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## **Challenging Literacy – Exploring Mediacy**

**Commentary: Gunther Kress**

I am in a black box. The black and white still of the guests in the hotel reminds me of the photograph at the end of *The Shining* or the restaurant in *Casablanca* or as in any Hollywood film or Las Vegas show. All the elegant women are dressed in their evening dresses and handsome men in their tuxedos. But the still is a projection from a DVD-disc in a computer.

There are lighter grey fields in the projection in the form of circles creating an impression of looking into the view finder of a camera. These fields trigger me to click on them with the cursor. When putting the cursor in one of the circles I am informed by a text line in the lower part of the screen what I see: Marlene Dietrich in the company of the famous producer David Selznick. But looking closer the picture I have clicked upon seems not be a blow up of the people in the circle. Back to the still of all the guests. If I move the cursor to the right over the still to another circle I am informed that this is about six-year-old Shirley Temple receiving her Oscar as a child actress in 1934. Now all seems even more confusing because it is not a child in the circle even though the text line says it is so. Click – and first a still on the girl's face in profile turned upward looking up at a grown up man in a dark suit. A film soon starts, what I first saw was a frozen picture. The documentary clip from the Oscar ceremony is just a minute, and I can repeat it by right-clicking. I do so a couple of times because the clip catches me. What does the little child's face express? What do the grown ups express in their attitudes towards the girl? In what ways are the persons and their interactions towards Shirley gendered and sexualised? Then I leave the clip and turn to another circle – click – and when I want to go again it cannot be done because I cannot find the picture of all the guests in the hotel that night in the 1930s, the Golden age of Hollywood film. Kind of lost in cyberspace!

The work I am taking part in is Pat O'Neill's *The Decay of Fiction* (2002). It is one of several other objects of new media art exposed at Kiasma, the beautiful Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki. My description above is based upon what has remained in my memory.

*The Decay of Fiction* makes clear that there is always something more in the digitally stored picture; there are literally always new layers to seek and trails to explore.

Katherine Hayles has written extensively on the relationship between technology and literature (see Hayles 1999). The step is not long from this to issues on the convergences and divergences between texts in print and on screen. Hayles (2000) has made an attempt to develop a typology for media specific analysis. She is not only focused on electronic multimedia hypertexts but on the way artists' books and more experimental literature remediates electronic texts and vice versa. One of her points is that the play between depth and surface is specific for the electronic hypertext, a play made possible by coding, which we take part in reading-exploring the graphic interface of the screen. I would say that this play has become a basic aesthetic convention. Another such basic aesthetic convention results in the sense of space or rooms expressed by metaphors like "navigating", "visiting" or "go to" this or that node or lexia in the electronic hypertext. This is also a part of Hayles's typology.

It must be noticed though that Hayles's typology is much more elaborated than my maybe much too obvious examples indicate. But out of a pedagogic point of view her typology points out established and new reading conventions or reading strategies. The actions and metaphors connected to them exemplify how necessary it is to develop concepts and analytical categories which take into consideration media specific characteristics when we talk about texts. I.e., what convergences and what divergences are there between texts on the screen and on paper or even texts as films? What conventions are developed in the remediations between different media? In what ways can the media specific be related to theories and empirical research on reader response? The questions tell me that media specific analysis concerning digital media is an issue in the core of the discussion on "multiliteracies" as practices of reading and writing.

Hayles has also reflected upon the materiality of media, i.e. the differences of materiality between paper and screen. She means that "[m]ateriality of the artifact can no longer be positioned as a subspecialty within literary studies; it must be central" (Hayles 2002:19). Hayles therefore introduces a new word ending with -text: technotext. This is done in a situation where "hypertext" and "cybertext" have been downloaded so many times that they have become key concepts for different scholarly communities. Espen Aarseth (2003) even says that the idea of the emancipating potentialities of hypertext has turned into a hype, an ideology, together with "interactivity" and "virtuality".

Technotext is defined as follows:

“When a literary work interrogates the inscription technology that produces it, it mobilizes reflexive loops between its imaginative world and the material apparatus embodying that creation as a physical presence” (Hayles 2002:25).

This means that materiality and meaning production cannot be separated from each other. A book is not just a container of ideas or fantasies: it has a materiality which stands in immediate relation to its semiosis and vice versa. This is said in opposition to such theories, or rather ideologies, that claim that literature is independent of its physical embodiment, that literature is just an expression of a mind.

From a reader response perspective the focus on the materiality of the artifact might seem somewhat too focused upon the text as independent object. I would say that media specific analysis and the idea of technotexts also must emphasise harder readers’ more or less conscious exploration of the ”reflexive loop” between meaning or “imaginative world” and materiality. There is a potentiality in the work, a virtuality to talk deleuzian, imbedded in the technology of the work itself. But this potentiality is nothing without somebody’s transaction with it, transforming all the possibilities into actualities here and now.

*The Decay of Fiction* uses three different projections and the same DVD-disc as database. The disc contains maps, stills, old and new documentaries and not least an astonishing double projection video. A set of mouse and headphones belongs to each projection. Least three persons can simultaneously explore the DVD-disc. If so, they become participants in a play, a play about a lost time in Los Angeles. It also gives a lesson on how memory and dreams work: images and words, space and temporality are mixed up and new connections and contexts are visualized. Memory is a virtualisation of what really passed.

Let me now remind you of the history media technology and ways of telling stories. The video cassette gave the pleasure of being able to choose immersive film experiences whenever you wanted. But you could also stop the film and freeze the film whenever you wanted. Parents and teachers were many times very worried about the effects of watching videos, especially if they were violent. I think it is enough to mention *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *Horror at Elm Street* or *Friday The Thirteenth*. But after a while more post modern horror movies were produced in which the horror film expert could find quotations from or references to popular horror films. *Scream* might be the most famous of these. Watching this film you could both enjoy being immersed, i e really scared, and ironically reflect on all the quotations and allusions it contained. The aesthetic experience is then oscillating between immersion and media reflexive distance.

This has gone even further when films are stored on DVD. DVD is rapidly making the analogue video cassette obsolete. You can still watch the film as an immersive experience. But you can also choose to see documentaries from the production of the film, listen to the director's reflections on certain scenes and interviews with the actor or actress commenting on the stunts etc etc. In this way you could say that the DVD-technology fosters a media reflexive viewer. Of course this has also consequences for identity work. We live in a world where more and more media are part of everyday life. Media are part of the reflexivity on issues on identity, not least gender, is also mediated.

So media reflexivity works in two ways simultaneously:

1. new media make us more and more aware of how media work and
2. more and more of our experiences are mediated; late modern reflexivity is a mediated reflexivity.

The potentiality of the media reflexive viewer can be related to that which Bolter & Grusin (1999) calls the double logic of remediation. They mean that media are constantly converged and improved as to give the impression that what we see or hear is not mediated. That which I experience seems totally immediate. So, the double logic is, the more media are improved, multiplied and converged, i.e. hypermediacy, the more immediate that which is mediated seems, i.e. immediacy.

*The Decay of Fiction* is an object of new media art which could be seen as an example of hypermediacy. But does it give an aesthetic experience which is immediate and immersive? I think that it is necessary to regard this work as playing upon the pendulum between immersion and media reflexivity.

To summarize:

the latin word *littera* meaning "letter" connotes too closely print culture. This means that questions must be asked for what counts

as genres and conventions in the new media age and  
as consequences of materiality upon writing and reading.

In the discussion of this the meaning of concepts like

media specific analysis  
remediation  
technotext  
media reflexivity

are crucial.

Theory and empiric research must be connected to the fostering of necessary civic capabilities, i.e. the capabilities we have to use different media in communicating rationally and emotionally and to express criticism, on our own or together with others. The creation of concepts like critical literacy, digital literacy or even multiliteracies are still too close to ways of thinking bound to print culture. I am aware, though, it is claimed that they should not be so and therefore there are arguments about multimodalities. But there is a need to be fulfilled. What word could then fulfil this need? I propose “mediacy” as this word.

## **Ref**

### **Literature, websites**

Aarseth, Espen (2003), “We all want to change the world”, Liestöel, Gunnar et al ed., *Digital Media Revisited*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

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– (2002), *Writing Machines*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Website: <[www.mitpress.mit.edu/mediawork](http://www.mitpress.mit.edu/mediawork)>

### **Work of new media art, exhibition**

O'Neill, Pat (2002) (in cooperation with Rosemary Comella, Kristy H A Kang) *The Decay of Fiction*. Exhibited in *future\_cinema*, Kiasma Museum for Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland 28.6-28.9.2003.

## **Commentary on paper by Gunther Kress**

"I am interested in understanding the specificities of representing in different modes. For that to happen successfully it is important to have terms which are as precise as we can make them - when we are doing academic, theoretical, intellectual work. Hence too much metaphoric extension - as in the case of the many extensions of the term 'literacy' - blurs the focus and diminishes sharpness of analysis. I use the term 'literacy' when I am talking about the transcriptional resource of letters. Of course, when the context changes, and we need to talk in wider environments, then rhetorical or even polemical uses of the term 'mediacy' may be useful, for that reason.

Literacy, as a term, focuses on what I call the 'mode' of representation: where 'mode' is the culturally made resource for representation - other modes are the visual / image mode; speech; gesture; etc. Mode is the result of the work done by humans as social / cultural beings and agents with some material resource (sound, graphic stuff, (movement of parts of) the body as in gesture, space, etc)

The term 'Literacy' focuses on mode; and unfortunately it gets extended to other modes (visual literacy, eg) and to skills (computer literacy). As I say, for me that produces a deep problem, theoretically.

To replace a term which focuses on mode by one which focuses on medium (and allow that to be metaphorically extended and blurred) seems to be simply transporting the problem of theoretical precision from one site to another; it solves no problems, but creates newly different ones."