Web Design and the Dialectic Between Productive Intent and Creative Consumption

Perhaps the most radical variable of differently experienced web page viewing is the relative (not infinite) "play" that is gained from the move from print to electronic media. For example, an absolutely beautifully designed newspaper page which takes full advantage of a particular, and constrained, space and which dazzles readers with its design and textual flow -- the sort of page I loved trying to design in my days as a newspaper editor, simply cannot be reproduced on the electronic screen. The inconsistent sizes of electronic monitors, not to mention other variables (different browsers, browser versions, operating systems, etc.) make the exact (re)production of a particular print design on the web an essentially futile process. Even those web pages which seek a high degree of control/customization by employing javascripts in order to load differently marked up versions of pages (something beyond my technical expertise) based on users' browser differences cannot reproduce the control of the printed page. Try personalizing your font size to "48 pt." and see what a different web browsing experience you have.

Yet awareness of the futility of the effort to control the semiotic and textual flow and look of one's web page does not mean that I have not, in building this page and others, attempted, to some extent, to control what the "end user" views on his or her screen. There are ways to maintain some control -- use specific pixel widths in constructing tables, use images instead of text, etc. -- over what web surfers who happen upon your page see. (Of course, some of these methods might increase the load time of the page. I can wrestle endlessly with trying to strike a balance between relative control and the so-called "load time" of particular web pages I design).

Limits to creative, resistive potential

It is, I think, absolutely crucial to note that web users do not have limitless space for creativity (or creative resistance). Operating system options are not infinite. Nor are browser choices. Indeed, socio-economic factors could prevent some potential web site surfers from getting on the web in the first place. In short, while the producer cannot fully determine the semiotic/textual experience of the end-user, neither can the end-user realize an utterly idiosyncratic experience. Powerful social, economic, political and technological forces beyond the control of the individual (yet, paradoxically partially the outcome of his/her always already socially directed and constrained (creative) practice) direct both the production, and consumption, of web pages such as this one.

In this sense, one might say that web page consumption, and, I think, in particular production, provide a revealing window on the dialectic of semiotic and textual meaning. Having spent a good portion of life situated in the position of semiological and textual gatekeeper -- as a journalist, editor, writer, teacher, etc., I am accustomed to operating in a creative productive mode which tends to afford primacy to the producer in the textual/semiotic meaning/sense making equation. At least, this is generally true when it comes to writing and (web) page layout and design. When I teach, I try not to direct my students to think this, or write that. However, when viewed from a relatively high level of abstraction, I, along with the rest of my academic colleagues, do work pretty hard to encourage students to conceive of "thinking" in a particular, critical manner.

I am fond of pointing out to my students the paradox which inevitably underlies the following assertion made by a professor with whom I once worked as a teaching assistant. On the first day of class, he told students: "I'm not here to tell you want to think. I don't care what you think (about issue a, b, or c). But I sure as hell care about getting you to think." I agree.

It is, however, crucial to note that at a certain level, the statement is at least a little disingenuous (not intentionally so). The professor **does** in fact care **what** his students think **about what constitutes thinking** (and what does not). In short, he is, as all of us necessarily must be, deeply implicated in promoting certain ways of thinking -- and seeing. We are better off, he is implying (and I agree), if we (generally) agree on what we think about "thinking," that is, that in order for something to qualify as "thinking" it must reveal a high degree of informed individual and socio-historical reflexivity.

"Structured Polysemy" and the Role of Rhetorical Context

Admittedly, I work as well to get students to express their thoughts in a rather restrictive mode of written expression which emphasizes clarity, depth and breadth of thought, rational, logical argumentation, brevity, etc. It is an approach which operates on a rather rigid notion of unilinear and monologic communication. The producer, operating within a particular semiotic and rhetorical mold, transmits, as clearly as possible, meaning to the semiotic/textual consumer. It is a dominant approach into which (virtually) all semiotic and textual gatekeepers are inculcated. It is, I would add, also the dominant mode of social practice within (higher) education, practiced (and often preached -- in certain contexts and for particular rhetorical uses) by the very same academics who celebrate the many (agentive) wonders of supposedly endless play and wild polysemy.

Here, I find Morley's notion of "structured polysemy" extremely useful. It concedes the basic underlying reality of power and the always ongoing struggle for legitimation. Certain powerfully situated social actors -- gatekeepers like myself, for example -- work very hard to reign in and/or direct meaning, creativity, resistance, etc. They cannot, of course, succeed entirely. But if the world were, **at a practical, everyday level** -- in other words, at the level of actually lived and experienced human social reality --

characterized by the ability to engage in endless play and creativity, if it were indeed marked by actually realized extreme polysemy, **as opposed to the theoretical potential for such polysemy**, across **all types** of texts and rhetorical contexts, why must I plug into a formulaic, academic writing mode when submitting to a prestigious journal my paper celebrating the boundless wonders of (a wildly and impossibly) libertarian semiotic/textual world? Why are college students required to write in a particular way when they submit papers to me, or to my colleague who celebrates textual and semiotic play? Why don't more college students who read a textbook on the great social theorists of the 19th century take up the endless polysemic potential of these (and other) texts and act as if what they're reading is a script for a television sitcom, or even total gibberish?

Meaning and the Struggle for Legitimation

At a very high level of abstraction, the answer, I would suggest, lies in the everyday practical realities of perpetual human struggle -- for power, for expression, and to make sense of, and understand the (social) world human beings materially and ideologically (re)produce. In order to make sense of their world in some collective sense, variously situated human social actors struggle, sometimes with one another, sometimes against one another, or sometimes both with and against one another, to contain "play," "polysemy," "meaning." In other words, they are always already involved in an ongoing socio-historical struggle for (self-)legitimation. Some groups of social actors meet with more (hegemonic) success in this struggle to define the very terms/frames (language, culture, ideology, etc.) of understanding than others. It is these groups (the educated bourgeoisie, for example) who, while they do not entirely succeed in restricting play, creativity, resistance, do in fact often largely, even sometimes overwhelmingly, succeed in setting the hegemonic rules for "structured" polysemy in a social world, that is,

through and through, characterized by unequal relations of power. These hegemonic rules -- which to varying degrees direct and constrain polysemy, are anchored in ideology, the set of beliefs, values and ways of (semiotic and textual) "seeing" characteristic to a particular group, or class, of people.

Education as Key Instrument of Hegemony

As Gramsci, Bourdieu, Althusser and others have noted, a primary structural means whereby a particular order of domination (which implies, at an actually realized level, sometimes extremely "structured polysemy") is the (higher) educational apparatus. Thus, there is much less room, I would suggest, for wildly divergent readings of an academic journal text, or textbook, particularly if that reading is realized within the real, material confines of the academy, than there is for diverse readings of MTV's *The Real World.* This fundamental point, it seems to me, is rarely addressed in that (very large) body of work within the academy concerned with the meaning-making equation in the domain of popular culture. In fact, I would suggest that a general failure to engage the meaning-making equation in domains and contexts of power results in the fields of media and cultural studies in an overstated general claim for "agency," "creativity," "hybridization," "localization". Put differently, there is, by way of empirical omission, an implicit -- and highly problematic -- extrapolation of claims about what is going on in the domain of popular culture to the whole of the global social/semiotic order.

To return, perhaps somewhat belatedly, to the metaphor I was attempting to construct at the outset. The celebration of populist resistance within cultural and media studies is bit like saying the individual web user can entirely reshape the constraints that the web page producer has sought to impose on a particular, and situated, web context. This is a fundamentally flawed assertion. First, the user's understanding of a (rhetorical) context is

itself always already informed by the larger socio-technological context in which she is situated. Second, despite the theoretical possibility of multiple (but not limitless) browser options, for example, chances are that a user will be surfing the site with a dominant web browser like Internet Explorer. Simply because one can load Linux on one's computer, simply because one can surf with Safari (and thereby perhaps express and practice a limited resistance to Microsoft hegemony) does not mean that many people will in fact do so. Larger social forces (which are nothing more than the socio-historically/collectively situated and directed[1] practices of "others") come to bear on the individual practices of a majority of web users who are likely (though not guaranteed) to "choose" to experience a web page according to socio-technologically patterned, and hegemonic, frames of reference. In other words, relatively few are going to go out of their way to download a different browser. Fewer still are going to reset their browser's font size -- unless of course physiological realities force them to do so (the question of web page accessibility for people with various disabilities is an important one -- it is also beyond the scope of this particular analysis.).

The more people who make such always already socially directed choices, i.e., the web page designer optimizing her page for IE 6 and the web page user surfing with IE 6 because most pages are "already" optimized for it, the more such "choices" direct the "choices" of others. Of course, there are still plenty of variables (monitor size, resolution, OS, browser version, and even competing browsers) which will continue to frustrate efforts on the part of web page producers such as myself to direct the aesthetic experience of web users. The lack of homogeneity and standardization, the erasure of the (comfortable) space limitations of the printed page (which, of course, could nonetheless be cut up by the consumer) will continue to vex web page designers (I've wasted hours and

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[1] Direction is not the same as sheer determination, which, in any case, is a straw man.

hours trying to get my pages to look "nice" in Netscape 4.x on a Macintosh despite the fact that relatively few people are using this browser, though perhaps a disproportionate number of academics may still be clinging to it). However, perhaps this limited, but, for the designer, also potentially maddening "play," is preferable to extreme homogeneity. In the end, what variability means is that the view you may be getting of my web pages may not be the most aesthetically pleasing (from my biased producer's perspective) view that you could experience. So be it . . . I guess.

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