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**Hypertext Theory: Writing in the Electronic Era**

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**Term Paper**

**Multi-Modality & The Electronic Writing Space**

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## **Abstract**

Electronic writing space is said to combine several modalities of communication, which includes elements of the visual, textual and aural senses. This paper attempts to explore the semiotic potentials of the electronic writing space, and to describe the demands that this multi-modality places upon the author and the reader.

## **Introduction**

Just as the artist has his canvas for his creativity, so does the author with his writing space. What then is the electronic writing space? A simple definition would be the space for expression provided by the electronic medium. Contributing to the author's expression in this given space are additional modalities of communications which contribute to the text being more interactive. It is therefore crucial for the author to identify the semiotic potentials of this electronic writing space, and be empowered with this multi-modality to make reading a different experience for the reader.

## **Potentials of Semiotics & Multi-Modality**

There is a critical difference between the literary writing space and its electronic component, contrary to Bolter's claim that

*"[a] printed book consists of words on a page. When we read the words, they give rise in our minds to representations of the world, of imagined worlds, or of abstract ideas. When we read words or examine illustrations in a hypertext on the computer screen, we have the same experience."*<sup>1</sup>

The experience for the reader is never the same as reading a book. Hypertext has been developed for the purpose of achieving new experiences for both the reader and the writer, and this is evident in Landow's support for the promise of hypertext to *"embody and thereby test aspects of theory, particularly those concerning textuality, narrative, and the roles or functions of reader and writer."*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jay D. Bolter, 'Electronic Signs' *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 87-88.

<sup>2</sup> George P. Landow. 'Hypertext: An Introduction' *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 2.

Hypertext opens up innovations in the field of writing, such as the use of hyperlinks and the juxtapositioning of materials in written, visual and aural forms. There are implications for these advantages to written text in the multimodal arena of hypertext, which includes visual information, sound, animation, and other forms of data.

Besides content, visual (and even audio) presentation are now of equal if not more importance for the author. Kress has noted that

*“after a period of some two to three hundred years of the dominance of writing as the means of communication and representation, there is now, yet again, a deep shift taking place in the system of media and modes of representation and communication, and the system of evaluating these.”*<sup>3</sup>

With this shift towards the increasing dependence on images and sounds to convey information, hypertext seems to be the platform for authors to express their creativity and share their knowledge. This proposition is supported by Kress who says “[i]nformation that displays what the world is like is carried by the image; information that orients the reader to that information is carried by language.”<sup>4</sup> While this is becoming true with the semiotic potentials of the electronic writing space, there never should come the day when the scales are totally tipped, leaving language to fend alone.

Although hyperspace is still a textual medium, the aspects of fonts, colours, size and animation come into play for the electronic writing space. The modality of text, however, is foregrounded with the introduction of visual and aural modalities. The visual composition of any type of message represents a large part of its meaning, and that is often supported by the cliché ‘A picture paints a thousand words’. However, in this time and age, it is more accurate to say that it can paint a thousand *different* words. This convergence of the various modalities holds many prospects for future of hypertext.

## **Need for the New Author**

As with any type of text, the writer must ask himself what the purpose of the piece is, who the audience is, and exactly how does the imagery enhance the text. “*With new media technology, we are moving from an anonymous public to active communities.*”<sup>5</sup> The author must learn to accept that the reader wants to play a

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<sup>3</sup> Gunther Kress. ‘Visual and Verbal Modes of Representation in Electronically Mediated Communication: The Potentials of New Forms of Text.’ *Page to Screen* (London: Routledge, 1998), 58.

<sup>4</sup> Kress, 65

<sup>5</sup> Alan C. Purves. *The Web of Text and the Web of God: An Essay on the Third Information Transformation* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998), 160.

more active role in the writing of the text, and thus allow the reader to do so through the use of the alternative modalities available.

In view that hypertext empowers the reader with the ability to interpret the text as and how he wants to, especially since hypertext creates an environment for the reader to map his own reading path, it is then the responsibility of the author to identify a number of interpretative paths which may always be supplemented and subverted by the reader. The relationship between author and reader is thereby reconfigured.

With the multi-modality of the electronic writing space, the author can now present his knowledge or creativity to his readers, if he so wishes, in a variety of media. An interview article may be both accessible on video and as a written feature. When images, written texts and sounds are brought together, new ways of combining iconic and symbolic signs need to be found. Thus, multi-modality does not simply mean adding the visual and aural modes to the textual mode, but the production of whole new, multi-semiotic combinations of representation. This means that the author has to carefully consider the way that he selects and combines the different modalities.

Bush has identified that the human mind does not work in terms of pure indexation of information. Instead,

*“[i]t operates by association. With one item in its grasp, it snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts, in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain.”<sup>6</sup>*

Hence, it is only beneficial for the author for him to identify, with the visual and aural modalities, the possible associations that can help the reader to better associate with the concept or story which he is telling.

The author should also use *“the new media genre to arrange information in a rationale, intelligent form and provide functionality to users,”<sup>7</sup>* as noted by Liew. For this to be possible, the author hence must be able to know how to use these semiotic tools to his advantage. This means that the author has to face the challenge of self-renewal if he wants to survive in this new playing field.

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<sup>6</sup> Vannevar Bush, 'As We May Think' in *The Atlantic Monthly*, 176: 1 (July 1945), 106.

<sup>7</sup> Avrel C.L. Liew. *Understanding The Social Context in New Media Design with a Focus on E-Documents*. (Campus Visit Seminar delivered for the Information & Communications Management Programme at the National University of Singapore, 7 August 2001)

## Presenting the New Reader

“Changing the ease with which one can orient oneself and pursue individual references within such a context radically changes both the experience of reading and ultimately the nature of what which is read,”<sup>8</sup> according to Bolter. With the creation of hypertext fiction, the reader is invited to participate in the shaping of the text.

There is no doubt that the author is still in control, but the reader is put in the scenario where he *seem* to make random choices while reading texts that *seem* borderless. It is this freedom that the reader has been waiting for, and now it is readily available with the shift towards multi-modality in the electronic writing space. As Bolter further points out that

*“the electronic reader takes an active role in the making of the text: that indeed the text becomes a contested ground between author and reader. In fact there is a third player in this game, the electronic space itself. The computer is always doubling the author for the reader, just as it doubles the reader for the author, interpreting and misinterpreting each to the other.”*<sup>9</sup>

It is with the understanding of the elements of visual literary that a viewer can come to understand visual syntax. Visual literacy allows the reader to make sense the meaning and components of the image, with basic visual elements like shape, texture and dimension. Just as the author has made a significant choice in his selection of visual elements to accompany his text so as to help the reader to visualise the text better, the onus is on the reader to identify these elements and to interpret the underlying meaning which the visual elements are portraying for the author.

Given also that the new author has the added task of selecting the right combinations of multi-modality elements to better ‘tell his tale’ to the reader, it would be wise for the reader to judge the author dependent on the content rather than the modalities used. The modalities only add to the experience of reading. Hence, at the end of the day, it should be the case the reader enjoys reading the content and not purely enjoying the aesthetics which hypertext offers.

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<sup>8</sup> Landow, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Jay D. Bolter, ‘Electronic Signs’ *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 91.

## **Conclusion**

While the electronic writing space is an environment for structured yet creative writing for the author, there is the need for him to accept that this hyperspace is also an infrastructure for connectivity with his reader. If he intends to make reading an experience that goes beyond the rhetoric of simple writing, then he has to be ready to meet the demands of the new reader with the semiotic tools that electronic writing space readily offers to him.

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