

2012

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### Recommended Citation

Duggan, B. Articulations of Irish Language Poetry as Multimodal Texts. Cumulus conference, Helsinki, 2012. DOI: 10.21427/ja0w-6e13

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# Articulations of Irish language poetry as multimodal texts

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## Abstract

In October of last year, visual communication students at Dublin Institute of Technology took part in an exhibition of Irish language literature texts that were imaginatively extended, exploring an array of new literacies. Taking the Irish language texts as a starting point for this project, students creatively explored print, visual, digital and material modes to extend the meaning of the poetry.

This paper explores, from a social semiotic<sup>1</sup> perspective the creative potential this multimodal work offers design pedagogy in how we frame and articulate meaning across both print and digital media design education. With an emphasis on an ensemble of signs as a whole, towards meaning making, there are learning potentials in examining these representational forms and technologies. This is increasingly significant as our students will need to be conscious of how meaning changes as information migrates across more varied communication modes. It is important that design education explores the potential for new ways of describing design thinking through critically questioning our visual communication practices.

KEYWORDS: visual communication, social semiotics, multimodality,

## Introduction

Design students and professionals are increasingly developing innovative work that transcends print and digital media in new and exciting ways. Graphic design, previously, has been concerned with work that was media specific, where there have been stable and fixed

rules for practice (Kress, van Leeuwen, 2001). Now a single design project crosses multiple media, taking in digital, environmental and print characteristics within ubiquitous delivery systems. Henry Jenkins refers to ‘transmedia navigation’ in which our students need to develop an ability to read and write across all available modes of expression (46, Jenkins).

From a visual communication perspective, this paper examines ways that critically question disciplinary knowledge and practice. There needs to be new ways of talking about the relationship of texts and narratives across this migrating mediascape. A social semiotic perspective (Kress, van Leeuwen, 2001, Kress 2010) will be used in examining these new patterns and permutations of visual communication practice. By focusing on the students experimental iterations of these Irish language texts, it is hoped to develop new ways of discussing, describing and designing. This paper will investigate the students’ design practice with this work as ‘multimodal composition’<sup>2</sup> (Morrison, 2010). This perspective is concerned with meaning making that is situated and contextual, examining the interplay of semiotic resources<sup>3</sup> in practice. This situated practice calls on an activity theoretical prospective as this paper looks at the changing relationships between the students, their activity/practice, happening within a social context. The exhibition element of this project meant, with an evocative and poetic starting point, the students had a final, real contextual outcome and communication goal. This then allows the students to find and create new and experimental practice, providing possibilities for expansive learning (206, Tuomi-Gröhn). This recasts the relationship between research and practice, where the students become reflective researchers within a situation of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and conflict, examining reflection-in-action (308, Schön). This paper attempts to set out the tools visual communication practitioners know and use and cast them in a new light with the new tools and their affordances an expanded practice has in transcending multiple media types. What new meaning and patterns are created through an extended repertoire of modes and how can this lead to a better understanding and analyse in the intersections and interplay of multimodal discourse in students design practice?

## The context

This project was carried out by third and fourth year students as part of their visual communication course, bridging, what are usually, two discreet modules in digital and print media. The students, over a four week period, worked towards putting together an exhibition as part of a wider week long Irish language festival, imaginatively extending and exploring new and experimental literacies for a series of recently published poetry and prose<sup>4</sup>. The main focus for this paper case studies two projects that extend across digital and print media. In narrowing the focus, the concern is looking at the inter-play and relationships across the

semiotic resources towards communication and meaning. The case studies are based on conversation in tutorials with the students, written 'design rationales', design research notebooks and the finished projects developed for the exhibition.

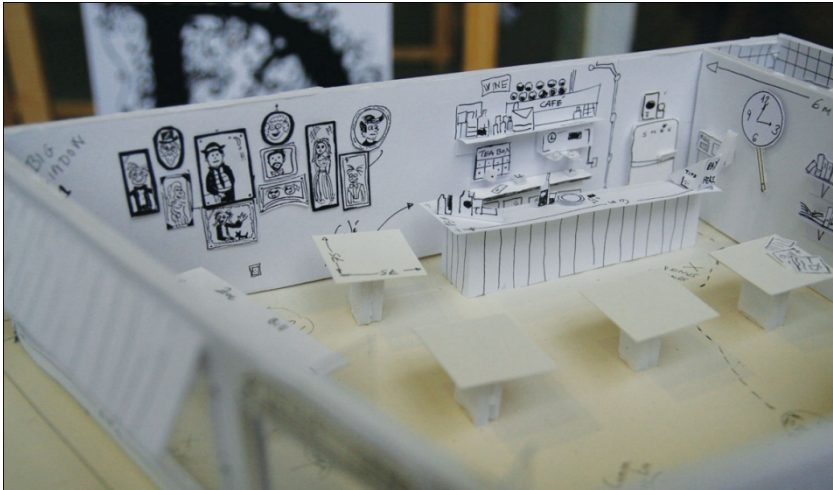
The first case highlights design thinking and practice that moves from material to digital, and questions the different semiotic affordances<sup>5</sup> and their combinations used in this movement across media. In design education and as a tutor, it is pertinent to examine how multimodality can provide a conceptual toolbox that questions meaning in communication, challenging settled notions of language (79, Kress) and practice. This toolbox is one in which artefacts and perspectives may be reordered, combined and juxtaposed (30, Morrison) but grounded in a valued role of situation and context. In the second project there is a focus more on the students' design process and thinking, framing this as 'reflection in action' (308, Schön). In examining the synthesis and tacit way a student develops a project, I will examine how framing and describing this process in a multimodal perspective could help design education articulate design process better. Both cases consider the 'trans-modal' and 'intermodal' (151, Kuzmanovic) elements of these projects, looking at how a multimodal perspective frees up semiotic affordances as communication migrates across media formats.

## Case Study 01 'Venus', Moving from Material to Virtual

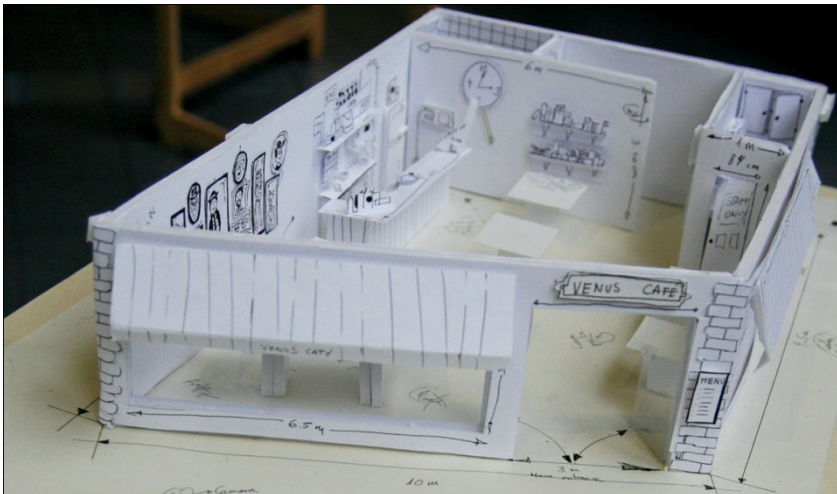
This project is based on a prose text called 'Venus' by Dáithí O Múiri. The story focuses around a café where a group of friends like to meet up and listen to music. The student imagines the space, the environment and objects in which the narrative of the prose piece unfolds. From his design rational the student states...

*'after reading it a few times (the prose piece), I started to visualize it as a movie. There are a few different characters, a café that is mentioned a number of times, music references and a lot of verses that are very poetic and cinematographic'*

A cinematic genre is evoked where the student sees characters, a place, music and story fitting within the genre of film. The student imagines a 'pre-production' model that illustrates various spaces and artefacts mentioned in the text, where he names the café 'Venus'.



**Figure 1, a photograph of model made for exhibition**



**Figure 2, model of Cafe 'Venus'**

In detailed drawing, the model has small portraits hanging on the wall; a chess board on a table, the bar, a clock and a music system (fig 1. 2). He decided that this model, as a material artefact, would be his exhibition piece for the festival exhibition. From this position and working within the genre of film, the students' 'set design' has materiality, permanence and dimensionality. In mapping out a possible architectural space for the cafe, spatial meaning is created. There is spatial relationship between the 'stuff' in the cafe and how it is laid out. In re-creating a working model the student sees this as material artefact to be used in conversation by a film director and production crew in discussing space and props for possible filming. Arrows, directional lines and measurements are illustrated on the space providing a working model from which an imagined set, dialogue and characters would work within a space. The student has realised a model that has conversational, process orientated focus, yet this is evoked through a three dimensional material artefact.

Digital media now opens up the semiotic modal affordances of film, photography, illustration and animation that are becoming part of the toolkit in visual communication.

*'Film obtains through the digital, plasticity that was previously only possible in painting and animation, it's digital character sees it as raw material for further compositing, animating and morphing'*  
(300, Manovich).

This 'plasticity' of digital media mentioned here allows the designer access to a more interdisciplinary approach to practice, as a concept or narrative has the ability to migrate across media. Opening up previously discrete disciplines, can digital media allow a play in integration of modes of representation? How could an extended meaning be attached to this model through digital media and the digital affordances that cinema, photography, animation and graphic design present? Through discussion with his tutors the student was asked to consider what other modal elements could help the viewers directed gaze, in reading this as a communication piece? Through a series of still images, photographed from the model, the student imagined possible iterations within this cinematic genre, experimenting with transition and fades, zooming, panning, but with still images. Here we see the affordances of film being aligned more, in its visual language, to the graphic rather than the photographic.

The student has, open to him, the semiotic resources of animation, photography, illustration, film and sound as an ensemble. The movement of the images are layered with type and sound, giving the reader/viewer of the piece, a more experiential feeling of moving around this cafe (fig 3). Yet the space we move in is illustrated and drawn on cardboard - relating to this meaning, which the student states in his rationale, is '*reality entangled with dreams and imagination*'. The type used is in a supporting role, naming the 'actors' in this film. The sound has a layering of noisy chattering of the cafe and soundtrack of jazz music (Quintana).

An historical opposition between animation and film had defined the 20th century but Manovich, makes explicit, developments in digital culture that have broken this down (298, Manovich). He states that film-makers have been combining images, sound and text for a whole century, but the digital gives focus to how the structures and strategies are free floating in our culture, available in new contexts (73, Manovich). These affordances become open for use in graphic design through the digital. There now can be consideration of the multiple modes at play and their affordances in directing and articulating more focused meaning. Where would meaning reside in the use of sound, with composition or temporality? The student has outlined in his rationale that he wants to communicate in this prose piece 'Venus' where...

*'reality of adulthood mixes with some nostalgia of a 'bygone era' friendship and comradeship.'*



**Figure 3, storyboard of animated sequence**

### Layers in composition and as mode of production

Mentioned above are a number of instances of layering - whether in transitions between still images in moving the viewer through the space of the cafe, compositing type on image and layers of sound. Layering, as a strategy in overlapping components of an image and type, has been an important concept used in visual communication practice and production (128 Lupton, Cole-Philips). Here we see this mode of practice extended to and intertwined with a mode of production. Layers are a way of organising media in such widely used software tools like Adobe Photoshop, After Effects and Illustrator. There is easy manipulation and movement of layers. By standardising the logic of 'cut and paste' in media manipulation software, selecting and compositing any digital media in any combination (131, Manovich), has aided the play and manipulation of the semiotic resources in use.

### Describing

In describing the affordances of a sound, one can note its rhythm and pace. There is intonation and accent on certain notes in the jazz music, or that is has softness or loudness at certain points in the piece. But from a social semiotic point of view, the situated context makes us observant of the inter relationship in the modes in context and situation. It is the interplay and combinations of semiotic affordances together as a whole towards meaning making. Equally one can observe and question rhythm and pace in the temporal compositions - what is the pace and change of rhythm in transition of the still images in relation to movement and pace of type? In how type is described as bold or italic, fixing

leading or kerning for print layouts, one can extend these affordances to examine atmosphere, feeling and narrative, encompassing kinetic and audio quality. (Bellintoni, Woolman). Type is taking on the semiotic affordances of cinema. With this there needs to be an extending of the vocabulary used to discuss multimodal composition that draws on traditions of known vocabularies and genres. This is seen as a 'rhetorical convergence' – combinations of meanings of expression from earlier media, writing styles, rules of visual composition coming together (94, Fagerjord). There is a description of how the student has framed and composed the photographic images but this rhetoric is combined with grammars used in film such as panning and zooming. Pace and rhythm can be freed up from the rhetoric of sound and music to question meaning in movement of type and image, all within a situated meaning.

There have been certainties about language that have acted as a barrier to posing questions in communication practices (84, Kress). In opening up this language, we increase the scope of possibilities to better ways of extending meaning making across media and their modal affordances. *'Without a new language, we will be held hostage to the values informing print'* (89, Blake-Yancey). This 'toolbox', referred to earlier, has rhetorical, conceptual and technological components to it, allowing an extended thinking, acting and describing in design practice.

## Case study 02, multimodality and design thinking

There has been an examination of how the fluidity and hybrid nature of multimodality is leading to rhetorical convergence in how one articulates, thinks and practices within, but also across, visual communication. This case study will focus on the students' design process and reflection-in-action, looking at how the student works 'in' and 'through' their project development. I will frame this case in the light of Schön's theory of 'reflective practice', which looks to the synthesis, exchange and decisions made in practice, becoming a 'conversation with the situation' (76, Schön). I am interested to see how this tacit, implicit process, the student working in practice, can be viewed in the light of multimodality so that we, as design educators, can develop better ways to make explicit the articulation of design thinking in practice.

This student has based her project on a poem 'San Égypt' by the poet Gabriel Rosenstock<sup>6</sup>. She has set out to explore the juxtaposition presented in the poem between the grandness of the Egyptian pyramid and a familiar un-extraordinary plastic bottle. In her rationale she begins focusing on the theme of creating an object of desire from the ordinary.



*'I notice the speakers interest fade away from the grand pyramids and the Valley of the Kings onto more basic objects such as plastic bottles and scarecrows. Perhaps these basic, ordinary objects are more extraordinary than we first consider them to be? ....surely they have some extraordinary qualities to unearth'.*

Let's examine her thinking in her design process. Figure 4 shows her collecting and critically questioning examples of image and type in her visual research notebook focusing on ordinary as extraordinary. In this case, this is a tacit process of examining semiotic affordances (94, Fagerjord) at work in other relevant design practice that will help the student make judgment calls in what direction to pursue<sup>7</sup>. These examples are used to relationally question her own work, providing an initial frame to focus possible direction. Schön calls this 'framing' where the enquirer poses a way of seeing the problematic, becoming aware of alternative ways of framing the reality of practice (310, Schön).



**Figure 4, from student's 'design research notebook'**

*'Faced with some phenomenon that he finds unique, the inquirer nevertheless draws on some element of his familiar repertoire which he treats as generative metaphor for the new phenomenon' (269, Schön).*

The student is questioning treatment of image and type. How is the treatment of the image and the content working together in relation to meaning? Composition and positioning of the bottle is being examined (fig.5). Colour palette is muted and paired back to a near duotone. The quality of the melted bottle connotes museum piece, like that of a precious blown glass artefact. Centring the composition and playing with scale in relation to position in the screen, allows focused gaze by the viewer (fig. 7) Barthes calls this the denoted and connoted message, so as well as having the analogical content (what is being represented) there is signification in the treatment of the image which is different to what is shown (197, Barthes). The students' design process is constantly questioning connotation in treatment that extends from just image to questioning and juggling constant combinations and isolations in more semiotic resources.



**Figure 5 Student's 'design research notebook'**

Bellantoni and Woolman observe this also in a word having two meanings – one being the idea represented in the actual word and the other is its visual treatment – the typeface, boldness or spacing (p6). In the printed booklet that accompanies this work (fig.6) and in rationalising use of layout and typeface for this piece, layout and typography are discussed....

*'the grid is flexible, and ensures that the work isn't crowded, and has space to speak for itself. Harmonious proportions were applied to prevent discord between elements. Type and Image are given almost equal space in the printed form of my design. In the digital form, movement and sound are integrated to create harmony within the animation'.*

This description shows there is a tacit understanding of the play and selection of modal resources as the piece migrates across media. This critical questioning of all the available modal affordances, towards meaning making, is important as communication formats change

and morph. Kress questions whether a 'font' or 'layout' is a mode (87, Kress) but then answers this in observing *'the disposition of elements in a framed space – a page, a screen – does not name as words do...It does however dispose information in semiotic space'* (92, Kress). As calmness is created through layout and grid system for a print piece, harmony is evoked through integration of movement and sound in the animated piece. The student uses the typeface 'Mrs. Eaves' and in quoting what the designer said about it.....

*'It's familiar enough to be friendly, yet different enough to be interesting. Due to its relatively wide proportions.... it's useful for giving presence to small amounts of text such as poetry'* (Licko, 2002)

In referring back to the tone that the student outlined in her rationale we can see it in the light of the semiotic affordances in play through the doing and making 'in' the project. What is a *'distinctly quiet yet striking'* treatment of image or selection of typeface? How can movement, sound, font or layout be used to create a piece that is *'calm and focused'*? In design there is a tacit, implicit understanding of these modes and their specific affordances as convergent ensemble.



**Figure 6, print booklet at the exhibition**

In this interplay there is constant critical questioning of where meaning resides through this experimental practice. The student has isolated and examined elements of composition, typography and colour through the ideation process in her notebook at the early stages in the project. This initial questioning is used to further frame and play with more semiotic resources, using it as a kind of spring-board (Schön) in a changing perspective and new frame. But in the 'action' or 'doing' part of the project the student now, through synthesis, questions temporal composition, type, layout, image use and sound, all in inter-relation to each other (fig.7). There is contextual situated meaning making that becomes central to questioning representation.



**Figure 7, storyboard of the animated project**

## Conclusion

The stable disciplinary knowledge and practice of graphic design is now extended to include wider grammars and affordances in previously excluded genres. As mentioned in the first case study, digital culture opens up the affordances and meaning in an extended ensemble of semiotic resources. These affordances of design have been extended to possibilities of cinematic, photographic and audio affordances, extending semiotic possibilities in communication.

*'Its a form of textuality that goes beyond print forcing us to extend....the dominant notion of 'text' so that it is no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces'. (77, Landon)*

Landon quotes Derrida in reference to hyper-textually – seeing the text as relation and as connective, but it gives us insight into what is happening to the text as it now crosses multiple media.

This paper serves as a conversational opener to possible ways we can describe design practice better in a changing, unstable mediascape, beginning to question how we will equip our students with the ability to think across media (48, Jenkins).

*'Unless we are able to rearticulate our definitions of writing – both to ourselves and to the world at large – we risk increased marginalization in the world already moving beyond conventional print based textuality'* (6, Johnson-Eilola).

This re-articulation of what writing is needs to be inclusive of image, text, sound and their appropriate composition. What and how we communicate has been freed up to migrate across media. Visual communication practice needs to be cognisant of an expanded tool set in exploring new patterns of visual communication practice.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to acknowledge that this was a team project coordinated and taught with my colleagues Anita Heavey, Brenda Dermody and Clare Bell, in association with 'Imram'. The project brief was originated by Clare Bell, Liam Carson and Brenda Dermody.

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<sup>1</sup> Social semiotic theory is interested in meaning making that is actively made in social (inter)actions. It is a branch of semiotics that focuses on activity, where signs are always newly made, in flux, in changing social environments (54, Kress 2010). In seeing signs as actively being made, rather than just used, there is a process orientation to this perspective that is inclusive to examining how people design and make meaning.

<sup>2</sup> Multimodal Composition is concerned with the analysis of inter-relationships of multiple modes across various media in situated practice (18, Morrison). The focus builds upon the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2001) and Kress (2010), where more general theories were developed, providing analytical vocabulary, to describe and analyze ensembles of meaning making in multimodality. The term ‘composition’ with multimodality gives focus more to what happens in design process, in action, examining the interplay within the practice of making multi-modal texts.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Resources’ in a conscious move away from the term ‘grammar’ by Kress (7, 2010) that has originated from a linguistic understanding of language; ‘*grammar is about rules, convention, certainty, phenomena that are fixed*’ (57, Kress). Semiotic resources accounts for the unstable, changing nature in meaning-making where meaning is never fixed and is generative, changing depending on social situation and use (8, Kress).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Imram’ is weeklong annual festival that promotes exhibitions and activities in the Irish Language. It ran, last year from 14<sup>th</sup> - 22<sup>th</sup> of October 2011. With thanks to my colleagues Anita Heavey, Brenda Dermody and Clare Bell who also taught on this team project. Clare Bell developed the Imram project brief.

<sup>5</sup> ‘*semiotic affordances*’ (157, Kress) a term which points to the potentials and limitations of specific modes for the purposes of making signs towards meaning in communication

<sup>6</sup> Extract from the start of the Irish ‘Haiku’ poem with English translation by Rosenstock, Gabriel San Éigipt

díríd ar ár bhfoinse –  
ar ár dtriall  
pirimidí

*pointing to where we’ve come from  
where we’re going  
pyramids*

Gleann na Ríthe  
buidéil phlaisteacha a mhairfidh  
míle bliain

*Valley of the Kings*

---

*plastic bottles that will last  
a thousand years*

<sup>7</sup> Figure 4 is work by James Huse featured in 'Creative Review', September 2011. Second image is from Acne Art Department for Acne Studios, in Hess, Jay 'Graphic Design for Fashion' (2010).