

Review:

Jennifer Rowsell. *Working with Multimodality: Rethinking Literacy in a Digital Age*. (Routledge, 2013)

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Nearly two decades ago, the New London Group (NLG) theorized the concepts of multiliteracies and multimodality in their groundbreaking work, “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures.” Challenging literacy education which overprivileged “formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language” (61), the NLG argued that conceptions of literacy—and its attendant pedagogies—must be sensitive to the ways “in which language and other modes of meaning [function as] dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes” (64). That is, the NLG not only sought to democratize the concept of literacy by illuminating the ways multimodal literacy practices synthesize linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial modes, but to also foreground the agentive force of multiliteracies as tools for enacting multicultural, multicontextual social change.

While two decades have passed since the NLG introduced multimodality, it continues to flourish as an interdisciplinary concept. Literacy scholars from fields such as technical communication (e.g., Fraiberg; Potts; Sauer), community literacy (Rumsey; Turner & Hicks; White-Farnham), computers and composition (e.g., Journet, Ball, & Trauman; Lauer; Wysocki), rhetoric and composition (e.g., Hocks; Palmeri; Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michel), as well as sociolinguistics and social semiotics (e.g., Jewitt; Kress; van Leeuwen) continue to fruitfully explore the pedagogical, theoretical, and empirical dimensions of constructing and communicating knowledge through multimodal literacy practices. Among such important contributions in recent multimodal scholarship is Jennifer Rowsell's *Working with Multimodality: Rethinking Literacy in a Digital Age*, which explores the ways that producers from distinct fields of professional and artistic practice—animation, architecture, children's literature, ballet, as well as costume, clothing, video, and web design—compose using multimodal literacies. By first offering detailed comparative accounts of the ways that multimodal composing practices converge and deviate within a range of distinct professions, and then articulating the implications such practices have for the ways that literacy pedagogy is promulgated in formal education settings, Rowsell's *Working with Multimodality* makes an important contribution to literacy studies. Literacy researchers and educators from a range of disciplines will be drawn to this work because Rowsell not only emphasizes the “need to think far more progressively about what literacy might mean” (2) but also because the composer-participants regularly frame multimodal composing as an “extracurricular literacy” (Gere) by recounting how composing with visual, oral, spatial, movement, gestural, digital, and embodied modalities is too often devalued within traditional educational settings.

Rowsell begins *Working with Multimodality* by situating her work within existing theories of multimodality, which derive predominately from socio-linguistic and social semiotic approaches. Consistent with such approaches, the book is concerned with the “distinct logics...temporal sequences, and visual grammars” (4) associated with specific modes, but throughout the proceeding chapters, she regularly describes how such structures connect to the rhetorical situations that precipitate and reify acts of multimodal composing

as literacy practices, which emerge from material locations. In doing so, the text offers audiences who may be just discovering the concept of multimodality useful waypoints for navigating this increasingly complicated approach. Yet, Rowsell also introduces three concepts, trans-, inter-, and intramodality that audiences more steeped in multimodal theory will find generative. Whereas “transmodal elements... reach across modes,” “intermodal effects... represent links between modes that can exist separately but that cross-reference each other”, and “intramodal elements involve modes that cohere to make meaning” (4-5). As the subsequent chapters unfold, she regularly refers back to these concepts, explaining how relationships within and between modes enrich and complicate how producers might understand their compositions. Next, Rowell outlines a research design that utilized ethnographic observation, interviewing, and artifact collection/analysis to gather data on the ways such composers have learned, understood, and practiced literacies as multimodal. The proceeding chapters offer brief vignettes which are pulled from thirty cases studies with distinct multimodal composers. Each chapter is organized around one of nine specific modes: film, sound, visual, interface, videogames, space, movement, word, and textile. Audiences looking for insight about how a specific mode functions, then, will find this organizational pattern helpful as each chapter foregrounds the ways the composers work within the rhetorical, logical, and semiotic dimensions one specific mode, while also accounting for the types of coordinative and subordinate relationships that are interwoven across modes through multimodal composing processes. For example, an animator who predominately works with the visual mode explains how textual and spatial modes extend the understanding that is constructed within and through the visual elements of the page.

Each chapter follows a consistent structure whereby the organizing modality is first elucidated conceptually through an exploration of mainstream examples, before it is situated within a brief review of literature relevant to the modality. For example, in “Chapter 4: “Interface” Rowsell begins by recounting how Steve Jobs altered the way computer designers understood interface, because Macintosh embraced “intuitive, point and click design that incorporated, simple...icons...and user commands” (61). Next, Rowsell discusses the ways that scholars such as Carmen and Allan Luke, Henry Jenkins, James Gee, and Sheridan and Rowsell have influenced

contemporary conceptions of interface. Thereafter, the chapters present the case studies—at least two, but no more than four appear in each chapter—as engaging analytical narrative vignettes which blend Rowsell’s voice, those of the multimodal composers, and visual artifacts associated with their composing. Each chapter concludes by offering a reflective insight on how such case studies might enrich the ways that literacies are taught and understood within educational contexts, and many of the chapters offer examples of activities that educators might assign for students to explore the limitations, affordances, and agency associated with multimodal composing. The structure of the chapters works to offer content that would appeal to a wide variety of audiences. The mainstream examples are helpful for introducing readers to unfamiliar modes; the brief literature reviews offer historical context to how the modes have been understood or approached in existing scholarship; the case studies offer useful examples for thinking through and exploring multimodality; and, the concluding sections help resituate multimodality in a classroom for those looking to make such connections.

In short, *Working with Multimodality* will leave audiences reflecting about the theoretical and pedagogical implications that multimodality has for composing in a variety of contexts. While the text focuses on professional composers, readers will likely to draw inferences regarding the consequences of multimodal composing in civic and personal realms. For instance, Rowsell argues that “a spiral of modal power”—the way modes are disproportionately valued socially and economically—is deeply ensconced within the materiality of modes: “The most powerful and institutionalized mode of expression and representation is world. [...] The legitimacy and power of modes within educational frameworks begins to fall apart as the spiral moves” away from modes that are discursive, material, and visible. To challenge such a disposition toward multimodal literacy, the text foregrounds the roles that identity and location play within literacy learning and offers five key themes for audiences to reflect on:

- *childhood* interests impact how composers value modes;
- *collaboration* and *communities of practice* impact the ways that modes are valued, taught, and enacted;

- *process* is fundamental to the practice of multimodal literacies;
- *remix* is central to the working practices of multimodal composing;
- multimodality is deeply connected with *narrative*. (150-151)

Reflections readers will enjoy exploring these themes as they affirm a critical literacy which values the processes, practices, and versions of literacy that are rooted in the respective participants' experiences as multimodal composers. The text reminds those in community literacy studies, public writing, and civic rhetorics to remain vigilant for literacy pedagogy which does not interrogate a proclivity for print-based literacies and does not serve students well. Multimodality, as the NLG argued long ago, is a tool for empowering composers, because the act of composing with a fully array of semiotic resources is an agentic democratic epistemological act that implicitly reveals, critiques, and responds to prescriptive literacy campaigns. Multimodality reminds us that uncritical pedagogies and curricula can be used to reinscribe the existing social and political order; it compels us to confront pedagogies and curricula that exclude multiliteracies in favor of monoliteracies; and, it challenges us to embrace the diverse multitude of ways that humans construct and communicate literacy within and across communities, in professions, and in their private lives.

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