Making Textual Analysis More Inclusive

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Think 'text' and you think 'words on a page'. Today 'words on a screen' are not that much different. If the words are not laid out in ways that at least mimic or evoke the world of movable type, the printed page and the authoritative world of 'book learning', then as readers we are a bit lost and possibly begin to reach for alternative categories, such as art or entertainment. You *can* tell a book by its cover, because that is what covers are supposed to do. Learning is about knowledge, knowledge is serious, and out go the jazzy covers and picture-pages, unless of course it's a children's book, and thus relegated to fun-learning. Too much seriousness seems to be bad for children, and good for the rest of us.

The 'us' in question is of course cross-cut with hierarchies of race/ethnicity, class, language(s), literacies, modernity/'Westerness' or 'Global Northness' and any number of other inter-sectional and post-colonial ways of highlighting exclusions, devaluations and oppressions. Female literacy at all, and of what sort and in what contexts, is still a global battle. Literacy rates are a prime indicator of 'development', and textual testing is a huge force throughout the literate world in determining life-chances at any number of nodal points. The 'standard' letters, numbers, idiographic characters and character-like symbols are now internationally specified and digitally coded. 'Lines of type' is becoming 'strings of characters', but effectively there is little difference from the mud tablets, lapidary inscriptions and scrolled-up papyri of the last three thousand years or so.

Famously – as feminists have said – 'adding women' (to male-dominated and masculinized institutions) and 'stirring' (a bit) doesn't change very much (Hekman 1990). Adding something – i.e. *inclusion* – to the text-dominated hierarchies of knowledge and learning described above won't change very much either. Making textuality more 'inclusive' is rather like making 'whiteness' more inclusive; it's a contradiction in terms. You have to start thinking in other terms in the first place, and then see what 'text' might mean after you do that. This is not a particularly easy process.

Meaning-making as a Practice

Or is it? Woody Allen's movie 'The Purple Rose of Cairo' (1985) does quite a good job of dramatizing – with clear visual tropes of rupture and impossible but 'real' situations – how to do this, with the clear result that textuality is thoroughly mocked for its instability, indeterminacy and oppressiveness. Turning on the subtitles in your DVD or download screening of this film reinforces the message within the film that text is meaningful within, but not between, different worlds. And commencing intellectual change with a film, and indeed a funny one that is 'merely entertainment', underlines the transgressions required in order to accept a film as a teacher. These claims raise a very large number of issues, and these issues can function effectively here as a starting point for transcending the logocentricity that – if left unchallenged – would otherwise choke off attempted inclusions.

Rather than 'finding' meaning in a text, we could instead enquire into 'meaning-making' as a practice. This then opens up much more than visuality as simply 'looking at something' such that we 'read' it and 'absorb' its meaning. The something could indeed be a picture, photograph, sculpture, artwork or 'arty' movie, or monument, i.e. something 'meant' to be meaningful. It could also be any number of artefacts that are apparently – but – not actually – meaningless: everyday objects, the (not very) natural environment, the 'built' environment, streetscapes and advertising, fashion (or the lack of it), food, an obviously endless list. Even if it's just a landscape 'that meant

something to me', I – at least – am making meaning, as well as 'reading' objects (including human and animal ones) as meaningful. This is not an argument that everything is relevant to anything whatsoever all the time just as anyone wants. Rather it's an exposure of how much exclusion there is already – and socially – in terms of what is (as opposed to what supposedly isn't) meaningful in knowledge-production before we get anywhere near the notion of 'text'. The object of this argument is not to deny the validity of exclusions, but rather to direct attention towards the authorities (whether decision-making humans or stereotypically intelligible genres) that define and enforce validities.

Astute readers will have noticed the use of the term 'reading' in the above discussion of meaning-making. Reading is a way of making meaning to oneself that can be put into words (if words weren't there already) and thus communicated to others, whether in spoken or written form, or embodied as charades, performance art, masquerade, sign-language or some other communicative act. Communication is of course imperfect, because meaning-making is linguistic. Languages work by making differences, and then claiming similarities (among differences, and in relation to other differences). What does a notion of 'text' add to this picture?

Text adds a concept of authorship (whether human or divine) and thus of authority. It also adds presumptions of individualism, even if anonymous or pseudonymous, or even if collaborative. It adds authorial intention, and any number of hierarchies within such certification. Or to put it the other way round, folk tales, poetry and songs, even plays and pageants, can certainly be collected as texts, and they are certainly meaningful. But there is something missing, and any number of ways round this via imputed authorship: 'Homer', 'Ossian', 'Deutero-Isaiah', 'Evangelist' come to mind as typical stand-ins. Even for texts where there is no surviving portrait of the author (or there probably never was one), the urge to personalise and authorise is quite remarkable: witness the patently fictitious busts and paintings of 'the Greeks'.

Texts are thus exclusion zones, marking off the 'truly' meaningful strings-of-characters from less wordy media and less individualised authors. As a window on experience they don't look terribly promising. They also require lengthy training in hermeneutical skills, and there are self-referential practices of credentialisation that enforce this legally and economically. But then what is important in our world is overwhelmingly defined in this way, as well as who the important persons are. What is important in our world is economic activity, commercialism, religion, war and conflict, health and safety, care and healing – all very textual practices, bureaucratized and institutionalized. However, these are not necessarily all highly credentialed practices: 'We have to stand up tall / And answer Freedom's call' ('Donald Trump's Official Jam', anon., 2016). Textual sophistication works against political influence in democratic politics, as well as in authoritarian acts of domination; irony sometimes sells products, but probably wins few elections, and is seldom employed by dictators.

The Performance is the Message

Having thus belittled textuality, and the 'meaning-making' skills involved in making it work (for someone to do something), let's 'big up' the notion of 'text' to cover the semiotic (but not reductively semantic) context through which texts (understood in a broad sense) actually make the meanings that they do. This covers anything from the colours, sounds, choreography, lighting, setting, camera-work and 'newsfeed' digital media through which the Trump campaign operates to the austere settings through which more academic analysis operates and the (comparatively) 'boring' rituals, performances and media through which academic meaning-making does what it does. In between there are any number of other on-going texts – or 'discursive practices' – of interest: governmental, NGOs, commercial, religious, entertainment, tourism and other 'packaged' or projected experiences. If texts were reducible to semantic content (as per the dictionary), such that 'transparent' media could communicate these singularities to 'receptive' minds, then why would all these performative activities be working so hard on us to make meanings so visible over and above the 'words on the page'? Are all these performances a distraction? Do they get in the way? Are they just 'white noise'? Why don't we just 'get it' from 'words on the page' and 'that's it'?

Or putting it another way, how impoverished was life-before-text? Or is it? – given that some human groups are even yet outside the empire of the written word and the consequences of logocentricity. Meaning-making is a projection of meaning into the human social environment, such that it can be 'read' by individuals and communicated. This 'reading' process is an active one, and an individual one, generating as many interpretations as there are readers.

And from this arise social processes of authoritative interpretation and concomitant disciplinary practices, but also resistance, subversion and transgression. Texts – as 'words on the page' – are an extraordinarily effective way of doing this, not least because they are engines (rather than mere repositories) of cultural transmission. This is not to say that oral, pre-literate transmission doesn't happen, or that it never changes in itself, or anyone or anything. But the process speeds up dramatically when materiality as near-permanence meets the interpretive urge, and writing becomes memory and thus an object with a 'life of its own' apart from any one person's oral account. 'Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living' – Karl Marx (1996: 32). The nightmare would weigh less heavily on us if there were less of it, and we were less obsessed with reliving it.

Communicative Objects and User Experiences

Of course libraries have famously gone up in flames (in Alexandria in A.D. 391, at the British Museum in 1731 and on Nazi bonfires in 1933, for instance). Digitized media are perhaps more vulnerable to technological change or civilizational reversions than were manuscripts, incunabula and books. Or perhaps not, since digitized texts are so widely disseminated among 'users', and 'big data' is so expensively stored by agencies. But digitization is a good clue here to meaning-making: visuality, sound, movement and the editing thereof are becoming standard techniques in textual production, since it is so easy to create readable 'content' on a screen. These 'creative' techniques and tools are now standardly used by academic textual producers, probably the group most inclined to logocentric reductionism and recondite semantics.

My conclusion is that meaning is what we make, and 'text' is *now* simply a 'how to' list for the construction of communicative objects. The concept 'text' has inclusively followed its own transcendence as a matter of communicative practice. The text always was an object, it always was constructed, and it always was intended for circulation, whether to the very few in a diary or letter or to the world at large in an epic novel or a political tract. Strings of digits have replaced movable type set in locked forms, as well as touch-typing that moved line-by-line down a page, with the result that communicators have pictorial command over still and moving images, layout and wrap-around, 'clip-art' and hyperlinks, overlays and voice-overs, sound-tracks and animations.

'Text' as a concept easily stretches to all this, but it just as easily drags us back to some inertial logocentricity such that 'real' meaning supposedly comes from reductive analysis, because semantic simplicity supposedly resides in the written or transcribed sentence, preferably one traceable to authorial 'authorisation'. Communicative objects as digital assemblages of interlinked 'user-experiences' – through their complexity of result and their simplicity of fabrication – make it harder to sustain this reduction, since textual semantics does such obvious violence to the working-object as meaning-maker, on whatever screen or device the object resides, or rather revives when summoned. Popular 'apps' make us digital authors in multi-media modes, whether constructing an autobiographical 'timeline' on Facebook, sharing images on Instagram or uploading videos to websites of all kinds. Authorship is now shared by billions (where there are networks and devices, and economic means of access). Those who are still glued to the 'handwriting on the wall' are clearly not getting the message.

References

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