

REVIEW OF *LITERACY IN THE NEW MEDIA AGE*

Literacy in the New Media Age

Gunther Kress

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Review by Donald Weasenforth, Collin County Community College

That much of the writing we encounter daily takes the form of digital text displayed on screens probably goes unnoticed by many. In today's world, "we take reading on-screen for granted, and ... in the developed world most reading is probably already electronic" (Kasdorf, 2003, p. 465). A fundamental revolution is that text is freed from the physical medium that conveys it, and this raises many questions about the definition of textuality, the processing of text, and the sociocultural effects of the shift to text liberated from print media. These are the types of questions Gunther Kress addresses in *Literacy in the New Media Age* (2003). He identifies two main goals for his book, one of which is to provide a perspective on literacy of the past through "the search for the beginnings of answers to questions such as: ... What is common about the making of representations and messages between then and now, and in the likely tomorrow?" (p. 8). Kress's second goal is to provide "a conceptual framework and tools for thinking about a field that is in a profound state of transition" (p. 8). Kress's book delivers as promised on the first count, but it falls short of providing a coherent framework.

The first three chapters of *Literacy in the New Media Age* address the reconceptualization of textuality as prompted by a growing reliance on images and electronic media; they also address ramifications of this reconceptualization for society. Kress uses as a foundation for his discussion the observation of a shift from print media to computer screens. Against this backdrop, Kress raises two questions: (a) How will the nature of literacy change with use of digital texts, and (b) what will the sociocultural effects of this new literacy be? The new media make it easy to incorporate multiple communication modes (image, audio, video), and these modes, Kress argues, are "governed by distinct logics [which] change not only the deeper meanings of textual forms but also the structures of ideas, of conceptual arrangements, and of the structures of our knowledge" (p. 16). As Kress and others (cf. Kasdorf, 2003; Lynch & Horton, 2001) have noted, traditional text and electronic text *can* be used very differently; that is, they allow different types of reading. Paper-based texts entail strict linear organization, explicitly manifested in part by page and chapter numbers. A reader can more easily flip through a paper text and get a better sense of the spatial distribution of the content of the text. An electronic text, in contrast, allows and invites random access through hypertext links as well as search and browse functions. It is certainly conceivable that these various functionalities could yield different understandings and conceptualizations of the texts due to the more fluid processing available to readers. The extent to which this occurs and the process by which it occurs are matters for research, for which Kress provides some foundation, albeit a limited one.

As for the sociocultural implications of the growing dominance of image and screens, Kress points to the democratization of communication due to ubiquitous access to web-based tools. The current proliferation of web pages, web logs, wikis, instant messaging, and podcasting provides ample evidence of this growth. The social effects of the growing preference for images and electronic text is a fascinating issue, but one

that deserves more than the superficial speculation Kress offers; this issue would have been better addressed in a different work, especially since discussing the evolving conceptualizations of textuality and providing an analytic framework to analyze these new textualities seem ambitious enough in scope.

A discussion of the influences of various communication modes on epistemology is provided in Chapters 4 and 5. Kress concedes that "the old resources [e.g., principles of textual organization] colonized the new technology, but at the same time the affordances offered by the new technology reshaped the resources" (p. 83). As throughout the rest of his book, Kress illustrates his point with *text* samples, but, curiously, he provides little discussion and few examples of *electronic* text, where one might expect to find the most interesting interactions of "old resources" and new technologies. Also, it is important to note that not all resources have been changed by technologies' affordances, a point not clearly made by Kress. What we see daily (e.g., paper and electronic issues of newspapers, "printer-friendly" buttons on web pages, etc.) can be characterized as parallel systems, in which the old and new coexist. Technology has brought about a greater use of images and serves as a new medium for conveyance, but the extent to which image and screen will replace text and paper remains to be seen. At this point in time, Kress's view seems somewhat overstated.

Kress's main point in these chapters, his prediction that these affordances will shape what we know and how we know, is well taken. Unfortunately, Kress does not provide the most persuasive evidence, which again could be found in electronic texts. For example, the abilities to link information through hypertext and to personalize the access and presentation of information with electronic text directly raise questions about how readers' understanding might be shaped. These and other capabilities of electronic text not only support the content of the texts, but also stimulate "the creation of more [information]...and...enrich that web of knowledge that is so rapidly enriching us" (Kasdorf, 2003, p. 3). Technologies such as flow cues in dynamically served web pages—for which information is collected, organized, and published on the fly by software—determine what readers know by automatically selecting and organizing information for them. Kress also overlooks assistive technologies (e.g., text-to-speech, magnification, and navigational features) that allow the manipulation of texts and images on screens so as to compensate for visual handicaps. These technologies have obvious social ramifications which should be discussed.

Chapters 6 and 7 are devoted to a discussion of *genre*—defined by Kress as "a response to...social givens" (p. 98) rather than a confluence of textual regularities—with some application to multimodal texts. Kress occasionally overreaches in his interpretations of textual elements (e.g., his construal of the social contexts surrounding student texts in Chapter 7), and he does not clearly tie this discussion to the issues of the dominance of image and screen. At times he also overstates his case, as when he asserts that "until twenty or thirty years ago, writing carried all the communicational load of a message, and needed to have grammatical and syntactic structures that were equal to the complexities of that which had to be represented in that single mode" (p. 117). Among many examples that can be cited to the contrary are the botanical prints of the 18th and 19th centuries, clear examples of traditional texts in which images carry the bulk of the message (Baggett, 2006). Such overstatement aside, his discussion of the specialization of modes (text versus image) is interesting and a useful basis for the proposed analytic framework since it underlies the design of texts and, consequently, readers' processing of the texts. His inclusion of image as a genre-defining characteristic is valid in that images do partially reflect the social purposes of a document.

In Chapter 8, Kress redirects his discussion from a consideration of theoretical issues to identification of specific aspects of electronic text design which could become elements of a framework useful to analyses of literacy in "the new media age." He also touches here on implications of digital design for redefining what it means to be literate. His concepts of "blocks" of information and "entry" (p. 136) reflect the composition of many electronic documents and readers' approaches to parsing such documents, concepts which have been discussed for some time by graphics/web designers (Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 1999; Lynch & Horton, 2001) but are nonetheless crucial to a theory of literacy of electronic media.

This discussion is extended into Chapter 9 in a consideration of the specialized functions of image (i.e., to show) and text (i.e., to tell) and the directionality of reading paths. "Writing is used for that which writing does best—to provide, in fact, an account of events, and image is used for that which image does best, to depict the world that is at issue" (pp. 155-156). Given these specialized functions of text and image, Kress advises that designers of (electronic) texts consider the "best fit" (p. 156) when using various media, using images to represent concepts more easily represented visually and using text to represent sequentially-based concepts. Multimodality, Kress notes, also raises questions of directionality, that is how reading paths are determined by the layout of a document. It is clear that there is not one path to reading a multimodal, on-screen text, as is true to some extent for traditional text-only documents, but what is most important is identifying document characteristics that promote certain paths (cf. Kasdorf's 2003 discussion of Flash animations and content flow cues). Consistent with Kress's discussion, Lynch and Horton (2001) note that "[u]sers of web documents...interact with [them] in novel ways that have no precedents in paper document design" (p. 17). Users of a multimodal document first perceive the document as "large masses of shape and color [Kress's "blocks"], with foreground elements contrasting against the background field. Secondly, they begin to pick out specific information, first from graphics..., and only then do they start parsing the harder medium of text and begin to read individual words and phrases" (p. 82). Unfortunately, Kress's discussion does not draw together these types of observations into a coherent analytic framework or theory of literacy "in the new media age."

Kress's last chapter mentions additional, somewhat disconnected, issues related to the proliferation of multimodal electronic documents. Kress conjectures that a reader's imagination is a matter of ordering elements in contrast to filling traditional text with meaning. While there is some validity to this statement, readers do fill images with meaning also. Further, Kress points out that the notions of authorship and authority are redefined in electronic documents. Finally, he notes that standards of reading proficiency need to be reconsidered given the differences in texts and how readers process them, but Kress does not go much beyond raising these issues, all of which deserve more investigation and discussion.

Literacy in the New Media Age provides an engaging examination of how the conceptualization of textuality is changing as images seem to dominate text and as screens overtake paper as the most frequent means of distributing text. Kress does an excellent job at discussing those theoretical issues that may eventually yield an analytic framework which we may use to analyze new media and evaluate what may become a new literacy. As texts (and the media used to convey them) continue to evolve, and as theory and research continue to evolve, we can hope to see a coherent analytic framework emerge, a framework incorporating aspects of interactive electronic text design, graphic design, text and image processing, and sociocultural intentions latent in the new media.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Donald Weasenforth is Professor of English as a Second Language at Collin County Community College in Plano, Texas, where he also serves as Chair of ESL, Developmental Reading, and Developmental Writing. A primary focus of his instruction and research is the effective implementation of instructional technologies.

Email: dweasenforth@ccccd.edu

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