

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 multi-modal, 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 visibility: how it has changed over recent years, and the meanings of those changes. The visibility 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 apophoric 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 observer³ 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 child-birth 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 (which 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.



FIGURE 2.1 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)* (1981), viewed at www.usc.edu/schools/annneberg/asc/projects/comm544/library/images/541.html

Instead the verbal and visual are interrelated to generate meanings. For example, Barbara Kruger's 1981 collage, *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)*, features an image of a classic carved female bust with the words 'Your gaze hits the side of my face' pasted down the side of the image, as a series of cut-outs (see Figure 2.1).

One obvious reading – literally – of the work is that it directs the viewer to the ways in which the gaze has objectified the feminine, with the essential violence of that objectification conveyed by the verbal pun on 'hits'. Another reading, however, focuses on the relationship of the verbal and the visual in that reading practice and, instead, sees the whole work as about ways of reading. Kruger's cut-outs indicate that reading is a construct, and in so doing begs the questions of who speaks here and what is the status of that speech. One answer is that this is a female voice (of which the classical female image is a visual metaphor) – in an art-world dominated by masculine voices, as both artists and critics. A second answer is that this voice is active in the artwork, rendering it a political as well as an aesthetic practice; that is, the inclusion of this marked voice – marked because it is female, not the (supposedly) politically 'neutral' male⁵ – makes the point that all art is political and that the aesthetic is a fundamentally political practice. It deconstructs the 'neutrality' of both the masculine and the aesthetic.

Kruger's work not only constructed a new voice (making an unfamiliar, feminist reading of a classic work), but it also located the voice, rather than

assigning it the transparency of neutral observer status. Kruger's work is not only a criticism of the masculinised world of the gaze, but also a deconstruction of the masculinised voice of authority – as it operates in the art world, in disciplines such as philosophy (and aesthetics), and in everyday life.

The use of the written word in postmodern artworks is often a way of examining the status and power of the written word. As noted earlier, however, this interrelation of the verbal and the visual has now become almost cliché, which underscores just how central this critique has been to contemporary understandings of textuality and, specifically, of writing. It does not devalue the power of writing but instead demonstrates its continuing role as a social, cultural and political technology.

Gunther Kress argues that writing has lost its dominance and that verbal literacy is now less important than it once was. Alternatively, verbal literacy can be seen as even more necessary than ever, with internet users processing vast amounts of writing with greater speed than ever before. Furthermore, users need to be alert to many aspects of writing that have become invisible through familiarity – like the use of fonts, the layout of a page – for their role in the creation of meaning.

The visuality of writing

Whether as an element in a postmodern artwork or on a web site, writing now has to be considered not as a transparent carrier of meanings, but as a feature of the design. So the visuality of the written text once again becomes visible. As everyday multimedia users we know, for example, that a text printed in Times looks vastly different from a text printed in Sand font – and will be perceived differently; it will mean different things. This pervasiveness of writing in multimedia led designer, Matthew Butterick, to note in an essay on typography:

The sole bit of good news is that [written] text rules the digital frontier, because it is compact to load, easy to create, familiar to use, and compatible with all computing platforms. The popularity of the World Wide Web has shown that text is still a vital medium, and though it's less flashy than pictures, sound, and video, it offers the best bang for the bandwidth. (2001: 39)

Most e-mail is conducted in either Times or Courier font, prompting Butterick to write that 'Internet users look like the most fertile new group of type consumers: a giant new demographic suffering from an acute case of dreadful typography' (2001: 40). Though as Butterick goes on to note: 'the language of Internet typography (HTML) allows for no explicit typeface choices, and only a handful of different sizes' (2001: 40) – a provocative thought for the technologically-gifted typographer.

In exploring the ways in which the visuality of writing can be used to construct complex, multiply-significant texts it may be useful to consider an example. In 2000 the National Archives of Australia (www.naa.gov.au)

FIGURE 2.2 *Documenting a Democracy* Home page, viewed at www.foundingdocs.gov.au

launched a web site called *Documenting a Democracy* (www.foundingdocs.gov.au) that shows visitors some of the founding documents of Australian democracy – which is to say, white Australian settler society. These documents include the Letters Patent that established many of the separate Australian States as well as the documents that declare the Federation of Australia. The site features some beautiful graphics and the virtual presence of those powerful documents has produced an awed response in more than one visitor.⁶ However, equally impressive is the site's interrogation of the values that those documents seem at first glance to confirm unquestioningly. And it is the web author's use of the written word that is the major channel of this critique.

On its Home page (see Figure 2.2) the web site features a splash screen: a mosaic of images of white settlement (or invasion, depending on point of view) overlaid with samples of copperplate handwriting and some typed material that the user assumes are from the documents recorded at the site.

At a most literal level this juxtaposition of verbal and visual material refers the user/visitor to the site's role in presenting the documents of Australia's white history. However, the superposition of writing over the images suggests another meaning, which is that the document precedes the event. In other words, the written document is not a simple recording of material events – which is the most commonplace understanding; instead, the implication is that the document actually enabled or caused the event. This is a very powerful statement about the power of the written word. It can be read as the site's acknowledgment of the episteme discussed above, whereby the written history is the valid history – the 'truth'.

Yet, as all Australians now know, this is just one version of the history of white Australian settlement. Essentially, it is the story of the victors; those who claimed by force the power to speak for all and whose documentary history is proclaimed the true history of Australia. And this, too, is shown on a number of pages at the site, including the splash page. The images over which the writing appears constitute a visual history of white-indigenous relations: from paintings of the First Fleet sailing along the coast and amicable meetings between English and indigenous Australian people, to the famous image of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam returning land to Aboriginal activist, Vincent Lingiari, by symbolically pouring dirt into his hands. Juxtaposing the documents (represented by the writing) with this history that Australians know to have been a bloody one, and one still fraught with injustice, immediately suggests the equivocal role of these documents in establishing what the victors now label a 'democracy'; that is, these documents that apparently offer a guarantee of equality and liberty were based on bloody conflict, the destruction of the liberty of indigenous Australians and the denial of their equality (they were not classified as Australian citizens until a referendum in 1967 changed the Australian constitution to enable this). This deconstructive reading of Australian history essentially questions the nature of history itself, and the role of written documentation in constructing the narrative that is accepted as history. This is arguably a crucial role for a web site that has professional historians as its major clients.

So the *Documenting a Democracy* site mobilises the visual representation of the written word to produce a web site that is not only a major source of information for historians, but which also engages historians – and potentially all users – in a fundamental questioning of the nature of history and subsequently of the meanings of terms like 'democracy'. And thus the site makes a major contribution to the development of the democracy – Australian society – which the recorded documents establish as a geopolitical construct.

In this example, debates about the written word, about the nature of documentation and about the history it produces discursively have a particular relevance. Nevertheless, it is impressive that the web authors do not rely on written argumentation to make this point. In fact, it may well be that on a government-sponsored site it would be very difficult to make this kind of argument directly. Rather, it is made in a number of different ways, including the reproduction of a map of indigenous languages (making the point that 'Australia' is not a monocultural construct, no matter who gets to write the history) and the inclusion of contextualising commentary with many of the documents – at times acknowledging their profoundly undemocratic nature. For example, on the Timeline page, the 1869 Aboriginal Protection Act (Victoria) is described as 'Democracy in reverse'. Yet, the most subtle and insistent argument comes from the splash screens and their interrelation of writing and visual images. And again the major point here is that the design employs the image of written word rather than its content to make this argument. It is the writing's implicit evocation of documentary materials, of written

history and of the producers of that history – their power and status – that generates the argument.

This example also raises two issues about writing as a mode of communication. Firstly, it confirms the power of writing through its ongoing involvement in debates about the nature of power. Secondly, it raises the issue of the visuality of the written text. What is it about the visuality of the written word that has been obscured by its power as a medium? What do we elide in our explication of the meaning of the written word?

Seeing the written word: reading the design

It could be argued that visual elements of writing (such as font, layout, spacing) are fundamental, communicative properties that we tend not to notice overtly – or, at least, not to subject to critical interrogation. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, there were attempts to draw attention specifically to the visuality of writing. Concrete poetry, for example, employed the materiality of the written word in the production of meaning as in the following example, Eugen Gomringer's 'Silencio':

silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio

The concrete poets utilised elements of the written word that had been ignored in the fetishisation of words; they explicitly evoked meanings that were generated not by words but by their arrangement in time and space.

Consider how much visual elements contribute to our understanding of written text. A particular spacing of lines indicates that we are dealing with a lyric – either poetry or song. Words arranged in columns most often appear in newspapers and magazines. So, spacing of words enables us to locate the genre of a work and also its medium:

Words in lines
 Which end in rhymes
 Tell us tales
 Of grief or passion.
 Words in columns and prose
 More or less verbose
 Are journalistic and factitious
 And debate our world in a political fashion.

A lyric poem written without its conventional spacing would be very difficult to process, and would most likely seem the most mawkish or overblown prose. A newspaper or magazine article written across a page, without

columns, would read quite differently. On-line versions of newspaper stories commonly do appear without columns in their printer-friendly form and the result is often that the impact of the piece is lost. This is because the journalist has written the story in a form that enables her or him to create salience in particular ways, by the use of grabs or by an arrangement of short and long paragraphs that highlights a particular statement. In transforming the piece for a printer, this layout is lost – and so is the writer’s emphasis, which is a major part of the meaning-making practice of the text.

Using the written word in any medium, therefore requires an awareness not only of the dictionary-derived meanings of the words but also of how their deployment in different forms and configurations may impact on those literal meanings. And this is not simply a matter of an individual aesthetic choice by author or user. The very fact that a choice can be made which is pleasing or disturbing for many users indicates that the choice is not a matter of individual taste, but is based in shared, cultural values and meanings. To utilise those meanings in the richest sense, then, an author needs to understand those configurations and their meanings – because they are part of the implicit cultural environment of users. Those users may not be able to articulate the meanings they read in exact historical and cultural detail, but they do see, read and hear those meanings. The informed designer or author adds to her or his palette, aesthetically, culturally and politically, by understanding the history of the modality. It enables the author to make complex meanings, to layer meanings, to add irony without need for laboured verbal or written explication.

In ‘Designing Hate: Is there a Graphic Language of Vile Emotion?’ Steven Heller (2001a) asks whether a particular typography can be evil – that is, whether the very look or shape of a word can be evil. His conclusion is that the connotation of evil comes from context, not from any implicit quality. So Heller writes that the swastika had no evil connotation before it was used by the Nazis; in fact, it was used by a US infantry unit in the First World War to signify courage. The swastika is an ancient symbol, signifying power. Because of its use by the Nazis, however, its meaning has changed forever: now it can only mean great evil. Visual artists employ the symbol in this way. Heller continues:

What typeface says ‘nigger’? What logo denotes kike, spic, or wop? Are there design conventions for expressing racism? Can hate be well designed? (2001a: 42)

He concludes that the type font used in Nazi propaganda – a German Fraktur type – now connotes brutality and savagery, not because of some essential quality in the font, but because of its cultural deployment. Of course, this begs the question of whether it was used originally by the Nazis because it already suggested some of these qualities. The answer is in the writer’s analogy with the swastika. The font may have had some (culturally) accrued meanings to do with power, but it was a particular historical, social, political, cultural mobilisation of those meanings – in the genocidal attacks on Jews, gays, the disabled, and others not acceptable to the Nazi regime (such as gypsies) – that have given the Fraktur font its (evil) meanings for contemporary readers.

An interesting supplement to this argument by Heller comes from a web site (wordiq.com), which records an interesting twist to this story of the Nazi font:

Fraktur went out of fashion during the early 20th century because of the obvious communication problems with non-native German speakers. However, in an attempt to deliberately differentiate Germany from the rest of the Western world, it was reinforced by Nazi Germany (1933–1945), which pronounced that Antiqua typefaces were not Aryan. During that time, new, more artificial Fraktur typefaces were designed (see Fig. 2 and 3). This policy was officially held up until January 3, 1941, when Martin Bormann issued a circular letter to all public offices which suddenly declared Fraktur to be *Judenlettern* (Jewish letters) and prohibited further use. It has been speculated that the regime had realized that Fraktur would inhibit communication in the territories occupied during World War II as well.

Despite being an old German tradition, the use of Fraktur still has a strong Nazi connotation to many, who are unaware of the Nazi decree of 1941 actually outlawing Fraktur. Consequently, Fraktur is today used merely for decorative typesetting; for example, a number of traditional German newspapers still print their name in Fraktur on the first page.

(Heller at www.wordiq.com, accessed)

The interesting point of this discussion is that the significance of the Fraktur typeface is seen in terms of its cultural history, even where that cultural history is essentially a fanciful construct – as in Bormann’s response to the typeface as ‘Jewish’.

Heller’s conclusion argues for a designer who is culturally-aware – able to understand the relation between design and meaning. Most particularly what this means is that design is understood not as individual choice and not as neutrally ‘aesthetic’, but as culturally formed and shared – and as culturally-specific. Heller notes, for example, that right-wing groups can deploy design elements associated with leftist groups to avoid being identified immediately with hate propaganda. The multimedia author has the plasticity of the word to work with – the fact that it can be made in a variety of ways, with different fonts, in different spatial arrangements, in combination with visual and other modalities (sound, movement, touch). But each use has its own history of meanings that users implicitly understand (to varying degrees, according to their own cultural backgrounds) and deploy in their construction of meaning – and that authors and designers therefore need to explore and understand. Let us look at the following examples of Bang: the word,

- **Bang!**
- *Bang!*
- **Bang!**
- **Bang!**

Despite our fetishisation of the literal meaning of the word, readers/users have many different ways of interpreting the meaning of a word in context – or of creating the context of the word (and hence its possible meanings) as it appears in different forms or fonts. It is not difficult for example, to determine

appropriate contexts and therefore possible meanings for the expression ‘bang!’ printed in the above fonts:

- **Arial Black Bang** – an adventure story bang, with lots of boofy blokes shooting at each other
- *Apple Chancery Bang* – an extremely genteel bang – probably a door blown shut in a gentle breeze
- **Sand Bang** – a children’s cartoon bang
- **Techno Bang** – a constipated, uptight, Keanu in tight leather bang

We can predict the meanings of these fonts through our common cultural experience because we are exposed to the use of fonts to make meanings through their visual appearance. One industry and context in which this has a major role and function is, of course, advertising – but the same principles apply to all uses of the written word. Its appearance is always meaningful, even if that meaning is to convey transparency (like the neutral observer of scientific discourse).

It might even be that an author could choose a design such as that on the *Documenting a Democracy* web site without any further, critical thought. And yet it was a choice. The author may have chosen only to engage with a contemporary mode of representation, the juxtaposition of verbal and visual text – but a critically- and culturally-aware author would know that this mode of representation signified more than an attractive arrangement of shapes. And, of course, we could argue that an author who is unable to articulate verbally this self-reflexive practice is nevertheless enacting an awareness of it through her or his visual skills. So the choice of design is a critical practice. It is worth noting even so that an author who knows why she or he makes such a choice is inevitably in a stronger position to make complex and interesting choices in the development of a text.

Breaking the rules

Stone wrote in *The War of Desire and Technology at the End of the Machine Age* that: ‘Before breaking rules it is necessary to understand them, so I have written and continue to write, academic articles that are quite mainstream in character.’ (1995: 166) This statement might be amended. It may not be necessary to understand rules in order to break them. However, to break rules and understand the significance of both the break and the text it generates, it is necessary to understand the rules in the first place; which is to say, one has to know how these rules work textually (what meanings they make as a component of the text, their diegetic function) and how they work culturally (what meanings they make for particular readers at a particular place and time).

As I noted earlier, this study does not follow the rule-governed approach of some handbooks on multimedia that argues for a set number of words per page or line, or that denigrates particular kinds of design, or even particular

fonts. Instead, it argues that usability is a feature of the cultures of users – literacies, subject positionings, social status – and that authors and designers can predict those cultures by an understanding of their users. It also argues for a textually- and culturally-aware author/designer who is able to articulate her or his design choices for clients and collaborators; and to articulate this not only in aesthetic terms but also as meaningful (meaning-filled) choices.

Screen-reading

Having argued for a non-prescriptive, culturally-sensitive response to the notion of usability it is, nevertheless, important to note that there are features of web-based uses of writing that may be technological, rather than cultural, artefacts. I use the word ‘may’ because it may also be that these features have a cultural component.

Analysts such as Nielsen make some important points about usability and writing even if they tend to do this in a rather prescriptive way. So, for example, they note that the font size should be easily readable on screen. This seems an obvious point – but it is apparently not obvious to designers of many institutional sites. All those columns of ten-point type are irritating because even if they contain information sought by the user, they are too small for most users to read. What kind of thinking has produced a web site that offers information but puts it in a format that is so hard to read? The obvious answer is: one that is not attuned to the needs of users. A brief survey of government web sites shows that this is a common failing. Rather than operating as a point of communication with the public, the site operates as a point of reference for the institution – categorising its functions, without any apparent awareness of the need to make these functions accessible to the public.

Challenged about this, one response from designers has been that there is a lot of information about the organisation to convey, and that this can only be done by reducing the font and displaying as much information as possible on the front page. A contrary view is that this approach does not acknowledge the primary function of the site as communication, and the need to present information in an accessible form.

This is why many analysts argue that the verbal text on a web site should be limited and not too conceptually dense. Too many words on a screen are difficult to read and a complex argument on a screen is very difficult to digest. One limitation of the rigid screen monitor is that moving back and forward (as one often needs to do in order to understand a complex argument) tends to be jumpy – and everyone has experienced the frustration of finding the line you wanted somehow lost in the click from page to page. The older technology of the printed book or journal enables the user to move easily from page to page or even to hold several pages open at once. At this point, this difficulty of movement seems to be a feature of the technology – yet it may not always be so. Furthermore, it is worth considering whether the limitation is also primarily a perception of readers trained to read a different (printed)

technology. When children interact with a screen – for example, reading information for homework assignments – they do not seem to experience the same kind of frustration with the limits of the screen. Is this perhaps because they do not have a long history of interacting with a different technology?

Even if this limitation is mostly cultural (generational), it must still be acknowledged by the contemporary multimedia author. Contemporary adult users may feel constrained in their reading of written text on-screen. They have a habit of being able to interact physically with a written text – touch it, write on it, underline or highlight it, physically manipulate the text in order to assert their own control of it. They want to refer back to earlier parts of the text physically, not virtually. As a result it is necessary to present written text on-screen differently from the way it is presented in printed form. The material cannot be as dense conceptually, but that does not mean it cannot be conceptually rich. Writing on-screen can be complex so long as users are able to interact with it in such a way that they can incorporate it into their understandings of themselves and the world; that is, so that they can use it to generate knowledge(s) – less on the model of monastic scholarship, more on the model of interactive play.

Digital literacy

The cultures of users are cited as critical knowledge for the author who needs to understand how to deploy the meaning-making resources available to her or him in constructing an on-line or multimedia text. The discussion has not yet considered how this on-screen engagement affects the user.

Stone wrote:

Ubiquitous technology, which is definitive of the virtual age, is far more subtle [than computers]. It doesn't tell us anything. It rearranges our thinking apparatus so that different thinking just is. (1995: 168, italics in original)

Stone's vision of the subtle, transformative effect of technology on individual subjects is evocative and provocative. It is Heidegger's argument in 'The Question Concerning Technology' in more user-friendly language. And it suggests why it is so important to understand the relationship between users and technology – because this too is part of understanding how users process an on-line text.

The brief study of writing with which this chapter started did not deal at length with the changes in the technology of writing. Yet, writing has always been associated with technology; we conceptualise it technologically. Paul Gilster in his study, *Digital Literacy* (1997), notes the significance of changes to the technology of writing: for example, from scrolls of parchment to books in codex form. As Gilster notes, when verbal text was presented in (codex) book form, it first became possible to cross-reference easily, to perform that backward and forward movement that some users feel is lost on-screen,⁷ and

to develop a system of page numbering and of indexing (Gilster, 1997: 25). The development of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-fifteenth century made books, newspapers and pamphlets more available than ever before, at least to the developing middle-classes. People were exposed to new ideas – about the nature of divinity, the role of church and state, and the relationship between individuals and each of these institutions. Not only did this have a major effect on the development of new secular institutions, but it also presented a great inducement to literacy – for all individuals who wanted to participate in social and cultural change. And this was accelerated in the nineteenth century by the development of the steam-powered press which furthered decreased the cost of printing. By the time the cheap paperback format was developed in the 1890s, universal literacy was an educational standard (if not practice) throughout western societies.

Understanding how a text came to be is part of understanding how meaning operates in a society; how information is transformed into knowledge; how your own textual production is socially and culturally positioned and how you might intervene in that positioning. Further, as Paul Gilster argues in *Digital Literacy*, it is more than ever now an essential skill. He bases this assessment on how current technology has impacted on information and communication delivery:

Acquiring digital literacy for Internet use involves mastering a set of core competencies. The most essential of these is the ability to make informed judgments about what you find on-line, for unlike conventional media, much of the Net is unfiltered by editors and open to the contributions of all. This art of critical thinking governs how you use what you find on-line, for with the tools of electronic publishing dispersed globally, the Net is a study in the myriad uses of rhetoric. Forming a balanced assessment by distinguishing between content and its presentation is the key. (Gilster 1997: 2–3)

Gilster notes that users must learn techniques for assessing the authority and/or reliability of what they access on-line, and concludes: ‘Developing the habit of critical thinking and using network tools to reinforce it is the most significant of the network’s core competencies’ (1997: 33).

To argue for a change from critique to design, as does Gunther Kress (1997), seems to undervalue both critique (as a contextualised practice that impacts on both everyday life and text production) and design (as a specialist practice that interrelates textual practice and meaning). On the other hand, critics and designers are now, perhaps more than ever, positioned to learn from each other – to interrelate their skills and abilities in order to (co-)produce text. It is significant, therefore, that contemporary design educators are writing of the need for designers to develop ways of working collaboratively, which means being able to articulate their abilities and to explain how their design works as a communicative practice:

New principles of interaction, information architecture, and collaboration must be folded in, while traditional principles of perception, conceptual thinking, and design processes are adapted to tomorrow’s tools. (Fried, 2001: 11)

Students must be taught to see themselves as contributors to the design process, as essential members of a team effort, and not just as 'visualizers' of the concepts generated by others. (Niederhelman, 2001: 16)

So just at the time that literacy educators such as Kress are arguing that critique must give way to design, design educators are arguing that design must move beyond its 'visualizing' practice to a more conceptual (and, therefore, critical) role.

Digital literacy involves a critical understanding of the social, cultural and political function of writing as a practice, and as a technology of everyday life. Like all technologies, writing powerfully influences how we think. Writing on-line has its own practices and protocols, which again contribute to the production of contemporary knowledges and understandings of our world and ourselves.

Being on-screen: subjectivity on-line

Paul Gilster writes that digital literacy is 'partly about awareness of other people and our expanded ability to contact them to discuss issues and get help' (1997: 31). This statement locates interpersonal communication as one of the key features of this new medium. He goes on to note: 'But it is also an awareness of the way the Internet blends older forms of communication to create a different kind of content' (Gilster, 1997: 31). It is significant that Gilster brings these two different aspects of on-line experience together – the experience of new possibilities of interpersonal communication and of new forms of textuality based, as we have noted elsewhere, in the reconfiguration of older forms. Both kinds of experience are related in that they impact on the individual's understanding of themselves and their world – their renegotiation of subjectivity and formations of identity.

One basic assumption of this work, and of all recent work on textuality, is that reading participates in the individual's negotiation of subjectivity. Users encounter a range of values and attitudes in the process of reading, viewing and listening that they negotiate by reference to their own cultural history and values. The result may be a reinforcement of the individual's fundamental beliefs and values – and corresponding feelings and actions – or some modification of them. In either case the individual's subject positioning is renegotiated in this transaction: values confirmed or challenged; attitudes reinforced or undermined; corresponding emotional responses reinforced or constrained; potential actions confirmed or opened to question.

Referring back to the *Documenting a Democracy* web site, let us consider the ways that different readings might contribute to the negotiation of subjectivity. For example, a user who has not grappled with the concrete realities of Australian history might read the site relatively naively as a simple cataloguing and description of powerful documents. For this user the site confirms a belief in the value of democracy and a patriotic engagement with Australia as a western democracy. So the site reinforces the user's basic sense

of self – their understanding of themselves and their own history, their relationships with others and with society as a whole. However, another user, who is more historically-aware, might read the site as problematising the nature of democracy and the notion of nationhood. For this user reading the site may mean the generation of understandings about democracy, nationhood, justice and equality that modify earlier ideas. This reader may be confronted with a new understanding that their own position within the society is based on conflicts that resulted in the dispossession of others, and on-going injustices and inequalities afflicting those dispossessed peoples. This reader reaches a new understanding of self, of others and of social relations as a result of their experience of the site. Both users have renegotiated their subjectivity as result of the interaction with the site; however, in the first case, the renegotiation results in no substantial change while in the second case the user's subjectivity is altered – a new sense of self is formed.

As noted above, this process is not unique to on-line reading but is a feature of all reading practices. For the on-line reader the concern is to be aware of how the elements that are specific to the medium influence the readings of written text. Gilster describes this as a historical awareness of the different modalities and of their new possibilities. With writing it means a heightened awareness of its elided visual elements that, in some on-line genres such as web sites, contribute substantially to the meanings. It also means being aware of how other textual strategies such as use of image and sound synergise with the written text to generate meanings. In other words, the literacy demands described above are important in the exploration of subjectivity because they enable the user to understand how they are being positioned by the text to accept particular values, attitudes and ideas. So the renegotiation of subjectivity is more self-aware; the individual is able to intervene consciously in the process.

Writing (for) your life

As noted earlier, e-mail is the most common and effective mode of on-line communication – and it is a writing genre. One of the most common ways of discussing how writing to others on-line affects individuals is through the notion of identity. Without physical representation a fifty-year-old man may represent himself as a teenage girl; a young woman as an eighty-year-old man. For some this raises the possibility of freedom from oppressive stereotypes they may encounter in everyday life. For others it may be a way of exploring aspects of identity that are normally closed to them – by adopting an on-line gender different from their own, for example, and noting how others react to them on this basis (though, of course, those others may also not be themselves, so to speak!).

There have been some celebrated cases of individuals adopting identities very different from their own and then having to deal with the fall-out when that difference is revealed. This possibility of formulating an on-line identity opens up for the individual the whole issue of identity. It raises issues about how much of identity is inherent in the individual and how much is generated

by others' reactions to that individual. Michele Everard has discussed how exchanges between school children on a local area network (LAN) seemed to have been facilitated by the lack of bodily engagement. Not having to negotiate the bodily presence of interlocutors freed the exchanges from the usual gendered problems: 'Some of the stereotypical behavior did exist in my project, but many of the children went far beyond what might be considered gender boundaries on the net.' (Everard, 1996: 201) She adds that, 'the gender participation levels were clearly different from those on Usenet' which she began by noting is dominated by male voices (Everard, 1996: 201). Everard's reading of this situation is that internet communication has been male-dominated because more men than women were using the technology early in its development. Everard suggests that involving both boys and girls in the development of the LAN has helped diminish stereotyped gendered responses. However, she is not so sure that the same situation would pertain with adolescents, who are more critically involved in the formulation of identity (gendered and otherwise). On the other hand, it might be that on-line communication challenges stereotypes because it reveals the ways in which those stereotypes are used. For example, in formulating on-line identities, how often do users employ just those kinds of stereotypes? Game-players and chat-room frequenters report how prevalent conservative stereotypes are – that is, individuals may choose to be a different identity, but that identity is itself often a stereotype (a muscle-bound hero, a buxom blonde, Lara Croft, a wizard, a dragon, and so on). This raises the issue of how much identity is invested with the notion of stereotype – and explains why the notion of identity itself has been rejected by many poststructuralist writers, queer theorists, and others.

The immediacy of e-mail – and of blogs, list servs and chat-rooms – means that individuals can be involved on an everyday basis in debating issues of concern and interest to them. So individuals arguably can be more involved in public debates about matters of professional or personal concern. They can obtain access to information easily and quickly and this can enable them to form a more fully contextualised view of their own position in the world, which may impact in all sorts of ways on their sense of selfhood and of identity.

A striking recent example of verbal sharing on-line is the work of the Iraqi blogger, known as Salam Pax.⁸ By sharing his thoughts and experiences, fears and desires, whilst his country was invaded by foreign troops, Salam Pax opened up the possibility for understanding between very different peoples. In a sense, Pax's missives opened up a range of issues about subjectivity and identity that had to be negotiated by Western war propaganda. His writings revealed him to be 'not an alien' but a fairly ordinary, though in the context also courageous, person; someone to whom Western users/readers could relate. For Western users, negotiating their own subjective positioning with reference to that war, Pax's writings may have had a range of possible effects – from encouraging them to question Western strategy to sympathy with the people oppressed by their own social institutions and leaders.

Most on-line written communication is not of that nature, however. A lot of it is administrative material associated with people's jobs and there is now

much more of this than ever before – because of the immediacy of e-mail. Some is from friends and it is a great joy to find that e-mail enables daily contact with friends in very distant places. This enables discussions and sharing of views on matters that are personal and political, professional and domestic. It also enables people to form new relationships and even to fall in love on-line. So e-mail is an activity in which the individual enacts a range of identities – professional and personal.

E-mail is the subject of much research by linguists and others because of its status, not quite writing, not quite spoken text. And it is the characteristic speed or immediacy of the communication that generates this ambiguous status. Because this written communication can be almost instantaneous, users write often; they join in debates; they dialogue on-line. As a result users developed a range of contractions (for example, OTOH – on the other hand) and shortened spellings (for example, you becomes ‘u’) to enable them to communicate more economically. Users also had to deal with the fact that written text can be read in a variety of ways by other users – which can be a major problem in on-line dialogue and debate. When there is a physical body present, bodily gestures are used to indicate intended meanings. In addition, if the text is a conventional written text, it is usually longer so that statements that might be ambiguous are clarified by the surrounding text. Here, one early solution that is still used at times is emoticons – syntactical characters used to create icons for emotion, for example, a smile as: :) (which some computer interfaces routinely transform into the smiley icon). These textual characteristics developed for e-mail and other on-line genres are now exploding exponentially in popularity because of the introduction of text-messaging on mobile/cell phones – which have much smaller screens and require even greater economy of expression.

Each of the on-line written genres and sub-genres has subject positions that individuals must negotiate. The context of the communication determines the subject position and identity adopted by the user, which in turn governs the degree of formality used in the verbal text. So an on-line discussion of a fashionable area of study may include postings written in street-cred language, whilst a debate with the Dean/CEO/Chief Scientist about funding would be conducted in formal language. In each case the user employs language to construct an appropriate identity – fashionable scholar or fiscally prudent academic/manager/scientist. Both situations involve a high awareness of the medium in order to manipulate the text successfully – in order to produce the required identity. In other words, a high degree of literacy enables the user to generate the identity on-line that best suits his or her purpose at a particular time and place.

In conclusion ...

This chapter on multimedia writing has singled out a number of aspects of written text for discussion, such as the cultural history and power of writing,

the visuality of writing, the new literacy demands of multimedia writing, and the negotiation of subjectivity and of identity in on-line writing. I have not described at length the principles of textual criticism since this is available elsewhere – in a whole range of textual and cultural criticism. This study uses concepts and ideas drawn from: the work on textual practice of Mikhail Bakhtin (1968, 1981, 1984, 1986); work on readership derived from the writings of Teresa de Lauretis (1986, 1987) and of Michel de Certeau (1984) (exemplified in the work of John Fiske (1989); the work of Henry Jenkins (1991a, 1991b, 1992) and Constance Penley (1991, 1992)); Foucault's description of discourse (1977, 1980, 1981); and work on subjectivity derived from the works of Foucault and Heidegger (1977). The next chapter makes an argument for the analysis of the visual in the same terms, arguing the importance of this non-specialist (in the sense that it is not discipline-specific) terminology as a way of discussing texts that draw on the resources of more than one meaning-system (and disciplinary formation).

Notes

- 1 In the film *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982).
- 2 This study of multimedia is based on precisely this kind of understanding of the development of ITC – as a material technology (what we commonly understand as the technology of ITC), as a literary technology (both in its practice and in the volumes, including this one, that are devoted to understanding and locating its practice), and as a social technology (via its effect on individuals and on their lived social relations).
- 3 Haraway's particular interest in her article is the neutral status of the observer – who (i.e. which social subjects) were considered capable of this 'neutral' role, and the effect of this judgment not only on science but also on gender, class and race.
- 4 This title itself is an argument for the development of visual communication!
- 5 In a sense this is the artistic version of the neutral observer – the authoritative male artist or critic. His suitability for that role is signified by the lack of any gendered marker in descriptions of himself or his work – so that a male artist is never identified as male, nor are his works grouped together as 'male artists'. Similarly, the writings of male critics are not identified – except recently by gender-aware, often feminist critics – as generated from a masculine point of view. By contrast, women who practise in the arts are often referred to as 'female artists' and their works are grouped together in exhibitions for no other reason than their shared gender. And female critics are often themselves criticised for a perceived female 'bias'. In other words, to be female is not to be neutral or authoritative, not the 'modest witness'.
- 6 See the report of visitor studies in Gillard and Cranny-Francis (2002).
- 7 Note that the cross-referencing referred to here is that performed by the reader/user, not that of the author which is perhaps more easily available on-line as links.
- 8 See: dear_raed.blogspot.com and salampax.fotopages.com