spoke to its future. To engage the key issues of its age, 21st century studies cannot focus on the humanities, arts, and social sciences alone—the historical purview of the Center. But it is going to have to engage all those other disciplines that have traditionally been seen as distinct from the humanities—the scientific, technical, and professional disciplines; likewise, those “other disciplines” are going to have to engage the humanities, arts, and social sciences.

In a way, Grusin continued, 21st century studies cannot be considered a field per se. “It is not an area or discipline of study, in the manner of the development of the modern university in the 19th century, but a mode of inquiry, a way of asking questions, of pursuing research, of disseminating one’s findings, of publishing one’s results.” The “borders [between disciplines] are becoming more difficult to draw: questions of film, music, and literature become questions of sampling technologies and intellectual property, or questions of war and counterterrorism become questions of computer programming or the design of video games.” In paraphrasing the cyberpunk author William Gibson, Grusin declared that “the future of 21st century studies is already here; it’s just not widely distributed yet.”

The “Future” in 21st Century Studies
“We look at the present through a rear view mirror. We march backwards into the future” – Marshall McLuhan

For the second part of his talk, Grusin shifted from the future of 21st century studies to the concept of the future in 21st century studies. As a way to enter this topic, Grusin summarized key arguments from two of his books, Remediation (1999, with Jay David Bolter) and Premediation (2010). In Remediation, Grusin and Bolter argued against the bias of the “new” in “new media” (the web, virtual reality, computer graphics): while most assumed an avant-garde stance toward new media as a set of technologies and practices that disrupted a history of aesthetic and cultural principles, the new media actually achieved their cultural significance by paying homage to, rivaling, and refashioning—“remediating”—earlier media such as perspective painting, photography, film and television. The past is remediated in the present.

Remediation also posited two “contradictory media logics”: immediacy and hypermedicacy. This “double logic of remediation” took a particular form in the 1990s. “The ultimate of immediacy” was envisioned as virtual realities “free from the cumbersome gloves and headpieces,” while hypermedicacy was “marked by the proliferation of mediation or by fragmentation and multiplicity,” such as seen in multi-windowed computer desktops and TV screens, or the graphic design of Wired magazine.

“The future already exists as a feature on the media landscape of the present.” – Richard Grusin

After 9/11, however, Grusin has been observing the emergence of what he terms premediation, something akin to “medial pre-emption,” or a remediating of the future in the present. Now, immediacy “materializes itself” as a constant and unconstrained connectivity (via one’s social networks and media devices), while today’s hypermedicacy is more that of “affective participation in and distribution of one’s networked identity across multiple sociotechnical and medial networks,” all operating within an environment of heightened, post-9/11 security.
While there are formal differences between the 1990s remediation and a 21st century premediation, there are also sociocultural or political consequences arising from the two. Grusin argued, for instance, that the “double logic of remediation” constituted the “medial regime” for the dot.com bubble, a media formation marked by the “unwavering confidence of a future that would be just like the present, only bigger and better”—far different from the “fear of a catastrophic or apocalyptic future” that marks our current, post-9/11 era of premediation.

In this current moment of premediation, not only the past and present, but the future as well, has already been remediated: “the future already exists as a feature on the media landscape of the present.” So unlike the era of remediation, which seeks a kind of “perpetual immediacy,” premediation seeks “to remediate potentialities, future events or occurrences that may, or may not, take place.”

In the run up to the Iraq War, for example, premediation took the form of the proliferation of particular scenarios or possibilities, giving the sense that war was inevitable. To generate these possibilities, or Deleuzian virtualities, required their remediation “out of which future actions, decisions, or events might (or might not) emerge.” To see premediation as the remediation of virtualities is to recognize that “there are always multiple competing and incomplete futures.” For Grusin, what’s key is that these virtualities are real. “To think of the future as virtual, and therefore as real, is to insist on the efficacy, or force, of the multiplicity of premediations in and of themselves—no matter how the future might actually turn out.”

With his own research as background, Grusin argued that the concept of the future that must be embraced in the development of 21st century studies is actually a form of premediation. “21st century studies needs to emphasize not where the humanities are, or where they have been, but where the humanities are going. . . . The future of 21st century studies is not to come, but is already here. 21st century studies must not march backwards into the future, its eyes on the rear-view mirror, but must engage the future in the present. Hence the time for 21st century studies is not at the end of the century but at its beginning. The future of 21st century studies is now.”

The Future of the Center for 21st Century Studies

“The task of the university is the creation of the future.”

– Alfred North Whitehead

For the final part of his lecture, Grusin outlined some future tasks for the Center to undertake. First, he made clear that his priority as new director was to take seriously, or to interrogate, the concept of 21st century studies—and, consequently, what it means to be a Center for 21st Century Studies. Recognizing that the Center...
has already begun this task *implicitly*, he is eager to make this project an *explicit* one. Grusin sees this project in terms of two, broad goals: 1) to continue bringing the Center into the 21st century, and 2) to continue bringing the 21st century into the Center.

Grusin’s first goal demands attention to the institutional formation of an interdisciplinary humanities center in the 21st century. Current configurations of humanities centers, which date back to early religious orders, put an emphasis on *space*—as a place away from the quotidian where scholars can exchange ideas—but also on *time*, in the sense that faculty are given time away from teaching duties and service responsibilities to do their own research. Given that we are in an age of social media and “always-on” media, however, Grusin would also look at other forms of participation in the Center, “forms in which co-presence in a physical space was not essential.” Additionally, the Center must “take the lead in the creation and deployment of 21st century modes of research, analysis, and representation,” perhaps through publishing conference papers online and by adding a digital wing to the Center that would foster new media experiments in research and performance.

In detailing his second goal— to continue bringing the 21st century into the Center—Grusin focused on the intellectual aims of the Center. In its earlier manifestation as Center for 20th Century Studies, the Center rightly focused much of its intellectual energy on “the multiple and complex questions of modernity.” But now that we are in the 21st century, a structural re-orientation is certainly in order, possibly by fostering new forms of collaboration not just among humanist, artists, and social scientists, but also with scientists, engineers, technologists, and other professionals.

To encourage more regional, national, and global collaborations, Grusin would also like to see the Center have more robust and extensive physical and networked presences via small satellite outposts around campus and Milwaukee, as well as a more robust presence on the Internet and social networking sites.

To conclude his talk, Grusin insisted that the Center cannot be merely a humanities center, but a center for the entire university. This does not mean that it abandons its original mission as a humanistic base, but that it actually fulfills it as one of the “four peaks of excellence” that helped establish UWM as a doctoral campus. With an appreciative audience urging Grusin to provide more details during the question-and-answer session, it was clear that the Center for 21st Century Studies has a strong future of healthy dialogue ahead of it.