MULTIMEDIA

ANNE CRANNY-FRANCIS

Multimedia

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Texts and Contexts

Anne Cranny-Francis

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PREFACE

This study of multimedia was written after several years' work as a consultant, analysing web sites. Its genesis was, therefore, in the practical need to communicate effectively with the users of information technology. My role was to analyse the ways in which the web sites made meanings available to users, and the kinds of meanings they offered. This meant exploring both the meaning-making practices of this new medium and the medium itself – how it positioned the individual user, and how users reciprocally influenced the development of the new technology and its textual practice.

The institutions and corporations represented by these web sites were often surprised, and sometimes alarmed, by the accuracy with which their web sites told their story to the public. Even when designed by an outside web consultant, the web sites betrayed the internal politics of the source in ways that seemed uncanny. On the other hand, the sites proved to be a rich and immediate source of communication with users – utilised to impart information, sell products, entertain, share thoughts and feelings.

So my involvement in these projects was very practical. It was about finding ways to talk about the meanings of this new genre of text, to enable designers and owners to assess their sites and also to create new and different meanings for their users. I worked with a colleague who conducted both on-line surveys and interviews with the users, which meant that I was able to check that my textual analyses accorded with the experiences of users. Through this hands-on experience I began to build up an understanding of how the different textual strategies available on a web site create meanings – or meaning-potentials – for users. Further, I also observed the development of the web site as a specific textual genre, with its own sub-genres and textual conventions. And I noted that the difference between the various types of sites was associated primarily with their social function – whether they were primarily about selling products or providing information or sharing interests. This function or purpose determined the meanings the sites were designed to convey and so their use of particular textual strategies; which also means being able to identify the meanings that the textual strategies available to multimedia texts can bring to the user's experience.

This book explores some of these meaning systems and concepts and how they contribute to the text: writing, visuals, sound, movement and space. The study works against their disciplinary pigeon-holing and, instead, suggests ways of appreciating the specific aspects of each, as well as the contribution of each to the overall meaning-potential of the text. This sometimes entails identifying forgotten or elided meanings associated with a meaning system

and its textual strategies. We see this particularly with familiar meaning systems such as writing and visuals. At other times, it involves teasing out the meanings a particular system or concept and its strategic textual use can offer. Sound is equally familiar, but less often subject to analysis – and the same applies to movement and space, both of which are sometimes simply characterised as 'natural'. As this study shows, all of these meaning systems are culturally-specific and are created by their social uses and roles.

I have included examples of web site analysis as well as of other kinds of multimedia (though not always digitally multimedia) texts, including museum exhibitions and films. I have done this to acknowledge that many textual strategies have a cultural history of use that makes their meanings familiar to the users of the new digital medium. However, I also specifically address the digital environment since it generates its own constraints and possibilities.

I also discuss the connection that digital technology makes possible because, for good and for ill, it is one of its major capacities. It is this connectedness that has made us the posthuman subjects we now are – connected with each other, with technologies, and with other living beings in complex networks that make the autonomous and homogeneous humanist subject redundant. Now digital technologies (among others) extend the haptic capacity of human being and consciousness to operate beyond its skin boundaries – which is not to disavow the corporeality of individual consciousness, but rather to note its foundation in that extended corporeality.

At each point in the analysis it is essential to acknowledge the embodied user whose sensuous engagement, cultural preoccupations, social positionings, and political and ethical investments determine the extent to which she or he activates the meanings offered by the text. So the study of textual practice must be culturally-specific or located in order that the likely responses of particular users and audience can be predicted and explored.

This study now seems very introductory, yet I think it opens up many of the issues that must be addressed as multimedia becomes the standard literacy of the twenty-first century. No single chapter is complete; none is a complete grammar – and yet this is always the case with grammars. They are simply ways of introducing a temporary metastability to a system that is inherently ungovernable. Hopefully, this study is a contribution to that new digital literacy – and one that opens up its creative potential, rather than attempting to regulate it or close it down.

I want to thank my colleague, Patricia Gillard with whom I conducted the consultancies that were the genesis of this study. Her ethnographic studies of audiences and users complemented this cultural and textual analysis of multimedia and showed me that it worked, and her friendship was a great source of strength. I also want to thank Mary Macken-Horarik who shares my interest in sound, especially in science fiction film, and Bobbie Gledhill for quoting Tennyson and watching *Star Trek* with me.

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ONE

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:

> **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 multimedia 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,

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. Allucquére 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.

TWO

WRITING

When the first series of *Star Trek* graced television screens in 1966 viewers were shown a vision of the possible future of human (or, more accurately, US) society. The women wore micro-mini skirts and some of the men flaunted 'Beatle' haircuts – but one of the most striking features of the programme was its view of technology. The producers of *Star Trek*, led by the visionary Gene Roddenberry, rejected the hokey technology of its more successful rival programme, *Lost in Space* for a credible extrapolation of 1960s technology. The starship, *Enterprise*, was controlled by a computer that was accessed either by direct voice-command or by patterns of lights. Science officer, Mr Spock, was frequently shown playing his hand over a bridge console to activate light patterns that communicated with the computer, and then translating those patterns into verbal information when the computer responded to his commands. There were no screens of verbal data on the *Enterprise*. The later *Star Trek* series added minimal verbal icons to the coloured patterns but communication with the computer remained basically non-written – either direct verbal interaction or patterned displays of icons or lights. The written text was somehow not appropriate to this future vision. And, in fact, when it appears, it does so as a charming antique – as in Spock's gift to his captain, James T. Kirk, of a copy of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*.[1]

Written communication is now both central to our lives and not so dominant as it once was. That apparent contradiction is evident in current multimedia texts. As Bolter and Grusin (1999) note, however, there have always been multi-modal texts. Many medieval paintings employed verbal and visual modes. Later, printed books included printed words and woodblock or woodcut images. In more recent times, newspapers and magazines, film, television, books and video use a mix of modalities in their texts – words, images, voice, sound, music. So contemporary users have a history of consumption of multimodal, multimedia texts and have developed ways of understanding their (potential) meanings and of incorporating those meanings into their everyday lives.

The change produced by digitisation is that it not only became possible to generate multimedia texts, but also that it placed the possibility of multimedia production in the hands of the everyday user. Just as word-processing made it much easier for individuals to edit their work (who can remember the days, not so long past, of typewriters and tippex?), now programs found on most

computers (such as Microsoft Word) enable users to generate texts that combine words and images – and without much more expertise to include animation and sound. This increased availability of multimedia production signals a change in the significance or value of different modes of communication. Writing still has a major social and cultural role, but it is not as dominant as it was in the nineteenth century soon after the steam-powered printing press took newspapers, pamphlets and, eventually, books into the homes of all but the poorest members of the community; or when 'universal' (verbal) literacy became the basis of educational policy. The ability to read and write soon became not only the hallmark of a civilised person, but also an essential requirement for men, women and children inside the home and without. We now have a technology that is equally transformative. With the possibility of generating multimedia texts placed in the hands of so many users, multi-modality is becoming the new literacy.

This chapter deals with writing as a communication mode in an age of multimedia. As with the other chapters on the textual strategies of multimedia, the aim of this chapter is not to be prescriptive about the use of writing, but rather to open up the possibilities it offers. This discussion begins with an acknowledgment of the power of writing in our society; of its function as a technology that establishes and maintains authority and 'truth'. This is followed by a study of the relationship between writing and visuality: how it has changed over recent years, and the meanings of those changes. The visuality of writing is also explored, with emphasis on what we have learned not to see and how those elements contribute to its communicative power. This discussion leads to a consideration of 'digital literacy', and of the demands that the immediacy of writing on-line make on individual users. Finally, we consider the relationship between writing and subjectivity and how it enables us to understand the contemporary multimedia subject(ivity).

The technology of writing

In *Of Grammatology* (1974) Jacques Derrida explores the meaning of writing, noting of the printed text:

> **The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopaedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy, and … against difference in general. (1974: 18)**

In this way Derrida draws attention to the distinction between writing as a communicative practice and a way of thinking, and the printed word, which is a technology for specifying the politics of a situation or an event or act. In Derrida's formulation the printed work closes down the disruptive potential of writing to challenge ways of thinking and acting – through the slippages and elisions that make its meaning undecidable. Derrida points instead to the

history of what he calls 'writing in the common sense, the dead letter' (1974: 17) as a means of asserting and maintaining authority.

Early forms of the written word were associated with authority, either as religious texts (handwritten by monks and other religious orders) or as official state chronicles. These early written texts were rare: literacy was limited to scholars, religious orders, state officials and the upper classes (many individuals occupying several of those roles or identities simultaneously); paper and inks were expensive. Many of these texts, interestingly, were multimedia in that they featured beautiful visual elements such as illuminated letters that were more than just illustrations of the verbal texts. Sometimes, the illuminations added other layers of meaning to the verbal text, visually expanding on the subject-matter of the verbal text; at other times, they chronicled the life of the illuminator and his community. In either form the preciousness, beauty and expense of the manuscript immediately associated it with those in positions of power and authority (Church or State (regal)) – and the written word itself became a sign or guarantor of authority. In this sense it literally enacted the concept of the divine word in Judaic and Christian doctrine: the godhead manifest in the word – 'I am the Word.'

The spread of commerce in the West and the development of secular power bases were effected through the medium of the written word. The written word was used to record commercial exchanges that formed the power base of the middle classes. The written word maintained its authority through official documents or bills of lading; it was accepted as a guarantee that an action had taken place, or that it should. The word still carried the same semi-divine authority it always had.

Equally crucial to this dominance of the written word in western societies was its role in the development of western science. In fact, the written word might be seen as *an* – or even, *the* – essential technology of science; that is, the written record of scientific observation and experimentation became the fundamental precondition and guarantor of scientific authority, which that scientific episteme constructed as 'truth'. In her essay, 'Modest_Witness @Second_Millennium' (1997), Donna Haraway writes about the development of the scientific method. She refers particularly to the study by Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer of the chemist, Robert Boyle, whose work came to define the scientific method. Haraway records that in their study, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Scientific Life* (1985), Shapin and Schaffer (quoted in Haraway, 1985) note that three different technologies come into play when a new life-form (the scientific method) is generated: a material technology, a literary technology, and a social technology (a formulation that applies equally to the study of contemporary information and communication technologies).[2] The literary technology of the scientific method was a written report by a supposedly neutral observer[3] who objectively recorded observations and experimentation that tested an hypothesis and so reached value-free conclusions ('truth'). Without this written documentation and presentation of results the scientific method – and western science – does not exist. For a contemporary scientist the guarantor of the value and validity

of her work is its publication in an internationally-recognised, peer-reviewed journal. The written word operates as guarantor of authority and as a source of truth.

One striking example of this power of the written word is given in an exchange between an obstetrician and his patient, recorded by British childbirth educator, Sheila Kitzinger:

Doctor: [*reading case notes*] Ah, I see you've got a boy and a girl.
Patient: No, two girls.
Doctor: Really, are you sure? I thought it said … [*checks in case notes*] Oh, no, you are quite right, two girls. (1988: 145)

Kitzinger uses this example to demonstrate how traditional Western medicine positions the patient as powerless and as totally lacking in authority. However, the more striking feature of this exchange is that *both* doctor *and* patient are subordinate to the case notes (and the basis for this can be found in the literary technology of science, discussed above). In fact it is the doctor's own subjection to the case notes that leads him to make this extraordinary challenge to his female patient about her knowledge of the gender of her own children. Of course, other factors no doubt intersect here – the power relationship between doctor and patient, and conservative gender relations that position the male as authority figure. Yet, it is the power of the written word that enables an exchange that is more than simply unequal; it is preposterous.

Similarly it is interesting to note that the so-called 'killer ap' of the late twentieth-century technological revolution was not the web site generator but e-mail, a very basic form of writing. E-mail has transformed contemporary western lives in a way that only the development of the first postal and rail systems did. Business is conducted at a faster turn-around time; arrangements (for travel, purchase, co-productions) are made at the speed of a modem or cable; people chat to strangers in different parts of the globe about their interests, their love lives, their hopes and aspirations for the future. And it works so effectively because writing maintains its authority.

Derrida's challenge to the logocentrism of writing is one of the fundamentals of mid- to late twentieth-century philosophy (Derrida, 1978), and had far-reaching consequences in a range of disciplines – from Literary Studies to Cultural Studies, History to Sociology. However, the challenge to the authority of writing also comes from those who have been excluded from the position of 'modest witness', sometimes because their literacy skills are inadequate, at other times because their accounts are not held to be sufficiently objective or well enough documented. A striking example of the latter occurred in some responses to the *Bringing Them Home* report on the State-sanctioned abduction of indigenous children from their families in Australia (National Inquiry, 1997). The first-person narratives of survivors of this abuse were challenged by some respondents as insufficiently objective or as undocumented – accusations that seem as preposterous as the example above of the doctor–patient interaction. For those respondents the written word is

the only proof of an event, a guarantor of its veracity. Such respondents have not understood or accepted the need to situate the mechanism of authority; that this mechanism of authority (the written word) is culturally-, socially-, and politically-specific.

The poststructuralist interrogation of epistemology in the latter half of the twentieth century, inspired by theorists such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, focused on the role of writing as a technology of 'truth'. In exploring the assumptions encoded in writing and subsequently established by the written word as 'truth', poststructuralist critics both acknowledged the social, cultural and political power of writing and opened it up to critical challenge.

The written word has had a tempestuous history. It both retains its power and has that power under challenge. Or rather, perhaps we might say that what is under challenge is the situation of the word: whose written word is it? Why is it regarded by some people to be the only guarantor of truth? Which people make that claim? In a time of such flux, of questioning and debate rather than unquestioned obedience to authority (whose authority?), the written word has multiple possibilities of use in any text. It can be used for simple information delivery – but then its authority is under challenge, so will that information be accepted? It can be used to suggest this very complexity, and so can operate both literally and interrogatively, or ironically, in the same text. And this is particularly evident in texts that combine writing and other modes of communication, such as the visual.

Writing and visuality

In his essay, 'Visual and verbal modes of representation in electronically mediated communication: the potentials of new forms of text'[4] (1997), Gunther Kress argues that the relative status of the verbal and the visual as a mode of information delivery has been changing over many decades. Kress examines two school science textbooks, from 1936 and 1988, and notes a crucial difference in their use of visual material. In the earlier book the graphics illustrate the written text; their relationship to the written text is one of redundancy. In the more recent book, however, there is no redundancy between verbal text and graphics. Instead the graphics convey information that is not contained in the verbal text, so that the verbal and visual material in the book work in a complementary, not redundant, fashion. This important change signals a new status not only for the visual (considered in more detail in the following chapter) but also for the verbal. The written word is no longer the sole source of (scientific and other) information.

At the same time the written word starts to take on a new role in art and design. Postmodern artworks mix modes of representation, so that visual works appear with words written across them. In fact, a blend of writing and visuality has become a kind of postmodern cliché. This mix of modalities signifies the end of an older reading and viewing practice in which the visual was surveyed for its possible meanings and then a verbal translation was attempted.