

LITERACY IN TIME AND SPACEⁱ

Twelve years ago I attempted to convey to a conference of English advisers what I saw as the essential difference between moving image and print media, by describing how editors manage and manipulate time in films and TV.ⁱⁱ I had fun demonstrating the power of the cutaway as an essentially filmic device that can, for example, subvert the intended meaning of a politician's speech, and I got excited about the possibility that cheap editing software might one day become a reality, so that pupils would be able to explore these ideas for themselves.

However, focusing on "duration" as a key feature distinguishing films from print was a step too far for an audience that had enough trouble worrying about whether what they thought of as essentially a visual medium had any place at all in their professional concerns. I still didn't want to abandon my hunch, though, that the relationship between print and moving image texts must be a central issue for media education. I increasingly found myself arguing that media should not just be a specialist subject, or a unique and separate set of competences, but should be seen as an essential part of literacy. I now believe we should not merely campaign for media literacy to be added to the curriculum, but that we should also campaign for literacy itself to be understood in a different way and redefined for the 21st century.ⁱⁱⁱ Against the continuing multiplicity of claims for new "literacies" such as digital literacy, internet literacy, games literacy etc, I think we need to keep in mind that literacy is essentially about **texts**: that is, human communications in sharable, reproducible forms. While different kinds of text may need specific sets of generic and technological competences to support them, we have become obsessed with these competences and we're in danger of losing sight of the fundamental purposes of literacy. Indeed, I think it is confusing and unhelpful to use the term "literacies": literacy ought to be the whole portfolio of integrated skills, knowledge and understanding that enables us to participate in our culture and society.

There is nothing particularly new about that definition. A literate person in the traditional and original sense was someone who could read, write and understand a wide variety of written texts: from novels to tax return forms; from Shakespeare to the *Sun*. So an important part of being literate has always been the ability to recognise different kinds of written text and to be able to deploy appropriate skills to interpret each one. It's not been necessary to invent a new kind of literacy for each different kind of text.

But I'm trying to address a different question here. To what extent might the whole nature and scope of literacy have to change if it were now to include, not only the modern forms of printed and screen-based texts that include lots of visual material (from magazines to websites), but also non-written texts like films, TV and radio programmes, virtual worlds and computer games? The response to that question so far, from politicians and policy-makers, has been "as little as possible!" Their default position has always been to contain and accommodate these forms by inventing new and specialised sub-categories of literacy, rather than to transform literacy itself.

From the late 1960s, "visual literacy" was the preferred term that could be used to acknowledge that "texts" could consist of more than just words. This term is still in

common use, although “multimodality” now offers a more complex and extended version of the same idea. It’s argued – by Gunther Kress for example^{iv} – that because books, newspapers and now web pages all include significant amounts of non-verbal material, not only in things like pictures and diagrams but also in their choices of layout, typefaces, graphics and colour, this constitutes an historically significant, conceptual change from the kinds of texts we were all familiar with in the earlier 20th century. The ease with which digital technologies now enable us to combine, or switch between, verbal and visual forms, is a seductive pretext for believing that we have all now entered a multimodal age, in which completely different kinds of text are emerging, that require new kinds of literacy skill to interpret them and to make them. But I think this argument lacks a wider historical and cultural context.

To define “traditional” texts as though they always consisted just of writing is to adopt the historical perspective of the powerful: the minorities who could read and write. Of course this is not unreasonable. The history of education is the history of struggle over who could be allowed to have the powers conferred by literacy: access to knowledge, the chance to spread ideas and influence opinion. But if we think about the past in terms of what most people’s daily experiences were, we can recognise that human communication for the majority has always been multimodal, combining written words with images and with design features such as colour and pattern. The walls of buildings such as a medieval European church or a Maori wharehau (meeting house) functioned like texts in those cultures, using images and symbolic figures together with pattern, scale and colour to inform people about the world and their place in it. In addition though, ordinary people in all cultures have always had their own means of cultural expression: storytelling, dramatic performance, music, song and dance: ephemeral forms, but ones to which anyone could have access.

The first recorded usage of the word “literacy” in English is in 1883, at a time when industrial-scale printing was becoming ever more efficient at turning out verbal texts. Its capacity to reproduce images – particularly photographic images – was still quite limited, but it was already starting to include them. So while mass “literacy”, as we understand it in modern education, did emerge from a specific historical period (in Western Europe, about 400 years) during which the printed word was the dominant textual form, it emerged just at the point when that dominance was about to change. Over the following century, the reproduction and distribution not only of still images but also of moving images and audio, has become faster, increasingly higher in quality and lower in cost. At the same time textual forms have continued to develop rapidly: new genres of film and TV have emerged; the popular music industry has gone through many transformations; our means of accessing audio and moving images has changed several times. The powers attributed to literacy – access to knowledge, the chance to spread ideas and influence opinion – are no longer confined to the printed page.

Given the rapid pace of this change – a century really isn’t very long when we’re thinking about knowledge and culture – educators are still having trouble coming to terms with what has happened and seem to be mesmerised by the technological changes rather than the changes in textual practice. Beside the portable solidity of the book, the new kinds of text still seem dangerously ephemeral. We have no

pedagogic apparatus for pinning them down and discussing them. Our education system is founded on written texts: its technologies and management structures are organised around making them, copying, transporting and storing them – and of course, on marking them. We are used to written texts, in the form of examination scripts, as constituting evidence of learning. So new, non-written forms of text, if they are recognised at all, get only a grudging acknowledgment from education policy-makers, yet at the same time they are obsessed with the technologies that carry these texts. The co-option of “multimodal texts”, as something teachers are now encouraged to build into their literacy teaching, is a case in point. It is acknowledged that multimodal forms are interesting and important, but attention to them is motivated by the affordances of ICT, not by their textual specificity. Different kinds of text are awkwardly lumped together, as in “texts which combine images, words and sound, on screen and on paper [sic]”^v in an attempt to confer a spurious unity on everything that’s not print.

Moving image media fit particularly badly into this approach. Film study has long been confined to the “visual literacy” ghetto: before the invention of the VCR, film study in schools was necessarily skewed towards visual analysis, either of short 16mm extracts, or of still images captured from the frame^{vi}. Critical analyses of film centred on the image and had little to say about sound and editing. But even today, because film and TV include visual material as well as words, it is still assumed that they can be crammed into the same conceptual apparatus as anything else that’s got visual stuff in it, such as magazines, web pages comics and adverts, under the heading “multimodality”.

Films and TV programmes are of course supremely multimodal texts, in that they combine images, sounds, and movement; and can include a huge variety of other modes such as performance, verbal language (both spoken and written), gesture, costume, set design, colour and many more. They are multimodal in the important and interesting sense that the meanings generated are more than the sum of their modal parts: for example, the sounds you hear in a film literally affect what you see. But treating them as though their multimodal qualities can make them in some way “just like” printed media that include visual content actually makes it harder to discuss them constructively in the classroom. A key difference between moving image texts and static texts on paper or web pages is not just their level of multimodality or the richness of their visual content: another essential dimension, and a key element of how they make meaning, is duration. Films and TV are time-based: the way the duration of shots, sequences, sound elements and transitions is organised is essential to their meaning.

Resistance to the idea of expanding literacy to include different kinds of text was relatively easy to maintain as long as access to the means of textual production and distribution was confined to a few institutions. It is this that has now been transformed by digital technologies. Word-processing, desktop design software, file compression, broadband networks, photographic and moving image editing software, web and game authoring software, have successively democratised access, not only to new forms of consumption but also to the production and distribution of any kind of text. They have also changed literacy practices: the kinds of things people do with texts; the places they have in their lives; the kinds of text that are important to them. This change has been so rapid that it has produced a

panic-stricken clamour for “digital literacy”, as though the mastery of these technologies were an end in itself. Of course it is not. These technologies have been developed in order to maximise the production and circulation of texts, and it is the texts that matter, more than the ever-changing platforms they sit on. It’s noticeable that the loudest calls for “digital literacy” come from the digital industry (Google the term and see which well-known company comes up first!). An increasing range of competences with new kinds of software and hardware are undoubtedly essential for accessing, reading and composing texts in different media, and the changes in literacy practices are interesting, with huge implications for pedagogy. But these competences do not in themselves constitute “literacy”. So for us as educators, “digital literacy” is merely another misnomer, distracting us from the central focus of literacy, which is the text.

Proponents of “digital literacy” tend to claim that “the boundaries are blurring” between different kinds of text. It is true that many of the devices we have at home – computers, TV monitors, mobile phones – can now carry multiple textual forms. It is also true that many kinds of text can be described as “multimodal”: web sites, games, advertisements, virtual worlds. But to what extent do we really face a world of genuinely diverse textual forms? If “literacy” as taught in schools is to expand and transform, how many different kinds of “reading” and “writing” skills must the classroom now accommodate?

I think it would be helpful if we could stand back, as it were, from the array of textual forms that confront us, and think more dispassionately about what kinds of literacy learning outcomes are actually required to deal with them. Setting aside the technical competences demanded by new kinds of hardware and software – which are important, but of a different order from the ability to interpret and create texts – I think it is hard to identify skills that have not been commonly required of most of us for many years, even if they are not all taught in schools. It may in fact be possible to group these skills into just two very broad categories.

One category would be the skills required to deal with **page-based texts**. In addition to the traditional printed pages of books and newspapers, which carry stuff such as printed words, pictures, maps and diagrams, we actually encounter exactly the same kind of material on web pages, graffiti, SMS messages, DVD and games menus, and in most forms of print and poster advertising. All these kinds of text share the common feature of being located physical entities, no matter how many copies may exist, or whether they are accessed in material or virtual form. And they are all heavily dependent on the written word: they may not use many of them, but the word is still important to most of these kinds of text. Even texts that consist of just one image usually have at least one word that “anchors” the meaning of the image. So literacy as traditionally understood is essential for page-based texts although, as Kress and others argue, literacy teaching does need to take better account of the multimodal relationships between text and image, graphics, layout and colour.

The other category of skills would be those required to deal with **time-based texts** such as moving image media, radio, podcasts, games, recorded music and visits to virtual worlds. Here we are into something rather more challenging and relatively new (i.e. 100 years or less). Duration is an essential, built-in characteristic of all these types of text, whereas page-based texts have no duration: you can spend as

much or as little time with a page-based text as you want. In spite of the fact that many time-based texts use words, at least as many do not, so although the “speaking and listening” dimensions of literacy contribute something towards learners’ engagement with time-based texts, literacy teaching in general falls woefully short of providing the critical and creative skills needed to help learners extend and enhance their capacity to understand and enjoy time-based texts. Nevertheless, time-based texts are obviously of enormous importance in our culture, as media educators have been arguing for many years, if not in quite these terms.

Multimodal theory and “digital literacy” fans would argue that the boundaries between page-based and time-based texts are breaking down. I don’t agree: I think that most of the time they remain perfectly clear. The combination of text and moving image on the same page is often a convenient way of accessing both, but it rarely constitutes a coherent text in its own right. You don’t sit and read the words on the YouTube page at the same time as you play a video. Once you’ve got what you want to watch you maximise the screen and get on with watching it. Just because there can be a “breaking news” text crawling along the bottom of a Sky News bulletin doesn’t transform that screen into a totally new kind of text. It remains a slightly awkward hybrid: you read the crawler in a different way from the moving images and audio track of the rest of the bulletin. And although I’d argue that subtitles are the least worst option for accessing foreign language films and TV, no one can deny that it is annoying to have to switch constantly between written words and moving images, while any knowledge of the film’s original language will quickly reveal that subtitles can never keep up with the detail and subtlety of the screen dialogue.

It’s true that avatars in virtual worlds can exchange written dialogue in “real time”, but I suspect that virtual worlds are moving in the direction of becoming more filmic, with options for creating and manipulating spoken dialogue and sound effects, such as some games are already starting to provide. The closest we can get to a real time-based/page-based merger is in films that animate written words themselves. This has been widely used in advertising for many years: it enables you to read the words at the same time as the shapes and colours of the letters change and move^{vii}. The same technique is now used in some electronic picture books for children. Maybe this is a type of text that will come into more favour eventually: at the moment it’s expensive and time-consuming to produce, but it’s certainly not hard to “read”.

To me, this page/time-based distinction makes more sense than others that have been offered in the long process of accommodating non-print media into arguments about literacy. I do not offer it as a permanent or impermeable distinction. It’s going to be very interesting to see how these two types of text continue to develop and interrelate – but my main interest here is in the kinds of learning that schools need to provide to help learners engage with them fully, not in providing a watertight, scientific description of the textual forms themselves. In the longer term, it will also be interesting to explore ways of investigating new literacy practice in terms of these two categories. But for now, I am using them pragmatically: my focus is essentially on classrooms and on the educational policy-makers who try to determine what goes on in them. Recognising the essential predominance of two basic categories of learning and skills might help us all to calm down and venture to think about literacy in more radical terms, rather than as a curricular “given” which can only accept marginal change.

What would be the implications of this distinction for thinking about education for literacy? Literacy education has to provide the skills, knowledge and understanding necessary to access, understand and make texts. Clearly it is unrealistic to expect education policy-makers to be in any hurry to acknowledge that the material studied in literacy lessons should now include not only multimodal page-based texts (which are still not as widely studied as pure print texts) but also the vast and rapidly evolving array of time-based texts. Education is a conservative field and change is glacial. But how far do the learning outcomes required for engaging fully with page-based texts overlap with those required for time-based texts? Are there two distinct kinds of learning outcome or may there be generic learning outcomes that underpin any kind of literacy?

When I was working with colleagues at the BFI to get film included in literacy teaching, we argued that there are conceptual learning objectives common to both print and moving image media: concepts such as narrative, genre, character and setting are useful “ways in” to films, but are also identified as key “text level” concepts in print literacy. Learners can develop their understanding of these concepts through both films and books, and there is good, if anecdotal, evidence to suggest that learning which employs both is more effective than purely book-based learning. But we also argued that other textual elements specific to film – framing, shot composition, sequencing and sound – are also worth learning about in their own right, on the basis of the usual media literacy arguments: moving image media are an important part of our culture and children are entitled to learn about them. So we are still looking for two distinct kinds of learning outcome. But would we have to teach these separately?

When we turn to the implications for pedagogy, I think we can approach page- and time-based texts together in a more integrated way. It is possible to see how the rhetorical elements of film have textual functions analogous to the strategies used by writers when they are constructing narratives, imparting information or striving for emotional effect. This might help us get away from comparing films and written stories merely at the level of “what happens”, and focus instead on how they work as texts: what expressive problems the artists are trying to solve. David Parker’s important study of how children’s writing could be affected by filmmaking^{viii} offers some intriguing insights on these lines, as does Mark Reid’s excellent introduction to the BFI’s *Story Shorts 2*^{ix}.

Like literacy teaching that encourages a descriptive, “naming of parts” approach^x to textual study, without thinking about, for example, *what* an adjective or a simile achieves at a particular point, media education can be over-dependent on “spot the close-up” types of film analysis that do nothing to explore what a close-up contributes to meaning, or why a dissolve has been used at a particular point, rather than a cut. Instead of treating texts as objects to be deconstructed, we can address them in terms of the craft of textual composition. Working on both page-based and time-based texts simultaneously, specific expressive problems such as the establishment of point of view, shifts from third- to first-person narration, or signalling an interior monologue, can become the central focus for learning. This doesn’t have to mean working on “the film of the book”. It’s usually more interesting to look at how such problems have been solved in quite different texts, or simply to take a text in

one medium and investigate how one specific moment (establishing a setting at the beginning, for example) might be tackled in another medium. Of course teachers do this to some extent already, but it's usually done as "using film to stimulate writing", rather than switching between text types in order to provide opportunities for reflection about how both of them work^{xi}. And there is no reason why this kind of work should not be attempted with young children: Jackie Marsh has explored some of these possibilities with three- and four-year olds.^{xii}

Exploring the ways in which both page-based and time-based texts can tackle expressive problems – both through creative work and textual study – opens up the way to a crucial but often-neglected aspect of teaching and learning: exploring what different media are – and could be – capable of. Recent training and policy in education has generated a frighteningly utilitarian attitude to texts, and media teachers are not immune from this. We ought not to be shy about admitting that texts are made by human beings trying to represent the world. So I would hope that what the page/time-based distinction might be able to offer to the development of literacy is not, ultimately, a sharp division between two radically different kinds of critical and creative skill, but a more flexible pedagogy to deal with both. Children experience the world of communication as a continuum of textual practices: if we can't rebalance the teaching of literacy to take account of this, we are likely to continue fostering unacceptable levels of failure in our schools.

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- ⁱ A presentation based on this paper was given at the UKLA/BFI Reframing Literacy conference, London, 14th November 2008.
- ⁱⁱ Published as "A Stitch in Time" NAAE Journal 1997.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Of course this does not mean that I think there shouldn't be any specialist courses in media for older students – of course there should. My interest is in media literacy as an entitlement for everyone from the earliest years of schooling.
- ^{iv} Gunther Kress (2003) *Literacy in the New Media Age*: Routledge.
- ^v See for example the account of multimodal texts at http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primaryframework/downloads/PDF/UsingICT_multimodal_forms.pdf.
- ^{vi} When I arrived at the BFI in 1979, their classroom materials consisted of 16mm extracts (which needed a projector and blackout to be shown in a classroom) and sets of slides; my first job there was to develop "image analysis" materials for schools, such as *Reading Pictures* (1981) and *Selling Pictures* (1983), based on French and Swiss work in semiotics.
- ^{vii} An early and influential example is the series of adverts for Radio Scotland by Jonathan Barnbrook, available on *Screening Shorts*, BFI 2005; also more recently the IKEA advert "Home", available on *Doing Ads*, English and Media Centre. Both resources available at 10% discount to MEA members from the BFI FilmStore.
- ^{viii} See "Written Outcomes" section in David Parker, "Moving Image, Media, Print Literacy and Narrative" at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/education/research/teachlearn/nate.html#theo>.
- ^{ix} BFI 2006; for ordering details go to <http://www.bfi.org.uk/education/teaching/primary.html>; MEA members get a 10% discount on this title from the BFI FilmStore.
- ^x Henry Reed, "Today We Have Naming of Parts", first published *New Statesman and Nation*, 8th August 1942; available at
- ^{xi} I'm grateful to Mark Reid for this insight.
- ^{xii} Jackie Marsh (2006) "Emergent Media Literacy: Digital Animation in Early Childhood" in *Language and Education*, Vol. 20 No 6.