

Busting Open Waterbusters: Finding Meaning within the Visual, Aural, and Choreographical Layers of an Imagined World

Purpose and Perspective

As the percentage of the world's population linked to the Internet grows at exponential rates, the digital divide rapidly is shrinking (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2009, p. 3). Researchers in all disciplines, searching for creative solutions to perplexing problems, may find a more insidious gap widening. Athanases (2009) described this divide in terms of the dichotomy between the Greek gods Apollo—"god of theory, of clear and rational understanding" and "linked to the static arts of sculpture and architecture and of distanced introspection and repose"—and Dionysus—"god of dynamic arts such as drama, music, song, and dance; of art as life in process" (p. 119). Callois (1958/2001) termed the divide as one between "ludus: play as a rule-governed system" and "paidea: a looser, more chaotic form of play" (as cited in Burn, 2009, p. 158), considering play metaphorically as life being a game we can either play by the rules (evoking the Apollonian or luddite) or ignore to our peril (evoking the Dionysian or paidean). This dichotomous divide appears in a video and a printed text created by a group of 6th grade students under the instruction of pre-service teachers and intended as part of a sustainability project. In this analysis, we first explore the multi-modal aspects of the video, "Waterbusters," consider next the interstitial spaces as related to the video's possible meanings, then discuss how future research might address questions raised by the exploration. Our purpose was to discover meanings implicit in the students' uses of different modalities and to consider the collective and transformative impact of this multimedia text.

Analytical Techniques

Chandler-Olcott (2008) said "semiotic activity is about selecting which modes (e.g., spatial, visual, audio, gestural, and/or linguistic) need to be emphasized in a particular context to achieve a particular end" (p. 251). More than just selecting modes and then deciding when, where, and how to emphasize one or more modes, the goal of a multimedia project, as Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) noted, is to combine the modalities to create "an entire semiotic product or event" (as cited in Chandler-Olcott, 2008, p. 251).

To analyze the selected text, we first viewed the multimodal text in iterations, attending to the various forms, patterns, and obvious meanings within the piece and applying theories about the ways in which modalities function literally and figuratively within the social and ideological contexts of reality. Our attention to the societal context was intentionally, disrupting as it were, the standardized views of reality, thereby allowing for the meanings often unattended to in children's representations of themselves to be revealed. In the final stages, we annotated segments of the selected text and finally, combined the iterations to create a layered and multilayered discussion of patterns across various segments.

Interpretations

"Waterbusters," is a video produced by a group of 6th grade students engaged in the

project by pre-service teachers under the direction of a faculty instructor during a field experience as part of a writing methods course. This particular group of five students focused on the problem of broken sprinkler heads wasting water and, by extension, money.

Annotation

Within the three scenes, we see the modalities of the spatial (outdoors, moving from sitting on a bench to falling off a bench), the visual (colors, costume/clothing, furniture, streams of water), the auditory (snore, music), the gestural (raising arms to defend self), and the linguistic (subtitle) (see Appendix A). Via the modalities, one obtains a sense of the students' multiplicities; methods by which they obtain and assert access to their varying senses of self via digital text.

Ostention

Eco (1994) discussed the idea of ostention as a person (or, presumably, an object) having been "picked up among the existing physical bodies and...shown or ostended [as] one of the various ways of signifying, consisting in de-realizing a given object in order to make it stand for an entire class" (p. 281). Looking at Eco's process of ostention through Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) "four-tiered model of identifying and visualizing frames," we see each of the four tiers present in the students' video (p. 48).

Ostention Seen through the Visual Mode. At the first level, the denotative level of interpreting visual elements, we accept at more or less face value what we see. We recognize the setting as one with which we are familiar. We perceive the images as "closely analogous to reality, they provide a one-to-one correspondence between what is captured by the camera and what is actually seen in the world" (p. 53). At the second stylistic level, the videographers chose medium and full shots to frame the three subjects, signifying relationships ranging from personal to social (p. 55). Connotatively, which is the third level of Rodriguez and Dimitrov's model, we interpret symbolically what each student is wearing on his/her head. Finally, the ideological representation (p. 57) of these three people being selected as subjects for filming and being filmed in the act of being blasted by water suggests these people represent victims of more than broken sprinklers, they are victims of a common, broken system.

Ostention Heard through the Aural Mode. In this case, we must consider four sounds: one snore, orchestral pastoral music, a synthesized syncopated beat, and rag-jazz played on a clarinet. None of the sound snippets last more than a few seconds; but, as with the video clips, each contains several levels of meaning.

Ostention Portrayed Through Movement. In terms of movement, we can see patterns similar to those we saw in the visual and aural modes, which reinforce the idea of ostention. Given that the scenes have been staged, the movements can be said to have been choreographed in a manner similar to that of dance. Bannerman (2010) discussed "dance as capable of signifying in the way that it is a system of signs and [as permitting] an analysis of how meaning is produced and conveyed" (p. 21).

Beyond Modes: Purpose and meaning

To what extent is the video art? Does it have value in ways other than as a work of art?

Smagorinsky (2011) explained Vygotsky's perspectives on art and noted Vygotsky's belief that "lack of technical skill prevents their [children's] creations, no matter how meaningful to their personality development, from reaching artistic status" (p. 325). Vygotsky, Smagorinsky went on to note, also looked for "a sense of profundity and new planes of emotional experience," and "paradoxical combination of form and material," in addition to technical mastery. From this perspective, the "Waterbusters" video, although technically adept, if not masterfully produced, probably would not meet Vygotsky's definition of art.

Perhaps, however, the video has other value. Figueiredo (2011) suggested that comics creators are information designers (p. 87) who work to "create meaning from fragments of data by organizing the selected pieces of data into an ordered view of the world" (p. 92). If we consider "Waterbusters" as a moving comic strip—each scene fluid, rather than frozen, but still enclosed by transitions from scene to scene that fragments the data, and its creators as information designers—world builders—rather than as artists, our task then becomes to glean and interpret the information presented not as art but as information about the world made over in the image of the creators, in this case, the students' own selves (p. 88). Apollo and Dionysus just might approve such an interpretation.

References

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Appendix A

Video located at <https://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/going-green-films/id384505068>.