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Tracing the Turn : the Rise of Multimodal Composition in the U.S.

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1. Introduction

In 2009, in *College Composition and Communication*—the flagship journal of U.S. based composition studies—Cynthia Selfe argued that if educators want to prepare students for communicating in an increasingly complex world, one where we strive to "create a different set of global and local relations than currently exists, we will need all available means of persuasion, all available dimensions, all available approaches, not simply those limited to the two dimensional space of a printed page" (CCC 60.4, June 2009, 663). This widely cited article comes at the end of a decade when rhetoric and composition in the United States saw an increase of scholarship and pedagogy arguing for classroom instruction in both the production and analysis of multimodal texts. In brief, multimodality is an approach to literacy studies where all communication modes—textual, aural, linguistic, spatial, and visual resources—are valued and explored. While multimodal approaches to literacy education and theory are not necessarily new, as Jason Palmeri (2012) argues in his historical tracing of composition and rhetorical education in the U.S., the groundwork for multimodal pedagogy was laid by the New London Group (1996) who argued that to be designers of our social futures, literacy education must include a multimodal approach.

As it's currently taken up in composition and rhetoric studies, multimodal texts are those that use more than one communicative mode. Yet as can be expected with most terminology, use of the word "multimodal" in current scholarship can at times be somewhat imprecise. As Claire Lauer explores, there are often conflations of "multimodal" and "digital." As Lauer traces the terms multimodal and multimedia, she finds a clear distinction between the two, describing that modes are often attributed to *representations* of information, whereas media refer more commonly to *tools* and resources to produce and distribute text (*Computers and Composition* 26.4, December 2009, 227). That being said, multimodality

is, arguably, inescapable. As Jody Shipka (2011) suggests, "there is, technically speaking, no such thing as a monomodal text as even print-linear alphabetic texts are provided meaning potentials based on the visual design of the page; the color; quality, and texture of paper the text is printed on" (2011, 12).

While not all scholars agree that all texts are multimodal, and while the nuances of the definition may vary depending on who is wielding the term and to what ends, the fact remains that since the New London Group's 1996 manifesto, rhetoric and composition in the U.S. has seen a dramatic rise in multimodal theory and practice. Consider that of the 650 panels at the 2016 Conference on College Composition and Communication, 103 of them explicitly engage with multimodality. This interest in multimodal theory and practice is often attributed to the tectonic shifts in composing that are part of 21st century literacies. Consider everyday literacy practices such as posting images to Instagram, making Vine videos, tweeting, or texting with emojis—all of these everyday literacy practices are multimodal (Yancey 2004, CCC 56.2, 297-328). While everyday 21st century literacy practices certainly have an impact on the theory and practice of rhetoric and composition, the trajectory in how we think about multimodality and composing is also intimately linked with how we define and understand rhetoric.

2. Rhetoric and Multimodality

When situating how multimodality factors into the rhetorical situation, we need to consider both the tool used and the representations folded into the entire context of composing.

Multimodal practice is a framework rooted in both process and product of the texts we compose in the classroom, for "to label a text multimodal or monomodal based on its final appearance alone discounts, or worse yet, renders invisible the contributions made by a much wider variety of resources, supports, and tools" (Shipka 2011, 52). In situating multimodal practice as rooted within process, Shipka considers the material conditions that manifest as a part of our composing procedures. Under this framework then, the rhetorical situation frames how one retains, understands, and utilizes the resources to compose. Material conditions such as lighting, body posture, and texture are multimodal in that their utilization and aesthetic directly contribute to the texts that are produced within their presence and influence.

Expansions in how we define and understand rhetoric has allowed for a more extensive enactment of what it means to compose. Though it could be argued that multimodality has been tied to rhetoric since Greco-Roman times, considering how the sophists used the body and orality in conjunction with prose, the first

rhetorician to extend our understandings of rhetoric, Kenneth Burke, offers up a dynamic definition of rhetoric that calls attention to moving beyond written discourse for persuasion.

> For rhetoric as such is not rooted in any past condition of human society. It is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in being that by nature respond to symbols. (Burke 1969, 43)

Burke's understanding of language allows for symbols beyond the written word, and as such is an inclusive ideology for thinking about persuasion. In Burke's discussion of language as a symbol system, there is interpretation for epistemology that extends far beyond alphabetic literacy as a way to communicate in an ever-changing world. It is with this expansion of rhetoric that moves beyond alphabetic literacy that we have possibilities of, or at least theoretical groundwork for, multimodal theory and practice. For those of us rooted in rhetoric and composition, there is a necessary link between how we define rhetoric and how we theorize and teach multimodality. These connections are seen in various strands of rhetorical theory, all of which utilize the juxtaposition and affordances of different modes and their roles in persuasion and epistemology. In short, the question of how humans respond to symbols of all kinds is, in essence, a multimodal concern.

3. Current Areas of Research/Exploration

In what remains of this essay, we trace how three current sub-disciplines within rhetoric and composition—digital rhetoric, cultural rhetoric, and disability studies—each provide commentary about, critique of, and considerations for multimodal theory and pedagogy.

3.1 Area 1: Digital Rhetoric

Drawing from Burke's concern with how humans respond to symbols, multimodality is necessarily concerned with the rhetorical affordances in our current landscape. Digital rhetoric, then, explores what happens when our rhetorical acts take place in digital spaces and are afforded by digital technologies. In *Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method, Practice*, Douglas Eyman (2015) addresses ways in which digital rhetoric contends with Bitzer's (1968) rhetorical situation, noting that within a digital environment, modes provide particular affordances in reaching a wider audience than composing previously encountered (Eyman 2015, 75). In order to frame the rhetorical situation in digital contexts, digital rhetoric has come to serve as "the application of rhetorical theory to digital texts and performances"

(2015, 13). Scholars who engage with digital rhetoric align themselves with both contemporary and classical rhetorical theories as a way to theorize and compose born-digital texts (Lanham, 2006, Sullivan and Porter, 1997, and McCorkle, 2012). As such, multimodality is enacted within digital rhetorical theory because as Lauer (2009) reminds us, multimedia tools and practices are always in some way engaged with multimodality. Whether it is a title accompanied with a sound bit, or a color accompanying a text-based hyperlink, modes work alongside one another in order to create meaning in digital contexts. In thinking about the ways in which multimodality lends itself to rhetoric, it is important to consider individual canons of classical rhetoric and the ways in which multimodality has been implemented.

Though it can be argued that multimodality is implemented within all canons of rhetoric, Eyman (2015) discusses how the increase in technological affordances for new media scholarship makes us more conscious of our engagement with style, arrangement, and delivery. As such, our attention to aesthetics in production has led to a scholarly interest in design and visual rhetoric. Scholars such as Wysocki (2005), Ball (2004), Selfe and Selfe (1994), and Kristin Arola (2010) all explore the canons of rhetoric that allocate for particular attention to new media landscapes. Pedagogical resources such as Arola, Sheppard, and Ball's (2014) *Writer/ Designer: A Guide to Making Multimodal Projects* situate themselves within the canons so as to help students navigate how arrangement, style, and delivery all contribute to an effective multimodal composition. Such resources discuss the ways effective implementation of the canons in multimodal projects lead to effective persuasion in an ever-changing world. Perhaps the most profound connection between multimodality and digital rhetoric is the underlying argument that when composing with technology, form cannot be separated from content. Arola (2010) argues that in order to develop a critical consciousness about rhetorical design and how such choices lend themselves to overall effective persuasion, digital rhetoric must engage with modes (content) and media (form and tools) as a linked practice that cannot exist apart from one another.

3.2 Area 2: Disability Studies

Multimodality, by extending our conceptions of what it means to compose, offers new possibilities and pitfalls for accessible and equitable composing and reading practices. Within the fields of rhetoric and composition, scholars such as Yergeau (2009), Dolmage (2008), and Kerschbaum (2014) have argued that multimodal composition benefits from a perspective that considers disability studies. While the implementation of a range of modes may appeal to a range of users, this

scholarship cautions against normalizing of multimodality, one that limits whose bodies are included in our composing and reading practices. A scholarly and pedagogical engagement with disability studies "allows us to regard the ways in which multimodal composing—and its investment in all sensorial possibilities 'all the time' (Dolmage 2011, n.p.) - normalizes and has been normalized by our understanding of *the* rhetorical triangle" (Yergeau *et al.*, *Kairos* 18.1, Fall 2013, n.p.). That is, if we function with a limited definition of rhetoric, and more specifically with a limited and static definition of audience, we may (even if we use a multimodal approach) limit access by composing to a "default user."

In order to combat an ableist multimodal approach, Dolmage (2008) calls upon composition teachers to implore a "universal design" in the resources we provide and the pedagogy we enact. Without attention to universal design and accessibility, we run the risk of simply importing standard methods for design and multimodality. Such traditions, as Salvo argues, "leave accustomed power structures unquestioned and relationships between inside and outside unchanged" (Salvo in *Kairos* 18.1, Fall 2013, n.p.). Returning to Shipka, disability studies provides one way of considering material conditions that exist apart from the digital platform, advocating that the bodies and material conditions that apply to the composer are often a failed consideration in the ways that the text is produced, retained, and accessed. Considering disability studies alongside multimodality encourages us to consider issues of accessibility and to account for the ways in which the tools, modes, and meanings we construct can and should provide a range of affordances if used thoughtfully.

3.3 Area 3: Cultural Rhetorics

Cultural rhetorics is a broad area of exploration, one that sometimes includes disability studies insofar as both are attuned to the ways rhetorical approaches afford certain ways of being, thinking, and doing. As defined by the Cultural Rhetorics conference call for papers, it refers to the ways our scholarly and teaching practices engage with

> "a set of constellating methodological and theoretical frames… These frames draw from Rhetoric & Composition Studies, various Ethnic Studies fields, Postcolonial Studies, Decolonial Studies, Gender Studies, Performance Studies, Cultural Studies, and other fields" (2016, n.p.).

This list of fields is no doubt a huge constellation, yet what they all have in common, and what cultural rhetorics does best, is to question the ways that culture is an inextricable part of how we use and respond to symbols in the world.

Questions of cultural rhetoric often show up in digital rhetoric, specifically related to issues of identity and community. As Eyman notes, it's important for

rhetoric to consider "the ways in which race is constructed, marked, or elided in online communities" (Eyman 2015, 79). Many scholars (Banks 2005; Haas 2007, 2010; Nakamura, 2008) have explored the connections between culture, representation and rhetoric. Such concerns, when brought specifically to multimodality, allow for a richer sense of the affordances of multimodal texts. Such an understanding allows us to move towards a decolonial approach our multimodal theories and pedogogies.

4. Conclusion

Multimodality continues to pave the way for diverse rhetorical composing strategies within composition and rhetoric. Scholars in these fields have historically engaged with multimodality as both part of the process and the final products of composition. In looking toward the future of composing, considering the reality that our tools and technologies will continue to change, multimodality lends itself as an epistemological framework for understanding composing in an ever-changing world. Multimodality helps us recognize and celebrate the diverse rhetorical methods we use to communicate and compose in ways that move with and against print-based alphabetic texts.

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