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Exploring Media Reflexivity – Proposing Mediacy

This paper is part of a research project in educational criticism called *Genres in transition – aesthetic writing practices in upper secondary school*, financed by the Swedish research Council (2003-2005) and carried through in cooperation with associate professor Per-Olof Erixon, Umeå university.

The project aims at investigating practices in writing developed by students and teachers in the school subjects Swedish and Swedish as Secondary Language in negotiation with traditional genres in school and new genres in media culture. Practices include writing fiction and other verbal texts as well as producing electronic multimodal texts.

The project draws on theory and research in the following fields: the teaching of literature and writing as well as media studies as they have been developed in Scandinavia under influence of international research in reader response criticism, media studies, genre theory, cultural studies and youth culture. Concepts such as genre, interpretative communities, critical discourse analysis, analysis of narrative, multimodality and remediation are used in the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data.

As part of gathering empirical data in an upper secondary school focused on media education I established contact with a class which had multimedia production as subject one afternoon per week. I suggested that the students should produce “media diaries”. The purpose was to expand hitherto collected quantitative data on media access and use and qualitative data as interviews and classroom observations.

There is no time here now to talk much about this request of mine, how it was introduced and received, how work was organized, how many weeks it took to get the productions into my computer etc etc. There is also no time for reflections on research methods. I just want to show you one of these productions just because it gives a picture of two 17-year-old girls’ views on their own media use. The production is an image sequence consisting of 12 photos with inserted by-lines. The by-lines are the only way the photos have been manipulated. The assemblage of text and image could be called imagetext or verbiage.

Image sequence

**[projection, images can be published as stills and/or descriptions
can be more elaborated in case of article for publication]**

Maria and Steph’s Media diary

1 Let Maria

(making a face)

2 and Steph

(holding up the hand, hiding her face, talking in her mobile)

3 tell you about their media usage/habits!

(women from 3d world balancing pc:s on their heads, picture growing)

4 How often do you play pc-games?

(nerd in Hawaii-shirt and beer-bottle)

5 Read the paper?

(young man in suit reading local newspaper in library)

6 Phone?

(young/teen age girl in comfortable armchair)

7 Do you like video-games?

(plain man with console)

8 We do!

(three giraffes posing)

9 In the morning we read the paper.

(little girl reading official organ for The (Lutheran) Church of Sweden)

10 Phoning morning, all day and all of the night.

(little girl talking in red phone from the 60s)

11 The computer is used daily at school and sometimes at home.

(elderly woman by the computer)

12 Bye, bye!

(old fashioned TV set, phrase moving out of picture)

It is not my purpose here to evaluate the two girls' skills concerning the software in question or the aesthetic aspects of their production. But you should all know that the underlying commands etc in order to make a multimedia production even of this seemingly simple kind are more complex than you can imagine. All the discrete elements of the production must be combined in complex intersections.

What I am going to do at first is to concentrate on verbal text/ telling and images/showing. The questions here are: What discourses are expressed in Maria and Steph's media diary? What semiotic, narrative and discursive resources are put into work in the semiotics of telling and showing? The answers of the questions turn out into a discussion on media reflexivity as practice in terms of communicative capabilities.

All texts are polyphonic, or intertextual, and therefore multidiscursive. Discourses, defined as ways of thinking and communicating, are intertwined and therefore it is necessary to realize that any exposition is a construct. I am going to point out only three or four discourses dominated by well known communicative conventions. I am well aware that it could be discussed whether I should have chosen "genre" instead of discourse in my analysis and interpretation.

The first discourse is interpersonal and puts into play a rhetoric primarily using conventions in verbal language as greetings and good-byes, questions and

answers as in the first eight imagetexts. In this way the two girls directly address the reader, in order to establish contact.

The second discourse uses the convention of showing pictures in sequence, i.e. the two girls have chosen linearity as narrative convention, though the soft ware opens up for more interactive and consequently multilinear productions. This discourse is a reminder of the discourse of pedagogical slide productions from the 60s and 70s. The laid back and soft music is congenial with this kind of educational products. But at the same time it is obvious that the girls distancingly play with irony here.

Let me then point out a third more complex discourse: the discourse of private life as part of public life, of the intersections and transitions of life-world and system if you like, as this is thematized and practiced in media culture.

This discourse is in its turn made up by two intersecting discourses. The first: Maria and Steph have made what is expected from them as part of school work. In this respect they have adapted their work to the ordinary discourse of doing what is asked for. The researcher and their teacher want to know something about their media habits and use. They have made their homework so to speak. This more official discourse of public life at school is in pair with a second, more informal and social discourse.

As we remember they address us directly in the first three imagetexts in order to establish contact. They are eager to narrate at least parts of the story of their media life. The discourses of private respectively public life are negotiated in the very same moment as we see the two photos of Maria and Steph themselves. They are here drawing on conventions from mass media: making a face and putting up the hand before the lense are actions we have seen many times

before. Such behaviour is a way of keeping private life out of public life. And in this context this is a behaviour which puts the private and the public into play. The girls play with the intersections and transitions of life world and system.

This play is communicated primarily by using photos as discursive semiotic resource. The two girls have chosen all the pictures from a wide range of alternatives on the Internet. So even if some of the pictures might be chosen by coincidence, I claim that the choice is consequently ironic and distanced. None of the persons are of their own age and sex, not to mention time and even place on earth. They seem to hide themselves behind masques. But still the production is about themselves as the verbal bylines point out! In this way photos disseminated via the Internet are used as vehicles by the two girls in reporting on their media usage. They can reflect upon their own lives via photos of public others.

This discourse of public and private life seems somewhat postmodern: children and old people, west and The Others, traditional and new media etc are mixed up into a multiplied and polyphonic blend. Pictures of different media are used in a process of remediation. Pictures of the well known are used in order to make us aware of media as media and at the same time of media as totally transparent and completely natural, part of daily life.

So, these imagetexts are used in a reflective practice. The production shows us in a very basic way what I call *media reflexivity*. Media reflexivity works in two ways simultaneously:

- using media makes us aware of how media work, and
- reflexivity is a remediated reflexivity.

As you see, in the twofold definition of media reflexivity a verb pops up: remediate. I shall soon come back to remediation more in detail. First a few words on “literacy”.

The capabilities of access to Western print culture have been called literacy, after latin for “letter”. But literacy seems to be outdated as concept when it comes to questions concerning communicative and civil capabilities in a media culture which “is now busy reworking, recombining, and analyzing already accumulated media material” (Manovich). Therefore literacy has been expanded by way of combinations as gender literacy, cultural literacy, political literacy, corporal literacy, media literacy, digital literacy and even multiliteracies. But still, these attempts to adapt literacy to media culture are still too close to ways of thinking bound to print culture. I believe that there is a need for a concept that takes into consideration the cultural and communicative heterogeneity in a new media situation. What concept could then fulfil this need? This word is “mediacy”, a word, which, though invented by me, who do not have English as my mother tongue, at least not is an ugly word, I think.

There are a lot of concepts that now can be discussed in relation to “mediacy”. I limit myself for the moment to “remediation” as it has been developed by David Bolter and Richard Grusin. Remediation means that new and old media constantly transgress and depend upon each other in a double logic of hypermediacy and immediacy. Bolton and Grusin point out that the more media are improved, multiplied and converged, i e what they call hypermedacy, the more immediate that which is mediated seems, i e what they call immediacy. This means that new media technologies make us aware of them just as media technologies, and at the same time that which is communicated seems more immediate. A Sony home theatre might be sufficient as an example of this.

Psychologically, processes of remediation(s) are ongoing social, technological and aesthetic practices with consequences for individual processes of intrasubjectivity and intersubjectivity. Processes of remediation are then essential for the reflexivity of gendered identity, or identities if you prefer.

To conclude: the capability to remediate (not then in any meaning the same as correcting someone's behaviour or the like) is a skill and a way of thinking and acting, of playing upon discourses, more or less consciously. It is the cognitive and aesthetic capability to design and produce artefacts as ways of communicating with others. In short: the capability to remediate is a basic aspect of mediacy as a media reflective practice.

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