Multimodal social semiotics: Writing in online contexts

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Introduction

Understanding the changing function of writing in online contexts such as blogs is central to understanding contemporary notions of literacy. This chapter describes and analyses the features of writing in online contexts, specifically in food blogs, from both a social and technological perspective. The decision to focus on food blogs is two fold: firstly food is a significant site for how individuals and societies form and express social identities, and secondly blogs are a significant digital form that involves writing – and food blogs are a common area of blogging.[1]

The chapter discusses writing as a resource for meaning making in the contemporary landscape of communication, the changing place and uses of writing, and writing genres in the context of websites and food blogs. Keeping a close focus on writing as mode it explores the complex mix of social, cultural, technological, and economic features of writing in online contexts and how these shape the function of writing. Throughout, the chapter draws on examples of food blogs to addresses questions of a social kind, including how notions of authorship and reading have changed, and the changes in relations of power between participants in online communication. These questions are intertwined with issues of a technological kind, such as, what kinds of texts and genres are produced on the site of different screens, and how the affordances of blog platforms are taken up. The ways in which the social and the technological are inextricably intertwined is pointed to throughout the chapter. For instance, contemporary principles of composition point to a melange of social and technological factors, in which the relations of authority and authorship, of power and knowledge, are being newly defined and 'embedded' in blog template design. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of current and future trends in relation to writing online.

The contemporary landscape of communication

The contemporary landscape of communication is marked by a profound change in the uses, forms and functions of writing (Boulter, 2001; Kress, 2010; O'Halloran, 2010). Speech has been and remains a major means of communication in face-to-face interaction although usually accompanied by gesture, gaze, body posture and so on. In short, speech is but one mode in a multimodal ensemble. When it comes to inscribed communication, writing has tended to dominate in the context of print. The place and role of language in inscribed communication is, however, changing in digital forms of communication. Writing and image taking on new functions and relationships (Bezemer and Kress, 2008; Jørgensen, et. al, 2011; Manovich, 2001; Wilson &

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[1] The chapter draws on data from a research project on food blogs and multimodal principles of composition. This research is a part of a larger project on multimodal methods for researching digital environments (MODE) (mode.ioe.ac.uk) and is funded by the ESRC [REF no.].

Peterson, 2002). Technological developments, notably web-based audio-visual applications (e.g. Skype) and speech-based applications (e.g. transcription software) together with the more generic potential for image and movement in online digital environments have led to two particularly significant changes. First, image is more and more taking the place of writing at the centre of the communicational stage. Second, the many screens of the contemporary landscape are, increasingly, displacing the media of the printed page (Jewitt, 2002, 2008). One consequence of this is that it is increasingly problematic to consider writing in isolation from the multimodal ensembles in which it is embedded. Following from this, understanding the function of writing, that is, what it is being used to achieve, becomes increasingly complex, particularly when seen as part of the endeavour of multimodal composition. Beyond the design of any multimodal ensemble there is a need to distinguish between the existing 'pre'-designed constraints and potentials of a technological platform (e.g. Wordpress) and what can be done on or with it in terms of writing. That is, the technologies underlying a blogging platform, such as Wordpress, have a kind of grammar that sets out potentials and constraints that in turn have effects for the possibilities of writing online. Understanding how these technologies shape writing has become one pre-condition for understanding writing in online contexts.

The social world, of which culture and technology are a part, shapes forms of interaction, and the semiotic resources available for communication: genres as textual forms of social relations and discourses that are the social shaping of content as it appears in texts; and modes as the social means for making meaning tangible, and visible (Bachmair, 2006; Kress, 2010; Van Leeuwen, 2004). Investigating technology within this social orientation sets out to understand the design potentials and constraints of a platform and to understand what its use can enable or inhibit or rule out for writing. Blogging platforms, for instance, provide facilities to design the screen on which interaction takes place and affords the use of a wide range of modes for making meaning and for communication: writing, sound as speech, music or sound-track, still and moving image, and colour.

Having sketched the focus and scope of this chapter the following section discusses writing as a resource for meaning making and writing genres.

Meaning and resources for making meaning
This section of the chapter explores the resources of writing and how these have been used and reshaped in the context of websites and blogs, notably the ways in which writing is configured with other modes, the function of writing and the genre of these multimodal ensembles. Both the effects on writing as a mode and the social consequences of this reshaping are discussed, for example the ways in which authority is shaped by the design and use of navigational features, linearity, modularity, and reading paths.

Writing as embedded in a multimodal ensemble
Writing is a mode: it is a set of resources, socially made, to enable us to deal with social needs and achieve social purposes. In this sense, writing can be understood as a cultural technology. Through interactions writing is constantly remade, to fit with ever changing social needs, occasions and purposes: it is shaped by the demands, needs, structures and practices in which it is used. It follows therefore that changes in both the uses and the forms of writing provide a record of social change (Bezemer &

Kress, 2008; Kress 2003). Thus to understand the likely developments of writing, the social groups which use it can be examined to see what they do with writing in different settings, and hypothesize from present forms, practices and trends to future ones. In other words, understanding the directions in which writing is likely to develop is intrinsically linked to the question of how society is likely to develop. If the social is taken as the starting point of meaning and of its expression it is necessarily the starting point of any attempt to understand uses and forms of writing among all semiotic resources present now and into the near future.

In making meaning as messages on blogs, writing is used together with images, still or moving; with colour; with sound in various forms (as music or sound-track); with actions and movements; with 3 D objects. That makes one question inevitable, namely 'What work are the modes which are chosen and co-present here, doing in the message overall?' All are resources for making meaning evident, visible, material, and thus raise the question of what meanings each of the modes present is called on to bring to any overall ensemble of modes into the message as a whole (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001).

A simple example may serve to make the point. Blogs, as one social medium, use a number of different modes together, writing included: images, for instance, are used frequently.

Fig. 1   Yorkshire pudding mixture in a stainless steel bowl

Focusing in on the work of each mode in Figure 1, the written part of this multimodal text, just preceding this image the blogger has described what she has done up to a particular point, and now she shows what stage the mixture for the Yorkshire pudding is at. She uses writing to convey something about the consistency of the mixture, including what it looks like. At this point the blogger uses an image – we hypothesis this shift indicates that writing is no longer sufficient. The image shows what it is difficult or maybe impossible to convey through writing. In other words, one can see, quite literally, the reason for the choice of a visual mode additional to writing. This raises the question of what is the semiotic relation between the writing and the image

in such texts: is the image inserted into the chronological sequence of the writing? Are they running in parallel?

Writing and multimodal genre

The writing here is, itself, unremarkable: as 'genre' it is a recount, stating what has 'gone on' so far, a series of events, presented in chronological sequence. The use of an image draws attention to a limitation of writing. At this point a new, different, question arises concerning the labelling of a multimodal genre. While there is no problem describing the genre of the written part of this multimodal text the image does not present sequential / chronological order; it *shows* a state of affairs - how things are. In other words, two (re)presentations, which are generically different, are co-present in this one text. That affects, changes, the genre of the text overall. The term *genre* captures central elements of a social relation and presents them in semiotic form (Bateman, 2008). For example, a recount has three participants: 1 *someone* who recounts 2 *something*, to 3 *someone* who receives the recount; social roles are mirrored by semiotic roles. Writing as recount and image as depiction, each suggest specific and distinct *social* and *semiotic* relations. A term is needed that aptly describes this complex and entirely common kind of multimodal text.

Writing and multimodal affordance

Modes are cultural technologies for making meaning visible or tangible, that is, evident to the senses in some way. In focussing on modes, there is a need to begin to tease out what the *affordances* of the different modes are (Jewitt, 2013; Kress, Multimodality, 2010) in order to see how and why each of these modes is taken up in on-line environments. This brings a new question about writing, exemplified in the blog screen shown in figure 1: what kinds of things does each mode – image, writing, colour, layout – do well, which things does it do less well, or which not at all? The blogger made a choice: switching from writing to image – we hypothesise because writing is not as easily able to show consistency or colour. This was a design decision: *image will do better than writing for this meaning.*

Digitally enabled and produced blogging platforms bring both a productive potential, and with that the need for a foregrounding of design in relation to the best means of communicating something. This capacity changes how modes may be used and are used. Design becomes foregrounded; and with it the question of what resources are best used for is asked. That is not a diminution of writing in any way; rather it brings characteristics of writing to the fore which had previously not been in focus: it does do certain things well, others less well or not at all. The written parts of the overall text (as recount) might have done less well what, using the image, is done readily and well. That raises the question of what are the potentials of writing as mode in an online environment. That question arises here in sharp form, due to a conjunction of social and technological factors at this moment in the production of this text-genre with this still relatively new medium, the blog.

Writing and blogs as medium

There is a need to focus on the representational, productive and distributive capacities of how technologies allow for the distribution or dissemination of the meanings made with multimodal ensembles. The most significant medium has been that of the book. Other media using the technology of paper and print, with the site of the page, have

developed over time, alongside the book: newspapers, magazines, and leaflets. All used the technology of print and paper as their means of production, and the page as their 'site of appearance' (the page itself of course being a socially/historically produced object). As modes are means for making meaning material and media are means for disseminating meanings as messages, there is a clear need to focus also on material/semiotic means of producing meanings, and the sites where they appear in digital environments.

The online character of writing makes evident how 'older semiotic orders' of print based page relations of modes, media, sites and production, are changing (Kress, 2010; Lemke, 2005). Online sites provide the conjunction of social and technological potentials and with that a lens to see how writing is challenged, in four ways:
1. Changed social arrangements amplified by the potentials of screens are changing genres;
2. In places where writing was dominant, image and other modes are now increasingly used with or without writing in ways that reduce that dominance;
3. The media of the page, the *book*, magazines, e.g. are being displaced by the media of screens;
4. Print as the means of producing writing and multimodal texts more generally, is challenged by the ease of digital means of producing multimodal texts.

Once factor central to these four changes, is that notions of authorship and publishing are also changing. What is posted and circulated can be edited. It can be an on-going process of writing in ways that what is published in print are not always readily available. Modes on screens, in often new genres, and in multimodal ensembles of varying kinds, are beginning to occupy the page and the 'readers' attention. At present the page is giving way to the screen or has perhaps already done so. With that, the centuries' long naturalized relation of the site of the page and the mode of writing are being loosened and undone. At the same time, paper and print are in many contexts being displaced by digital means of producing texts on screens (Boulter, 2001; Castells, 2000; Creeber & Royston 2009). In these processes, texts and principles of composition in general are being rapidly and radically remade.

The functions of Writing, Reading, Authority and Navigation

Reading paths and authority
This chapter insists the social is prior prompting the need to look carefully at the social to see what it is that is changing and how the various changes affect modes, media, production and sites of appearance. Socially speaking, the formal / semiotic feature of *linearity* correlates with and 'materializes' the social feature of *authority*: that is, it points to how the text was made and by whom; and its arrangement tells the reader how to read the text: where to start reading, how to continue reading, and, through that, tells how to 'get the' meanings of the author. Authority and authorship are entirely intertwined. 'Accurate' access to the meanings of the author depends on the reader's following the implicit instructions on how to read this text: an instruction to follow a specific 'reading path'. Social authority is given material form in the formal-semiotic features of the text. Linearity, here, is the sign of social power of a certain kind. This has led to a 'naturalized' order of engaging with a text, described by the metaphor of a 'reading path'. Such reading paths are signs of the authority of the

author who had produced content-as-knowledge, securely accessible only if the reading path is followed (Ede & Lunsford, 1984).

Social order and its semiotic form are both involved in a process of change. Instead of producing a pre-inscribed reading path – from the top left of the page to the end of the first line; back to the left of the following line and to the end of that line; and so on – the contemporary page tends to be arranged according to a different order and different principles. The previously taken for granted authority of the author, instructing the reader to read in a particular way, has been replaced by an invitation to the 'visitor' to a page – or more often now to a screen of some kind – to design their own path, using the resources that are there, across the page or screen and further on. With that has come a profound change to conceptions – and practices - of reading, which now no longer is decoding; it is now a matter of the visitor's design, arising out of her or his interest (Kress, 2003; Leu, et. al, 2004; Lunsford & Ede, 2009; Moss, 2001). The 'interest' of the person engaging with the semiotic entity – here the screen – leads her or him to construct coherence, developed in their construction of their 'reading path'. This idea is useful for capturing the power tension and authority involved in the social media practice – blogging and thinking of writing in this context as a cultural technology.

An illustrative example is useful here to make these points: Figure 2 shows two screen-shots of a website called PoetryArchive. The site imagines and addresses as its audience all those who have an interest in poetry: young and old, professionals or manual workers. The screen-shots (Figs 2 a and 2 b) show two 'pages' / 'screens': one a general screen / page of information titled "About Us"; and the other the opening screen / page "Children's Archive".

Fig 2a   About Us

Fig 2b Children's Archive

Both of these screen pages have the usual features of website screens: menu, navigational buttons, etc., however, there is a striking difference between them. The screen-shot in Fig 2 a shows, as its largest element, a block of writing of a 'traditional' kind: an arrangement which is characteristic, in part at least, of a 'traditional social order' untouched by the technological potentials of the computer or mobile technologies. By contrast, Fig 2 b shows an arrangement of entities of various kinds that has little or no resemblance to the page of a traditional book. The place of writing differs between these two sites. Figure 2 a has, as its major compositional element, a written text arranged in a conventional linear way. Figure 2 b shows anything but a traditional written element; writing is not dominant, nor does linearity dominate.

In Fig 2 b, linearity is replaced by modularity. Modularity (i.e. 'modules' as the *compositional elements*) is a formal-semiotic feature that derives from social arrangements of a certain kind, and expresses and reflects social meanings. They point to processes of text-making, not usually by a single author, but by a design-team and its practices. Modularity also points to the assumed manner of engaging with or 'reading' the text: not by following an order established by an author, but according to the interest of the person who engages with the text. In making the text, a design-team

reflect on the characteristics of those who might 'visit' the 'site'; make assumptions about their aesthetic dispositions (reflected in the colour-palette, for instance - as in the drawing and painting style); and assume that they expected to exercise 'choice': that is, to be able to move 'across' this 'collage-like' text and make selections according to their interest. Compared to the linearly constructed text shown in Figure 2a, modularity inverts the social and power relations of maker and reader. Linearity insists that the ordering of the author has to be observed; modularity makes no such assumptions and demands. Modularity insists that the interest of the visitor of this site is pre-eminent. It rests on a different distribution of responsibilities: namely that the task of the designer(s) is to assemble materials, contents, which will prove to be of interest to a reader, who will then make their choice about where to enter the page, and, by doing that, make a decision about how to move through the website.

In these online contexts, such choices have effects on writing, most obviously in the fact that if the assumed interests, including the aesthetic interests, of the visitors are pre-eminent in the process of construction, then writing will not be central, whether as organizational resource (linearity) nor in terms of meanings to be represented. Writing appears here mainly as caption, and its forms are shaped by that function. This arrangement points to and realizes a profoundly different social relation to that which underlies the compositional arrangement of Fig 2 a.

This is not an exhaustive account of indicators that connect the social and the semiotic: they are everywhere. It is not possible to produce a sign or a text, simple or complex, without displaying such indicators. As just one other instance, connected to the features of modularity and linearity, there is the socially and textually crucial issue of cohesion and coherence. Coherence names the effect gained from engaging with a semiotic entity, where the reader assesses that 'everything that is here belongs and belongs together' (Kress, 2010; Liu and O'Halloran, 2009; Van Leeuwen, 2004). 'Cohesion' names the devices and their use employed to produce this effect. In the long written textual element of Fig 2 a, the devices are linguistic and textual. Here, to show some of them, is an excerpt from the page - the opening heading and paragraph.

> **The Poetry Archive** exists to help make poetry accessible, relevant and enjoyable to a wide audience. **It** came into being as a result of a meeting, in a recording studio, between **Andrew Motion**, soon after **he** became U.K. Poet Laureate in 1999, and the recording producer, **Richard Carrington**. **They** agreed about how enjoyable and illuminating it is to hear poets reading their work and about how regrettable it was **that**, even in the recent past, many important poets had not been properly recorded.

Cohesive devices
In the second sentence, the initial *it* connects with the compound noun / name *Poetry Archive* in the preceding sentence. In the second sentence, the *he* re-states the name Andrew Motion. The initial *they* in the third sentence connects with the two nouns / names *Andrew Motion* and *Richard Carrington* in the second sentence. The *that* in the third sentence provides a link forward and lets the reader know that she or he will be informed about what 'was regrettable'. *Recorded* at the end of the last sentence, 'gathers up', so to speak, to '*hear poets reading their work*'. In other words, there are many direct links, as repetition, as restatement, etc., and subtle connections, which

knit together all parts of this paragraph. The same phenomenon can be observed operating across the whole of any coherent text.

A further means of producing coherence is by *ordering* and *sequencing*. Below, the three sentences of this paragraph have been re-ordered to show how the internal organization of the paragraph depends on appropriate sequence; but also to show how each sentence in a paragraph gets shaped by the need to fit into a specific place in a paragraph or even the whole text.

> *Re-ordered paragraph*
> **2** It came into being as a result of a meeting, in a recording studio, between Andrew Motion, soon after he became U.K. Poet Laureate in 1999, and the recording producer, Richard Carrington. **1** The Poetry Archive exists to help make poetry accessible, relevant and enjoyable to a wide audience. **3** They agreed about how enjoyable and illuminating it is to hear poets reading their work and about how regrettable it was that, even in the recent past, many important poets had not been properly recorded.

Every text projects an account of that specific bit of the world which it produces and describes; in doing so, it projects, with and in that text, a sense of the ordering of that produced and projected world.

There are none of these features in the screen-shot in Fig 2 b. There is no sequence; there are no lexical or syntactic or textual means of establishing coherence through internal connection, or through 'reference' by pronouns. Across these independent modular entities that is not a possibility. These resources for producing coherence are not available to the visitor of the screen shown as Fig 2 b. It indicates how different the social semiotic organizations of the two texts, Fig 2 a and 2 b, are. At a social level, it means that visitors to this site are not required or expected to be familiar with or knowledgeable about nor expected to be interested in the relation between these discrete modular entities, which exist here 'by themselves', so to speak. This is in not to say that the example in 2 b does not exhibit or 'have' markers of coherence. It does. The social origins and the forms of coherence are, however, fundamentally different to those of 2 a. The 'world' of 2 b and its forms of coherence are not about connection(s) between specific units or entities, at a detailed level. They are about coherence in the sense of all parts being part of a larger domain. The formal, semiotic devices which are used for that are, for instance, the *colour palette* of the whole; or the overall placing / ordering of elements of the composition within the space of the screen. Understanding the kinds of coherence provided by a text, knowing its principles of composition can provide insight into the kind of community which produced it (Jewitt, 2005; Kress, 2003). Conversely, knowing the community of readers for a text will provide an indication of the forms of coherence that are likely to be present. Both can provide insight into means for making a text *in*coherent, for this group. In the case of the device of colour, this may be a radical change in the 'palette' for instance by introducing intensely saturated colours or colours that belong to a different part of the spectrum.

It is reasonable to assume that, with a few exceptions, no-one sets out to produce an incoherent text: though the principles of coherence, and the cohesive devices available and used, are or can be profoundly different, and they and their use reflect

social notions of coherence. We might feel that a 'bricolage', assembled casually on a beach from bits of flotsam and jetsom is incoherent. Yet its frame – some bits of branches and driftwood - around the collection of bits and bobs, can immediately suggest the potential to 'read' meaning into the ensemble. Thus the 'reader', can do the 'semiotic work' of conferring coherence on the ensemble.

There is then a broad distinction to be made between a semiotic entity where someone has, clearly, done the semiotic work of producing coherence (for the reader); and an entity where the semiotic work done leaves the reader to do (some/much of) the work of creating coherence for myself. These two orientations reflect changes in forms of the social as discussed in relation to authority. These orientations also have their effect on the semiotic work that is done and the semiotic entities that are produced. The use of all modes takes place in larger social conceptual frames. One question, for writing is how writing-as-mode will fare in open digital environments, notably with multiple users bringing different cultural-semiotic resources to this process of reading.

Modular navigation

As already discussed 'traditional' written texts display a linear ordering: in their sequence of elements, arranged as lines; they are strongly sequential in larger textual elements, such as paragraphs and chapters for instance. In contrast, 'newer' forms of composition provide visitors with navigational resources to choose their own reading path (Lemke, 2005). It is possible to see the examples in Figs 2 a and 2 b as relatively clear examples of the uses of writing in 'traditional' and in 'newer' forms of composition and how the reading path has shifted from a prescribed linear order to provide visitors with modular navigation choices. Fig 3 shows a screen-shot of (part of) the homepage of the same website.
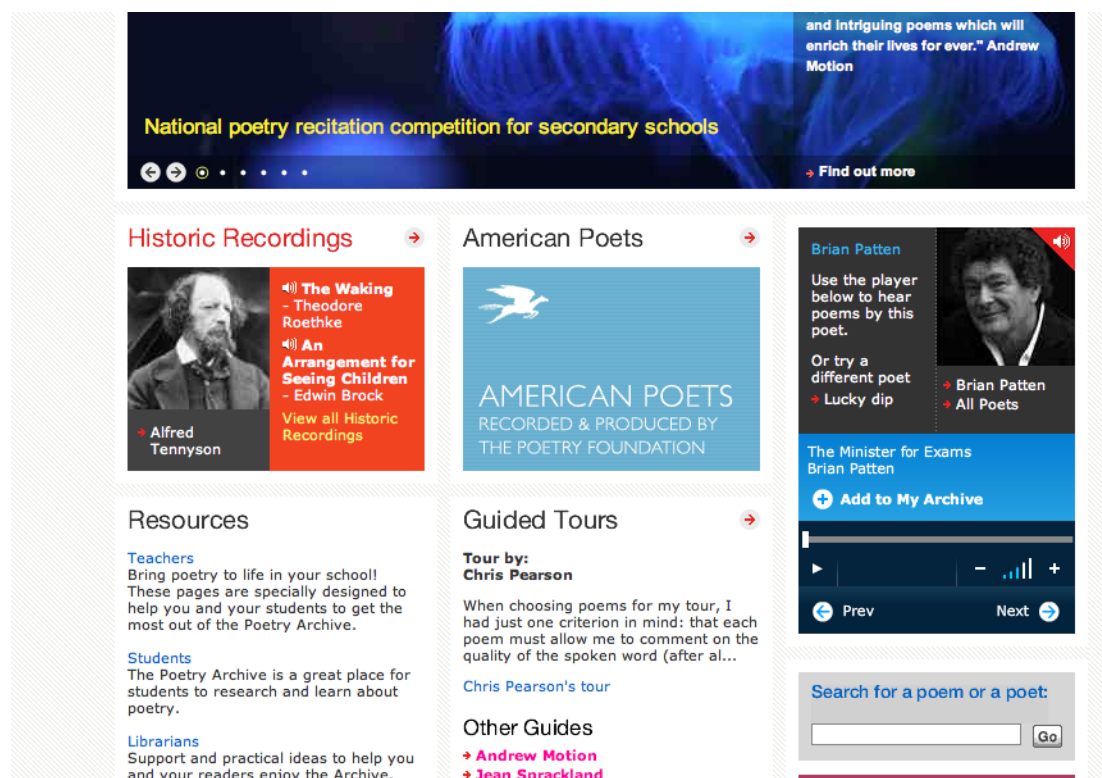
Fig 3 PoetryArchive: Homepage (screenshot)

Communicationally, the homepage needs to address all potential visitors to the site. And so, compositionally and semiotically, it has to be something of a half-way house, appealing to all groups, offering enough that is recognizable to all. The composition is modular, organized much more in a columnar rather than in a linear manner. Within the columns the over-arching organizing feature is sequence and not linearity – that is, sequence may be vertical (top-down) or horizontal (left to right); within this there may be segments of writing which are linear. The social significance of modularity is evident here; that is, the visitor is free to enter the site where she or he wishes to do so. Authority, in other words, lies as much or more with the 'visitor' choosing how to navigate the site than the author or design-team prescribing a set reading path in that respect. The modules themselves can have a structure of image plus writing; or of writing alone, with 'blocks of writing' (as in the module headed "Resources" with 'blocks' within this headed 'Teachers' 'Students' 'Librarians') rather than paragraphs. Within the 'blocks' there is writing of a conventional kind. Overall, in terms of the use of modes, writing here is still relatively dominant; in terms of compositional principles, the foregrounded principle is that of modularity, within an evident columnar, vertically sequential structure. In further thinking about structure and design, there is also a sensory experience that seems to be emerging in the ways that the blogger engages with potential visitors. For example, while less scrolling is often though to be a sign of a more streamlined design, some bloggers seem to be using a vertical framing to engage viewers to keep physically scrolling and tangibly interact with their blog. Further, this shift in navigational design also changes the usual principle of composition that what comes first (or what is in the landing page online) is most important seems to not be the case.

In other words, compositionally, the website overall is aptly iconic both in terms of the different sets of principles corresponding to ideals of the 'young' and 'old' audience; and of a transition from the traditional to the new, in use of modes, organization and navigation. This starts to blur the boundaries in terms of applying once distinct sets of talents or skills and allowing them to coexist on the page.

In part it strongly preserves the mode of writing in its traditional manner, and some of the traditional elements of writing: sentences and units 'below' the sentence, organized as blocks rather than paragraphs. That is, with the traditional unit of paragraph there is an expectation of 'linkage' and development, from one paragraph to another. At the same time it uses elements which were not part of the mode of writing in its traditional form: 'modules', for instance, units which are not paragraph or sentence; and, we are suggesting (as a provisional label) 'blocks'. The tasks demanded of writing, the tasks into which it is drawn, are other than its central traditional tasks (though writing as 'caption' or 'label' does of course have a long history). In parts of the website writing is very much in the centre, in others it is on the margin. Where it is on the margin, the visitors addressed are imagined as young; where it is central, the visitors are imagined as much older. Modularity rather than linearity of writing provides visitors, both young and old, options for navigating the site as suited to their reading preferences. The website embodies the unstable characteristics of the communicational landscape in which this website functions,

particularly the very different dispositions of its imagined audience; and of the place of writing within all that.

Designing (for) audiences
Blogs, as a medium, make use of a range of resources. There are, first, the generative resources of the platform itself. They offer the blogger the opportunity to design an overall shape for their particular blog. Different platforms offer different potentials for the blogger's design of the medium, with specific potentials. The platform constrains what can be done, much in the way that the grammar of a language constrains what can be expressed, while at the same time offering a wide potential for different kinds of expression within the overall constraint.

So, still with a focus on writing, there are, with any specific platform specific potentials for producing texts-as-genres of a certain kind. There are the many modes which are or may be available for use in relation to a specific platform-as-medium: writing, image, moving image / video, layout, and so on. The generative potentials are used to design a shape by the blogger. That shape does not determine what modes, where and how modes are to be used – such a constraint may be the result of certain design decisions deliberately made. With any online medium there are genres, which in their turn afford and constrain the uses to which modes are put (Lemke, 2005). With any online medium, as indeed generally, new genres may develop, as a consequence of social changes – where the potentials of the platforms may have their effects on that possibility.

There are design decisions made by bloggers in relation to individualization of the blog; or in an attempt to appeal to a specific audience. That may include or lead to changes in genre: if one assumes for instance that the blog at one stage had come into being as a consequence of the transfer of the not-online genre of diary, then the development of this genre on-line can be followed. For one thing, the distinctions of a private – public domain may change given the characteristics of being on-line (REF?). For another, what a diary is like or is becoming when it becomes linked with large corporations and becomes a vehicle for advertising or product placement, etc. can be questioned.

These decisions and trends will have effects on which modes may become privileged: not necessarily in terms of quantity of use – is writing used more than image? - but rather in terms of the functions of modes. That is, is the blog 'image-led' or 'writing-led', does it deploy video, still image, or writing with equal frequency and with different functions? Do aesthetic considerations change with changes in the social functions of the blog?
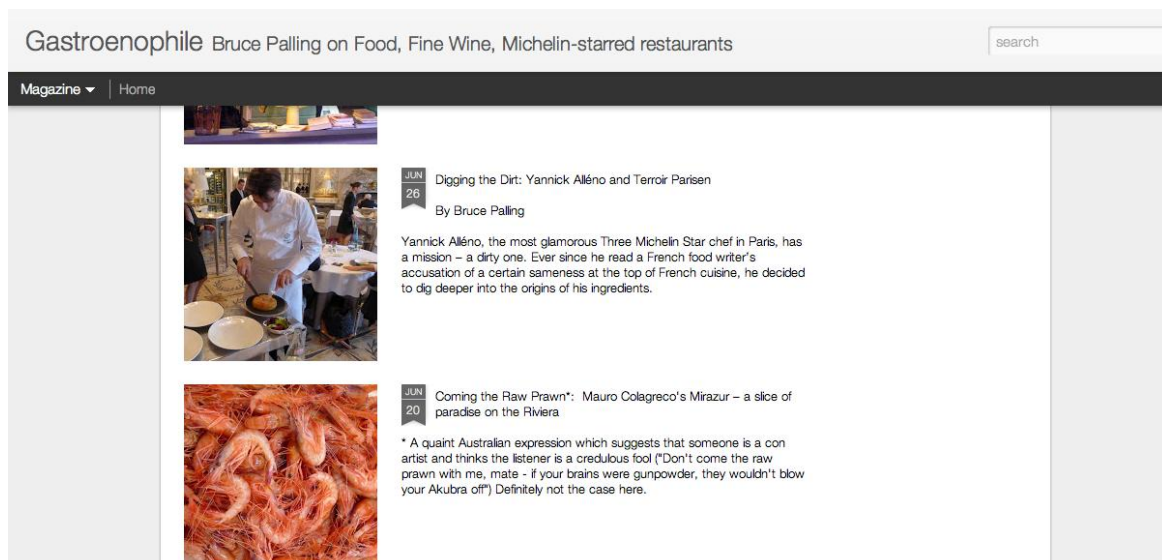
Fig 4 Gastroenophile

For example, taking the food blog Gastroenophile (Figure 4) in terms of the amount space given over to a mode on the screen, writing is, here, equivalent to image. The written part of this (multimodal) text-element of image-writing is relatively unremarkable.

Generically speaking, this is, broadly, a 'mini-report, of two sentences. The first sentence has an embedded relative clause; and a phrase in apposition. The second sentence has a complex but not unusual structure of (complex) adverbial phrase of time preceding the main clause. The 'style' is relatively informal, leaning on the cadences of speech rather than those of formal writing. There is a mildly amusing pun on the name of the restaurant "Terroire Parisien" – "digging the dirt".

A significant question here is one about the respective function of image and writing. If a left to right reading order is assumed, image is first; image is, as it were, the 'topic' of this 'blog element', its 'theme': it presents the main issue. In this structure writing has a subsidiary function, that of 'commentary'.

Understanding the place of writing 'on-line', requires some further questions to be asked which are not actually about writing in its conventional sense, but about *composition*: does it matter which element, the written or the visual is prior in a left-right sequence on the page? But asking that question is to move right away from characteristics of the mode of writing as such and to move to principles of multimodal text production. In other words, the issue is that it is not productive – in thinking about writing on-line – simply look at writing as such, but rather writing needs to be treated as an element in the design of a multimodal text. This holds true, even when

writing is clearly the major and central mode, as for instance in the blog below (figure 5).

Fig 5   "Silverbrow on Food"

Unlike Fig 4, a screenshot of a blog offering reviews of restaurants, this blog records the cooking and 'entertaining' of an individual. 'Writing is dominant, central in all respects. Where in Fig 4 the platform offered two columns, here the platform offers three. It shows that the affordances and the design of Platforms are one variable, and the uses made by the blogger of the platform are another, separate variable. The affordances of the Platform are used here less to shape the 'core' of the blog, but rather to embed the blog in a wider network of quite different media platforms.

14

Twitter updates
follow me on Twitter

Other blogs

Andy Hayler's Restaurant,
Food and Hotel Guide

Around Britain with a Paunch

Blue Lotus

Bruce Palling

Cheese and Biscuits

Divina Cucina

Dos Hermanos

eat like a girl

Epicureaddict rants on…

Food and Drink in London

Food Snob

Food Stories

Foodie at Fifteen

Fuchsia Dunlop's blog

Gin and Crumpets

High-End Food

Fig 6 The Blog, placed in the blogger's wider network

Writing, here, exists as the names of nodes, which connect elsewhere: to other, similar blogs in the right-most column, and to other activities on the web by this blogger. But again, here we are beginning to discuss not writing but *composition* of the specific medium.

To show the affordances of the same kind of platform as in Fig 4, designed very differently, here is Fig 7

BACON ACTION: Book tickets for Baconmas at The Thatched and Bacon Masterclasses

Posted on November 5, 2012

Bacon Masterclasses – photo from Gastronomical Heights by James Woollerton

It is bacon o'clock, folks!

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Recent Posts

- Greetings from Grenada! And Now for Something Completely Different: MONKEYS
- BACON ACTION: Book tickets for Baconmas at The Thatched and Bacon Masterclasses
- Review: Hawksmoor Air St
- Fernando de Castilla Sherry Tasting Matched with José Pizarro's Food
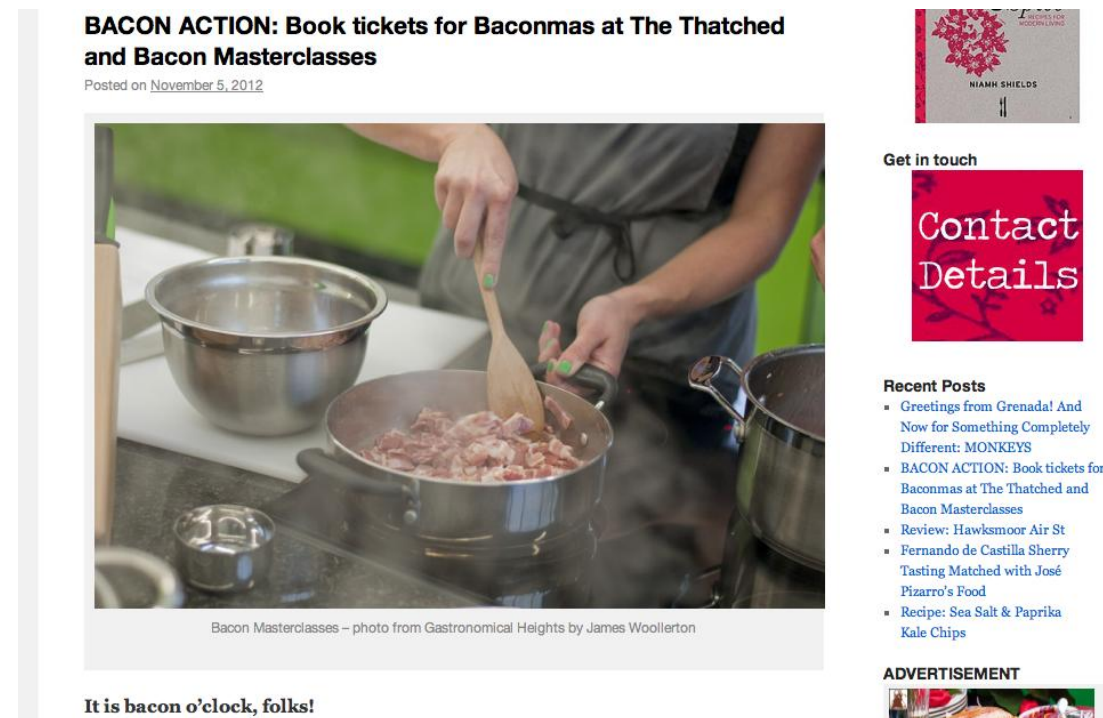- Recipe: Sea Salt & Paprika Kale Chips

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Fig 7   Eat like a Girl

The ordering of the Eat like a Girl blog (figure 7) is that of a vertical (downward) scrolling, within which there is no left-right ordering. The right most column runs in parallel to the central column: an entirely different arrangement to that of Fig 4. Whereas in Fig 4, the dominant ordering was of elements displayed left to right, in a vertically organized sequence; here the dominant ordering is the vertical, with the left to right order not utilized. The dominant genre is that of travelogue/diary, and in that genre writing is the dominant mode. In the blog overall, images take up about the same amount of space as writing: their function is to convey an aesthetic of 'high art': gastronomic, interior design, 'living'.

Some concluding comments

This chapter has focused on blogs. Given their social function, their 'transitionality' between the older and the newer, socially and semiotically, blogs make it possible, perhaps more so than other media sites, to look at the present state of writing on-line, and to speculate about future developments. A number of issues have arisen clearly, marking social and semiotic changes.

First and foremost and most decisive is the realization that it is not possible, now, any longer to look at 'writing on-line', as though it is 'writing' much in the it has been known, and that it continues to exist as a discrete phenomenon. Semiotically speaking, writing now has to be considered first of all in its environment of multimodal textual ensembles and in the wider environments of the connections of various digitally instantiated sites. Although, this chapter has not traced the now usual connection of blogs to other sites; nor therefore shown how the content of the blog is re-shaped - transformed and transducted modally and generically on other sites, this also has profound effects on 'writing'.

Second, the chapter has discussed the shift from the authority of the author to the interest of the reader (Kress, 2003; Lunsford & Ede, 2009; Moss, 2001; Silverstone, 2007). Semiotically, one consequence, or sign of this, is the shift from the linearity of the written text to the modularity of the contemporary written elements of multimodal texts. As has been discussed, if linearity was one means of signalling the authority of the author, then the modularity of the multimodal text signals the responsibility of the person who engages with the screen, let's say, as a (co-)designer. Power relations have changed, with semiotic consequences for writing – and beyond writing.

Third, the social is the origin of the semiotic; and as the social is dispersing and fraying, so notions of coherence as they had existed both socially and semiotically have changed profoundly (Kress, 2010; Liu and O'Halloran, 2009; Van Leeuwen, 2004). There is coherence in contemporary texts, on-line – though the forms of coherence are often profoundly different to the traditional forms: from the tightly 'knitted' coherence of words, syntax and (written) text, to the more open, a looser, 'less committed' coherence of – as an example - a colour scheme. The former allowed no or little choice in ways of approaching and engaging with the text. If you transgressed the order given by the author, you would not 'understand' the text. The latter forms may offer suggestions about ways of engaging, but leave specific forms of engagement and orders of engagement with the text to the interest of the reader.

Fourth, in all that there is an absolute need to consider the potentials which on-line media provide for the production of kinds of texts and genres (Bateman, 2008; Lemke, 2005). The media of mobile screens are becoming dominant and ubiquitous. The urgent questions for those concerned with reading and writing include: what can actually be done – represented – on these screens? What is permitted or possible on these sites? What modes will be dominant there, image or writing, or others, such as moving image, music, etc.

It seems clear that current social trends, matched with the affordances of the new media, will reshape the ways in which we make meanings. Writing will not disappear, though the 'children's archive' home-page is taken as an example – and perhaps as a useful metaphor - writing in the ways that it has been known may be subject to enormous changes. There is not on that site, anything like a sentence: there are captions and headings, but no sentences, no paragraphs, no extended texts, no written narratives.

For the near future a situation in which traditional forms of writing will exist side by side with the new is emerging. In as far as the elites will continue to use and maybe to prefer the traditional forms, it will remain crucial to ensure that young people will be able to have the best possible understanding of the affordances of writing in its traditional forms; and that schools will be allowed by those who control them to foster their explorations of new ways of making meanings.

On-line is a big space, and one that is constantly expanding but it is an expansion within certain principles – many of which are yet to be unravelled. This chapter is an attempt toward beginning elucidating some of these principles.

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