



## **Literacy in the New Media Age by Gunther Kress Published by Routledge (Londong), 2003, 196p.**

Reviewed by

### **Stephen Dobson**

Associate Professor  
Lillehammer University College  
Email: [stephen.dobson@hil.no](mailto:stephen.dobson@hil.no)

Gunther Kress in *Literacy in the New Media Age*, does not argue for a narrow understanding of literacy in terms of merely the reading or writing of printed text in a competent manner. The kind of literacy he looks at includes the reading all kinds of semiotic, meaning loaded forms. Technological changes and their connection with social and economic factors form the framework for his book. As he states on the first page:

Two distinct yet related factors deserve to be particularly highlighted. These are, on the one hand, the broad move from the now centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image and, on the other hand, the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the medium of the screen. These two together are producing a revolution in the uses and effects of literacy and of associated means for representing and communicating at every level and in every domain. Together they raise two questions: what is the likely future of literacy, and what are the likely larger-level social and cultural effects of that change? (p1)

Just as he widens literacy to include the image, he also widens his concerns from reading images and words to the design of meaning in these modes. All people are capable of learning how to design images and words. And by extension the curriculum in English – he is Professor in English Education at the Institute of Education (London) – should include learning how to communicate in these different modes.

Kress is conversant with post-modern debates on changes in communication media and society in general. A society in which, 'the formerly stable framings in all sorts of significant areas are weakening or have disappeared' (p87). He calls this the New Media Age, I would call it simply the post-modern. What makes his book special is that he has embedded and applied this understanding of the post-modern to a specialized field in education, that of literacy. But in typical post-modern fashion he refuses to define the field in a narrow, constrictive manner. Likewise, he does not present a dry, scientific book lacking in personal stories and sudden insights. The reader soon learns about his German background, his upbringing in Australia and about several of his visits to different places around the globe. He refers to insights gained from his son's use of the Playstation. This might be a deliberate strategy on his part and that of the publisher, in order to make the book global in its appeal. I would however, like to believe that the mix of the personal with the analytical

and global reflect his belief that social science can reach beyond the world of the academic.

Kress is critical of proposals to enhance the literacy competence of children. Competence for him is a concept that suggests a stable set of skills that children can acquire in a once and for all manner; in a society that changes little from generation to generation. Similarly he is against enhancing the critical aptitude of children with respect to literacy. As he puts it:

Critique is anchored to the ground of someone's past agendas; design projects the purposes, interests and desires of the maker into the future. Design is prospective, constructive not deconstructive, utopian and not nostalgic. (p50)

How then does he argue for enhancing the ability of children to in the direction of literacy as a design oriented activity? He suggests a chain of connected concepts, what he calls a 'toolkit'.

Meaning in speech, writing and encounters with images is based upon semiotic work, whether as articulation of outwardly made signs, or the interpretation of inwardly made signs, such that the signs are filled with meaning. The meaning of signs is not therefore, something given by the sign on its own. Signs have the potential of becoming signifiers with meaning and the sign makers original meaning can be changed through interpretation by the listener, reader or viewer of the sign. The conception of signs as signifiers of potential meaning is derived from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. But, Kress goes further in his toolkit by appropriating the work of Peirce who was concerned with the uses of the sign by readers/users. Peirce distinguished between iconic signs (e.g. the form of flame paralleled in the drawing of the flame), indexical signs (e.g. smoke signaling combustion is a relation of consequence between the sign and its signifying something) and symbolic signs (e.g. the red cross is a sign signifying a meaning established by convention).

Kress rejects the 'idea of arbitrariness' found in de Saussure's conception of the relation between the sign as signifier and what it signifies. On this point he is closer to Peirce in the view that the relation between the signifier and signified is always motivated (p42). That it is motivated means that the reader, speaker or viewer can change the content of the meaning according to the changing local context in which the sign is encountered. Social conventions can never determine meaning in an absolute sense.

The next conceptual tool he introduces is that of the mode in which the sign is communicated. We have time-based modes, such as speech, dance, gesture, action, music and space based modes, such as image, sculpture, lay-out in architecture and streetscapes (p45). Each mode has its logic and this exerts an influence on the meaning afforded by the signs carried in the respective mode. Writing partakes of a spatial logic, in that words are presented graphically and it also partakes of the temporal logic because words follow sequentially. The most potent expression of the temporal modes is the genre of narrative and the most potent expression of the spatial modes is the genre of display. This dichotomy between the temporal and spatial makes it possible for Kress to state the following:

'The world narrated' is a different world to 'the world depicted and displayed'. (p2)

It is perhaps some what paradoxical that in widening the concerns of literacy to include the domain of the screen, Kress still chooses to define literacy 'when we make messages using letters as the means of recording that message' (p23) as opposed to numeracy, for example, where meaning is made with numbers.

Kress's tight definition of literacy is based upon his skepticism towards extending literacy to include computer-literacy, visual-literacy, emotional literacy, sexual literacy and so on. These extensions obscure the manner in which to take visual literacy for example, different modes (the image and writing) and their potentials are combined without retaining an understanding for the distinct meaning potential of the respective modes.

The mixing of modes brings the reader to Kress's view on the multi-modal, for that is precisely what is happening as writing and image are present on web-pages, in hyper-text, on signs in streets, in sciences textbooks. Two logics are brought together, that of the logic of the written and the logic of the image.

I found some intriguing chapters in the middle of the book as Kress developed his concept of the multi-modal in texts. Texts are defined as 'any instance of communication in any mode or in any combination of modes' (p48). The reader is able to see how to read a page from a biology textbook. The image and text interact to communicate meanings. Such that there are blocks of image and writing, with proximity to the top associated with an ideal meaning potential carried in different modes, such written or image, and those towards the bottom of the page more concrete. Not that these potentials have to be realised, but they can be as the visual grammar of the page designed by the writer is presented to the student for study. The students can decide the order in which they engage with the blocks according to their interests. Later in the book he describes the difference between approaching the screen as blocks of image and writing to be explored and as entry points both are possible (p136-137).

The main point however, is that the multi-modal is not a melting together of the modes, it is rather an interaction, with one or other of the modes occupying a dominant position. Their distinct logics remain intact. Within modes there can be transformation as links are established within a mode and transduction as a message is re-configured in a different mode, from image to writing for example.

A key component of his tool-kit of concepts in the new media age is that of genre. This deals not with, 'what is represented in the sense of what issues, but with who acts (and) in relation to whom, with the question of purposes' (p84). Put simply, social actions shape the generation of texts in different modes and we always encounter texts as genres reflecting these social relations. Genre knowledge, in terms of understanding their constitution, their valuations in hierarchies of power, and being able to produce them become the sign of a truly literate person. He gives several examples of genres, such as swimming club rules, some beach holiday lets, an aboriginal community law. In each instance the social group who have made the rules have designed the signs to carry certain meanings.

Perhaps the most compelling example for his argument that understanding the social relations of genres and the modes they use, is the case of some 12-13 year olds in a science lesson as they write and illustrate plant cells studied under a microscope. The pupils produce images and text, some in the genre of a recount, some in the genre of the procedure. In the different genres they have chosen to communicate their meanings they construct different social relations. In the recount for example, the social relations are a 'friendly telling of what happened so that you might do the same' (p113), while in the procedure it is a case of social relations telling the reader what to do in a more instructive, commanding manner.

In one of the later chapters, entitled Meaning and frames: punctuations and semiosis, Kress looks at the role of punctuation in parceling the world. His subject in this chapter seems to be the manner in writing can imitate speech to varying degrees through the use of punctuation. Some forms of writing show

little punctuation and are hence less close to the transduction of meanings from speech into the mode of writing. Obviously the punctuation he has in mind can take place in different forms and in different modes – it is not merely dependent on the comma and semi-colons. The point is that the messages communicated in different modes are parceled for consumption by recipients. Thus punctuation, a topic to be expected from a professor in English Education, becomes another concept in his tool-kit to explain the functioning of texts and their realisation in different modes.

It is hard to find weaknesses or criticisms of this book, which is particularly suited as a textbook in undergraduate media studies and education programs. Instead, I would like to ask of his text the following: Are his arguments new?

Walter Benjamin in the 1930s thought deeply about the effects of new visual media on human experience (Dobson, 2003). He pre-dated Kress's concern with the visual image, even though he undoubtedly lacked the reasoned argumentation and theorization Kress provides.

Benjamin proposed dialectical images as a way of directing attention towards on the one hand, the human faculty to make images, and on the other hand the dialectical manner in which two or more opposing entities can be drawn together to bring about a shock with creative consequences. Thus, in the Arcades Project (1999) he suggests the following:

The dialectical image is a lightning flash. The Then must be held fast as it flashes its lightning image in the Now of recognizability. The rescue that is thus - and only thus - effected, can only take place for that which, in the next moment, is already lost. (9,7)

The shocking experience is meant to stop time and hence disrupt precisely, how the way 'things "just keep on going" is the catastrophe.' (9a,1)

But, dialectical images, acting and enervating more swiftly than the slowness of conceptual thought ( - in symbolism the image was able to bypass conceptual thought with its allegiance to universals and the paraphernalia of transcendentalism), are not limited only to a consciousness of time. Take for example his observations on Atget's surreal photographs of Paris:

Atget almost always passed by the 'great sights and so-called landmarks'; what he did not pass by was... the Paris courtyards, where from night to morning the hand-carts stand in serried ranks; or the tables after people have finished eating and left, the dishes not yet cleared away – as they exist in their hundreds of thousands at the same hour...Empty the Porte d'Arceuil by the Fortifications...They are not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant. It is in these achievements that surrealist photography sets the scene for a salutatory estrangement between man and his surroundings. (Benjamin, 1979, p250-251)

The dialectical image here presented is between the normal hustle and bustle of the city and its utter silence as objects rather than people gain the upper hand.

The dialectical image is the shock or the estrangement, which compels the viewer to take a second more detailed look at their everyday life, and in so doing gives 'free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail'. (Benjamin, 1979, p251) Benjamin in his unfinished Arcades Project (1999) presented written quotes (from many sources) and his own reflections on Paris in the mid-19th century. They were the source of his dialectical images, but photographs and corporeal

experiences could also be the source of these dialectical images, as he indicated in his other essays.

From Benjamin we find an awareness of the manner in which modes, to use Kress's phrase, interact in a dialectical fashion. Perhaps, Kress has something to learn from Benjamin. Perhaps, Benjamin can jog his theory along to a new set of questions. Kress speculates towards the end of his book (p174-175) if the image based mode inhabited by youth lacks or precludes experience of reflection, something gained in reading books in a sustained, concentrated fashion over an extended period. Benjamin might argue that with dialectical images and the shock of the differences experienced, pause for reflection is created even amongst youth looking for the latest image based experience.

In summing up my views on this book, I have one hesitation. His limiting of literacy to the making of messages with words rests uneasily with his widening of the concerns of literacy to the interaction of writing with images and speech: Why not widen literacy to precisely to include these other modes? Maybe I have misunderstood and this is his goal. Maybe I have read too quickly and not paused for adequate reflection.

This hesitation aside, this is an important book about literacy. However, I fear it will remain on university reading lists and on the shelves of university libraries. It will not reach a wider public, including teachers and educational policy makers. Personally, I have liked it as an instructive and illuminating introduction into the multi-modal and its relevance in a new media age, a post-modern age.

## References

Benjamin, W. (1979): One-Way Street. London: New Left Books, 1979.

Benjamin, W. (1999): The Arcades Project. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Dobson, S.: (2003): The Urban Pedagogy of Walter Benjamin. Lessons for the 21st Century. London: The Goldsmiths' Press. Part I, II, III (100 pages) In print version and on-line:

<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/cucr/pdf/benjamin1.pdf>

<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/cucr/pdf/benjamin2.pdf>

<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/cucr/pdf/benjamin3.pdf>