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## INTRODUCTION

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) use the term ‘remediation’ to explore the changes to textuality that have accompanied the development of multimedia. They describe:

... a double logic of *remediation*. Our culture wants to both multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them. (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 5)

For Bolter and Grusin one of the key issues involved in remediation is that of immediacy – the demand for erasure of the medium of the viewing experience: ‘The medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented: sitting in the race car or standing on a mountaintop’ (1999: 6). Further, they argue, this immediacy ‘depends on hypermediacy’ (1999: 6), which they later define in the terms of William J. Mitchell as a visual style that ‘privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity and ... emphasizes process or performance rather than the finished art object’ (Mitchell (1995 quoted in Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 31).

Bolter and Grusin also trace a cultural history of both remediation and hypermediacy. Earlier visual artworks, they claim, often used linear perspective and naturalistic lighting effects to create the sense of immediacy for which late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century multimedia artists have striven. And the logic of hypermediacy, so apparent now in web sites and the desktop interface, can be seen also in earlier text-forms such as illuminated manuscripts, medieval cathedrals and in the work of Dutch painters, such as Jan Vermeer, who were fascinated with the process of representation (Bolter and Grusin, 1991: 31–9).

Bolter and Grusin’s work provides some fascinating insights into multimedia and this study accords with some of their insights, and challenges others. And in both cases the rationale for this response comes from the theoretical framework used here to explore multimedia texts – which is derived from the work of Russian linguist, Mikhail Bakhtin. From Bakhtin, for example, comes the notion that all texts are read in the context of a cultural history of textuality – so that a reader or viewer or listener understands a specific text by comparing and contrasting it with her or his experience of all other texts. Bakhtin explained this when writing of the novel:

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**For the prose writer the object [the text] is a focal point for heteroglot voices among which his own voice must also sound; these voices create the background necessary for his own voice, outside which his artistic prose nuances cannot be perceived, and without which they 'do not sound'. (Bakhtin, 1981: 278)**

Bakhtin called this cultural mix of voices, heteroglossia; Julia Kristeva later translated the concept as 'intertextuality'. In both cases it is used to understand the ways in which readers mobilise the meanings in a specific text – by locating it intertextually; that is, in relation to the heteroglossia of other texts (voices) in, to and through which it speaks. So a contemporary painting of a female nude speaks or has meaning not only in relation to other contemporary representations of the female nude, but also in relation to the cultural history of the female nude which most viewers bring in some, often implicit, form to their viewing.

So, like Bolter and Grusin, this study understands the meaning of contemporary multimedia texts as generated not only by reference to other contemporary multimedia, but also in relation to the cultural history of textuality of which they are a part. It differs somewhat from their argument in that it does not see contemporary multimedia texts or audiences as wanting to erase the medium of a text; instead both texts and audiences seem often to play exuberantly with an intense awareness of the media used and their potential for meaning-making. Bolter and Grusin acknowledge this 'immediacy through hypermediacy' later in their book, where they associate it with the interactivity of video games (1999: 81). For this study, however, this interactivity with the text is a consistent feature of any reading or viewing or listening practice; part of the audience's mobilisation of intertextuality that creates the meanings of the text.

The notion of the active audience also crucially informs this study; the recognition that texts of all kinds only mean (that is, make meaning) because there is a reader or viewer or listener interacting with them. So it is not appropriate or useful or effective to entertain the concept sometimes heard in IT circles of the 'stupid user' – the user who cannot access a web site or use a program. If a web site or program is so difficult or inaccessible, it is most likely that it fails to acknowledge and mobilise the intertextual resources that its target audience(s) bring to it. In other words, the designer has not understood and used the cultural literacy of the audience in creating the product.

This study focuses on the kinds of cultural literacies employed in multimedia texts – whether they are digitally-generated multimedia (such as web sites and computer games) or composite forms of multi-media texts (such as films, museum exhibitions, performance art). Both forms are essentially multi-modal in that they employ different modalities of text – writing, visuals, sound, movement, spatiality – in their construction and meaning-making. The cultural meanings of each of these different modalities is explored for what it brings – historically and culturally – to the design and reading of contemporary multimedia. And in each case, also, we consider the ways in which this different mode of communication positions the user as a contemporary (multimedia) subject.

Chapter 2 explores writing in the age of multimedia. We start by exploring the historical significance of writing – its role as a guarantor of authority and truth (the written contract, the word of God) – in order to understand the kinds of cultural echoes it brings to any text. But we also consider the role of writing as a technology, something our familiarity with written texts can lead us to overlook. How does it operate as a technology? What kinds of meanings does the very ‘look’ of writing generate? We consider the changing relationship between visuality and writing and whether the visual has now superseded the written word, as well as the visuality of writing itself – an aspect of writing we again tend to overlook (Ong, 1982). Chapter 2 also addresses the issue of digital literacy, the specific literacy demands of the digital era, and ends by exploring the ways that this new literacy is shaping us as contemporary subjects.

Chapter 3 begins by examining some fascinating recent visual work by artists Amrit and Rabindra Kaur Singh, and H.R. Giger for the kinds of meanings they generate about contemporary society and culture. For the Singhs, this is an overt political practice; for Giger, an implicit element in his work. Yet, both produce beautiful and affecting art. We look at the visuality of a typeface and how this, too, generates a specific cultural experience. And we look at a complex, multimedia (hypermediated) text – the front page of a newspaper – for the complex meanings it offers readers and casual viewers. In each case we are looking at the ways that visuality articulates cultural (and social and political) meanings. We consider also some of the ways we might use to access these meanings, some of the critical terms that are useful for exploring visual texts. We then mobilise these terms to analyse a specific multimedia genre, the web site. We explore the web site as a specific visual genre: how it can be described and what functions it performs. We analyse a particular site (*HistoryWired*, operated by the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, USA) for the ways it uses visuals to perform its role as a particular kind of web site (institutional, educational) and how it positions users. In the course of that analysis we also explore some of the concepts and practices that can be used specifically to analyse visuality.

Chapter 4 ‘Sound’ begins with a series of scenarios in which sound is a major factor. These range from the pumped-up bass track of the Dolby Sound System used with *Star Wars* films to the writer who takes a laptop to a busy, noisy café to work. In each case we explore the contemporary sound theory that enables us to understand the different deployments of sound in these scenarios – whether it is sound as an imperialist practice that interpellates the listener into a particular transaction or exchange or narrative, or the personal stereo used to individuate the soundscape and protect the user from forms of social regulation. We consider the different concepts and ideas we can use to understand and analyse sound as a form of communication and as an embodied practice (we feel, as well as hear, sound). And we explore the terms that have been developed in several disciplines (including film studies, media, linguistics) to discuss the meanings of sound. The chapter concludes with an example of sound analysis in a section of film, which attempts to show how sound elements such as music, sound effects,

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and voice quality work together to generate a particular story and its (social and political) meanings.

Chapter 5 explores movement as another of the modalities used in multimedia texts. Like writing, visuality, and sound, movement is a culturally- and historically-specific practice – as the work of Marcel Mauss in the early twentieth century made clear. Mauss looked at the ways people move and discovered associations between styles of walking and individuals from specific cultures (both between and within countries or nations). The Chapter investigates the historical and social meanings of movement; how understandings of movement have changed in the west over the last several hundred years and the significance of those changes for textuality. We look specifically at the significance of movement in relation to digital technologies, including how metaphors of movement articulate the power and practice of the technology (for example, in the hyperlink that characterises many digital texts). Several ‘moving’ texts are analysed for how the movement contributes to their meanings (socially, culturally, politically). And we also consider the relationship between movement and embodiment, and how that may effect the meaning-making practice of the multimedia text – as well as how specific movements define the multimedia subject(ivity). Finally, we discuss how the movements generated by conventional layout diagrams map the common narrative of western societies.

In Chapter 6 we examine the last of the modalities that we associate with the practice of multimedia, which is spatiality. Again, we explore the socio-historical significance of this modality beginning with the redefinition of space in the early twentieth century as (a component of) space-time; that is, as inseparable from time as a parameter of human existence and experience. We trace the ramifications of this new understanding of space in the social theory of the later twentieth century, which theorises space as generated by particular actions and activities. In particular, we consider the creation of ‘cyberspace’ as the metaphor that enables many of our interactions with digital technologies. We also look at the proliferation of spatial metaphors in the work of theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari, used so often by multimedia theorists. Our concern is with how these spatial metaphors configure both contemporary textuality and subjectivity. Finally, we consider how metaphors of space inform our understandings of memory, and how they distinguish human and machine memory; which also inscribes understandings of spatiality into our understanding of the difference between information and knowledge.

Chapter 7 addresses the issue of connection, which is one of the defining features of digital technologies. Allucquère Rosanne Stone describes the connection between humans and their technologies in a way that is both enabling and unnerving: ‘Since in a deep sense they are languages, it’s hard to *see* what they do, because what they do is structure seeing. They act on the systems – social, cultural, neurological – by which we make meaning. Their implicit messages change us’ (1995: 167–8). With this in mind we consider Martin Heidegger’s important work, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, for its conception of this connection between technology and

the human; particularly for the possibility of reflexivity that Heidegger locates in our uses of technology. This leads to a study of the work of two theorists – Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway – who, from very different perspectives, explore our relationship with technology and how that reflects our current understanding of the connection between mind and body – which, for both theorists, generates new conceptions of hybridity and of connectedness. We trace a grounded example of this new connectedness in the use of digital technology to create new kinds of relationships between people, new intimacies, and the reflexivity they can promote. Finally, we consider one of the major theorists of this field, Jean Baudrillard, and how his work can inform our understanding of the relationship between the user and the multimedia text.

In all of these chapters the guiding principle is that we are dealing with a specific mode of communication that multimedia audiences or users encounter in a variety of different textual practices or locations. Our concern is with how users mobilise their understandings of these earlier encounters in their readings of multimedia texts. This follows the same logic as Susan McClary when she writes of a Mozart piano concerto:

... the Mozart piano concerto movement with which we are concerned neither makes up its own rules nor derives them from some abstract, absolute, transcendental source. Rather it depends heavily on conventions of eighteenth-century harmonic syntax, formal procedure, genre type, rhythmic propriety, gestural vocabulary, and associations. All of these conventions have histories: social histories marked with national, economic, class and gender – that is, political – interests. (1986: 53)

To understand the politics – the meanings – of a text of any kind, including multimedia, involves understanding the politics/meanings of its conventions – another Bakhtinian principle (Bakhtin, 1981; Jameson, 1981; Todorov, 1984). And understanding the meaning of any text involves both its poetics and its politics – whether we are looking at a contemporary web site or listening to a Mozart concerto.

This cultural knowledge is the subject of this book. It is the raw material, if you like, from which users, readers, viewers and listeners generate their own specific textual readings/meanings. Those readings are a combination of contemporary literacies and idiosyncratic experience that situate the text within a specific user's life experience and knowledge.

None of this exploration of meaning potential is prescriptive; rather it is a mapping exercise. The object is to explore the cartography of contemporary meaning-making; how different techniques and strategies make meanings for users, readers, viewers and listeners, and what those meanings are. It is intended as a resource – a way of developing a language about these strategies that might enable authors and designers to talk more explicitly about their work; users to talk about their readings. And it might also provide a way of conceptualising the relationships between these strategies and the politics of the text. This includes both the meanings these strategies make within a particular configuration (in the specific text) and the significance of the specific text as an example of contemporary multimedia.