

Chapter 1: Multimodality and textual analysis

Analysing Media Texts

Many of the texts we think of as ‘media’ are screen-based texts, in particular television and film, and so it is natural that the discipline of Media Studies has much in common (and much common history) with Film and Television Studies. It also has many areas of overlap with Cultural Studies, which has concerned itself with the study of popular culture.

Like these disciplines, Media Studies has, over the last thirty years or so, adopted a variety of approaches to textual analysis that may be described as ‘semiotic’ – that is, they viewed media texts as constructions of sign systems, to be analysed using the semiotic methods developed from structural linguistics, seeing meaning as chain-like combinations (syntagms) made up of signs selected from different functional categories (paradigms). In this book, we will lay out a semiotic approach, but one which will offer solutions to some of the difficulties which have beset semiotics in the past.

One problem with semiotics historically is that it developed into increasingly obscure variations, influenced by psychoanalytical theory, and by the range of theories collectively known today as ‘post-structuralist’. Similarly, theories of postmodernism made it increasingly difficult to go about the business of analysing a text without becoming involved in strategic philosophical refusals to see meaning as logically determined in any way. While these theories valuably challenged the idea that meaning resides in fixed codes, representing fixed identities and a stable world, they also lost some of the clarificatory benefits of structuralist thought. The project of a general science of semiology originally proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the founding theorists of structural linguistics, was intended to be an illumination of how meaning is constructed in different communicative forms. We believe, as we shall show, that it is possible to recover this clarificatory purpose without losing the benefits of more recent developments in textual theory.

A second problem for semiotics (though also a set of productive developments) was the rise of Cultural Studies. This discipline, while it employed aspects of poststructuralist thought, was in effect an assault on the abstraction of methods of textual analysis (especially those typical of late-seventies film theory) which conceived of viewers of the media as idealised spectators, rather than researching the behaviour of actual viewers. Cultural Studies represented a radical shift in emphasis, then, from text to audience. It used approaches derived from sociology and ethnography to research how real people engaged with film, television, romantic fiction, dance, popular music. Again, while the new territory revolutionised our idea of how ordinary people lived their cultural lives, it contributed very little to textual analysis as such, seeing meaning-making more as part of the audience’s interpretive effort than as part of the text’s structural function. We believe that there is a balance to be restored here.

A final aspect of media, film and cultural theory which should be delineated is a tradition of research in the political economy of the media. Such approaches allow for the study of how media texts are produced and consumed, looking at the significance of political and economic contexts and motivations. This makes it possible to explore issues of policy, regulation, globalisation, and patterns of consumption, as well as integrating these with more finely-focused case studies of audience groups

What does this amount to for students of the media today?

The legacy of these histories, we believe, makes it easier to study how media texts are produced and consumed than to study the texts themselves – or how the making of meaning is something that happens in a complex series of interactions between producer, text and reader.

As Cultural Studies changed the focus to audiences and to the political economy of the media, it is almost as if a focus on signification itself was left behind. Similarly, in the field of Film Studies, the riot of theory that succeeded structural semiotics has left a sense that there is no theory of signification that can attract any kind of wide consensus. Indeed, some prominent film theorists have argued the need for a retreat from theory (including semiotic theory), promoting instead a kind of analysis based on an understanding of cinematic conventions that seems to bypass the need for a theory of signification – of how meaning is made (Bordwell and Carroll, XXX). An alternative approach, particularly in film and literary theory, has been to shift the emphasis away from the analysis of texts towards forms of cultural history, so that the issue becomes less one of how texts make particular meanings, and more one of where do they come from, and what series of transformations, evolutions, and past cultural contexts have shaped their growth.

We take a different view. We believe that theoretical approaches are available which look both at what a text is saying and how it is saying it, in a relatively clear and systematic way; while at the same time considering how real audiences engage with texts, and how texts are actually produced in the real world. Andrew Tudor (1999) represents the current imbalance on Cultural and Media Studies in terms of a familiar opposition in sociology – the polar terms of structure and agency. Broadly speaking, he describes a move from an emphasis on the ability of structures (of language, ideology, text, the psyche) to determine the lives of people, to the reverse: an emphasis on the agency of people in determining their own meanings, pleasures, identities. He sees this opposition as sterile, arguing the need to find a new balance between structure and agency, and a sense of how the two are interdependent rather than opposed. In many ways, our approach in this book is an attempt to find practical solutions to the problem Tudor identifies.

In our view, then, a theory enabling students to analyse media texts with some degree of confidence would need three things.

The first is a coherent approach to signification – to how texts make meanings, and how these meanings may be carried by a variety of different communicative forms, such as language, image, sound, gesture.

The second is the capacity to integrate textual analysis with an analysis of audiences and their engagement with the texts under scrutiny.

The third is the capacity to integrate with the political, economic and social contexts in which texts are produced.

The approach which we will describe and model in this book has these capacities, and will provide students of the media with an analytical framework applicable, not only to media texts, but, in principle, to any text of any kind. It is an approach rooted in social semiotics; and, more specifically, in a theory of multimodality.

What is Multimodality theory?

Multimodality theory is a form of semiotics: a theory for the analysis of sign systems, or modes of communication. Its aim is to understand how we communicate with each other in many different ways, some of them mediated through the human body, such as speech, gesture, or dance; others mediated by various technologies, such as writing, visual design, film, the internet, and so on. It looks for semiotic principles common to all forms of communication that are relevant in any given instance (for instance, if we are analysing a film, to consider how patterns of editing, spoken language and music might all contribute to an overall effect which we recognise as rhythm). And it looks for ways to describe systematically how these modes relate to each other: how the meaning of words might be changed by accompanying gestures; how images of outer space are changed by their combination with a Strauss waltz in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

A social theory of communication

Multimodality is rooted in *social semiotics* (Hodge and Kress, 1988), a theory of sign-making which sees all acts of communication as social. In this theory, the sign-maker always has a social interest, or motivation, to communicate. It may be driven by the need to represent something in the world, whether this be an event, a belief, or

the sign-maker themselves. Or it may be driven by the need to establish relations with other people. In practice, whatever the emphasis, it will always perform these two basic functions. However, our communications are dependent upon not only the semiotic resources available, whether these be paintbrushes, words or binary code, but also and the social and cultural contexts in which we communicate. Analyses of the semiotic structures of texts produced for and by children and young people must, therefore, try to relate the analysis to these contexts, to determine what interest motivate the communications under scrutiny.

The social contexts of the media of contemporary communication have been extensively explored in the Cultural Studies research tradition. Of particular interest to educational researchers are studies by David Buckingham and colleagues of children, education and the media (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 1994), of child audiences (Buckingham, 1996), of children's engagement with screen media (Buckingham, 2002), and of children's production of media texts (Buckingham et al, 1995). In these studies, the motivation of children to engage with media texts to explore their world, their developing identities, their social allegiances, their tastes and pleasures, are documented and analysed. The picture which emerges is in many ways an optimistic one, where children's use of communicative forms is often knowledgeable, confident, purposeful. At the same time, a need is perceived for broad pedagogies – ways for children to learn how to understand and create media texts; though these forms of learning will not necessarily be located in formal educational contexts.

A functional theory

Multimodal theory sees all communicative acts as having three overarching social functions. The first of these is **representational** – to represent some aspect of the world. The second is **orientational** – to establish relations between those who are communicating (whether these are real people and real relationships, as in a conversation; or between fictional characters and their real readers or viewers). The third function is **organisational**: to organise the communication as text, compose it in such a way that it is coherent and cohesive: so that it has conceptual unity and structural unity, both of which are necessary if the first two functions are to be fulfilled. (It should be noted that different writers have used different terms for these functions; ours are derived mostly from Lemke, 2002).

These three functions provide a basis for the way we might approach analysis and the questions we might want to ask about a text, and we will return to them frequently as we tackle specific texts in the following chapters.

Communicative Strata

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) make a suggestion which has radical effects for textual analysts. They propose that texts, rather than being ‘once-for-all’ systems of signification, are in fact part of a dynamic set of processes of production, interpretation, re-production and so on. To systematise this idea, they suggest four strata:

Discourse: which they define as ‘knowledge of (some aspect of) reality’. We can see discourses as related to genres, so that human knowledge of some aspect of reality, whether large and grand (such as warfare, or the Gothic imagination) or small and domestic (such as domestic chores or homework) will always be coded in particular

communicative patterns. We see discourse, not just as the precursor to any act of meaning-making (though it is always that), but also as a pervasive medium which completely surrounds it: all aspects of the making of a text are discursively-situated and informed. Kress and van Leeuwen go on to point out that the interpretation of a text, itself an act of production in its own right, may take place in a different discursive context than that in which the text was produced, making for subversive counter-readings.

Design: design is the choice of mode. To tell a story, you need to decide whether it will be told orally, or in writing, or perhaps as a visual narrative. Richard Lanham has called this ‘The Middlesex Question’: a student approached him after a lecture at Middlesex University, saying that, as a designer, he was constantly having to decide whether to convey a message in image, text, speech, or some other mode; and wanting to know on what he could base his decisions (Lanham, 2001). These decisions will produce particular sets of *affordances* – what each mode can offer, or indeed, what limitations it has. Language can tell a story whereas pictures can show it. A spoken story will be told in a specific time, and will make important use of intonation; a written story will be read in the reader’s time, and intonation will be replaced by other devices. These are important differences.

Production: production involves the choice of medium. We will look further at medium next. Modes are always realised through material media – once we have decided to tell a story, we have to decide whose voice will tell it; if we write it, we have to decide on the material tools for the writing (fountain pen or wordprocessor), the visual design of the writing, the paper on which it will be printed, and so on. These choices, for multimodality, are not insignificant afterthoughts, but part of what makes the text mean what it does, and can affect the process of textual production

significantly. The introduction of electronic media goes much further, not simply adding another set of material resources, but changing the nature of representation in profound ways. Digital media do not simply provide a different surface 'look; or aesthetic (Sinker, 2000), but offer ways to re-design elements of text already designed in a previous process (scanned images, edited text, edited video footage, multimedia ensembles). Furthermore, they provide new physical environments, tools and cultures within which communicative acts take place.

Distribution: texts can be distributed in many ways, but the ones we will focus on in this book are distributed through complex technologies, which can reproduce, disseminate, re-design, transform in many different ways. This is partly to do with the nature of digital media, which are 'descended', in their social function, from earlier technologies of recording and transmission. In many ways, this function is still clearly discernible: television broadcasting systems and cinema projection systems deliver the moving image to its audiences; while the internet delivers webpages to its audiences. However, the plasticity of these media in the digital era means that the dividing line between the design and production of a text and its distribution becomes hard to distinguish. In the case of the internet, for instance, the medium of distribution is also, in many ways, the medium of design and production; and the webpage, once accessed by a reader, can be decomposed into text and image, or back into HTML, to become a resource for the production of new texts or transformations based on the old one.

Why is multimodality of interest in education and social science research?

Firstly, an increase in multimodal communication can be seen in contemporary media. Obvious examples are print publications: newspapers, magazines and text-books all include many more visual images than was the case in the mid-twentieth century. The twentieth century also saw the introduction of new forms of multimodal text, especially the combinations of sound and image in cinema and television. The current period is seeing new transformations and combinations of communicative modes in the internet, the rapidly-changing and extending functions of mobile devices, the convergent screen-based technologies, and the combinatorial possibilities of new digital formats for still image, moving image and sound. Interestingly, the word ‘multimodality’ is currently being used in the computing and telecommunications industries to refer to the way in which devices are moving away from a specialism in one mode to the use of several – so that your mobile phone will not only be for speaking and listening, but will take and receive pictures, enable text, show moving images, and access the internet.

The implication for textual analysts in the social sciences is twofold. As with any text, we need some way to analyse the processes and regimes of textual production: how is a computer game, for instance, authored? Stephen Poole (2000) describes how, in the early days of computer games, there was a kind of auteur period, where lone enthusiasts programmed entire games alone, and thus could be credited with a kind of authorial responsibility for the ‘game-text’. Now, he points out, games studios employ designers, script-writers, artists, animators, composers, programmers, directors – the authorship of the game is a highly-differentiated process involving many specialisms, more like the traditional division of labour involved in studio film-making. Schools

can, and do, offer both of these polarised models. Students in schools can now make their own movies, combining music, sound, speech, graphics and the moving image all on one computer operated by one student; or they can simulate an industrial studio, with specialised divisions of labour undertaken by students working as a group. Multimodality offers ways to recognise the particular forms of meaning contributed by these different configurations of people and technologies in the making of a text.

Secondly, we need ways to analyse how texts are engaged with by those who use them, read them, watch them, interpret them, interact with them. In educational research, this is a perennial concern, and one beset by changing and competing definitions of literacy and communication. As the multimodal nature of high-technology societies grows, these societies will reassess what communicative competences are needed by their citizens and how these are to be acquired and judged. The 20th century saw a growth in Higher Education courses in the new media of film and television; and more recently in the even more new technologies of computer-based communication. The first undergraduate and post-graduate courses in computer games are appearing at the start of the 21st century. It seems certain that a move away from writing to what Walter Ong calls a 'secondary orality' is already offered by the digitally-mediated spoken word, in speech recognition and synthesis, and in hybrid forms which combine features of writing and speech, such as text-messaging and chatroom communication (Ong, 2002).

More specifically, for education researchers, debates about literacy learning in schools have widened in recent years. While in many Anglophone countries there is still a focus in policy and practice on word and sentence level print literacy, especially in the

context of early years learning, educators are also asking what might visual literacy look like (Raney, 1997), or how might moving image literacy be conceived (Burn and Parker, 2001)? Others are asking what specific relations might there be between print literacy and the moving image (Parker, 1999); or between print literacy and computer games (Beavis, 2001)? More broadly still, the notions of multiliteracies and digital literacies suggest wider notions of communicative engagement across modes and media (Bigum et al, 1997). Though this book will not directly address these debates, we hope to provide some frameworks for the analysis of texts which children engage with or make in the context of these expanding conceptions of literacy. We will return briefly to the question of literacy in the concluding chapter.

The Researcher's Focus

Multimodality is an emergent theory, and our version of it is different from those of other writers. It is important to be flexible and adaptive. Furthermore, this is a very brief introduction to multimodal analysis, and can only give a limited number of exemplar analyses. For more complete accounts, readers should see in particular:

- Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), for a general theory of multimodality;
- Hodge and Kress (1988), for a general theory of social semiotics;
- Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), for a social semiotic theory of visual design;
- Jewitt and Kress (2003), for an edited book of different educational perspectives on multimodal literacies.

It is also important, as in any research, to define what it is that you are looking for – to ask a specific research question. In educational research, questions about multimodal texts may be related to many possible themes: what a text offers its readers; how it may be interpreted by them (and what might obstruct effective interpretation); what cultural uses it might be put to by children, parents, teachers, national policy-makers and curriculum designers; how children might design and produce their own multimodal texts; what resources and technologies are available.

The method of this book will be to demonstrate how multimodal texts can be analysed using the frameworks outlined in this introduction. There are many possibilities here; but we can only represent a sample of them. Most of our choices will be about whether we are focusing on one of the functions or more; one mode or more; and on one of Kress and van Leeuwen's strata or more. In chapter 5, we will think beyond the text, to explore how readers interpret texts, and how this semiotic process is related to the semiotic structures of the text they are interpreting.

Finally, our choice of texts is necessarily arbitrary. It represents something of our own specialist interest in media education, within which websites, horror films, computer games and documentary videos are all legitimate objects of study as well as potential outcomes of students' own production work.