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# From The Multi To The Modal: Relations In Multimodal Composition

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FROM THE MULTI TO THE MODAL: RELATIONS IN MULTIMODAL COMPOSITION

by

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## ABSTRACT

In response to the development of multimodal composition over the last twenty years, significant questions regarding its relationship to traditional composition and the discipline's pedagogical practices have been posed. These questions are most often raised regarding the way that multimodal composition isolates media and modes, and is thus "tacked on" to composition courses. These concerns are primarily due to the way that multimodality has been theorized, which is usually rooted in the work of the New London Group. Developing a version of multimodal composition that can avoid both isolating its various parts and being tacked on to traditional concerns requires moving from a focus on the multi to the modal of multimodality. This move requires a shift in two parts. First, because the representational, semiotic version of modality found in most scholarship cannot avoid the issue of isolation, it must be thought through the effects and affects of sensory pathways. Second, the various sensory pathways must be thought through what Brian Massumi has called the logic of relation—an effort which is significantly aided by using musical modality as a framework for thinking sensation.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	v
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: A VERSION OF MULTIMODAL COMPOSITION .....	4
CHAPTER 3: THEORIZING THE (MULTI)MODAL.....	11
CHAPTER 4: SENSATIONAL RELATIONS: AN ALTERNATE TAKE.....	20
WORKS CITED.....	34

## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 3.1 DOMINANT/SUBDOMINANT RELATIONS OF THE AUDITORY .....	29
FIGURE 3.2 DOMINANT/SUBDOMINANT RELATIONS OF THE OLFACTORY .....	29
FIGURE 3.3 THE COMPLETE AUDITORY MODALITY .....	29
FIGURE 3.4 ROOTING THE EXPERIENCE.....	30
FIGURE 3.5 THE COMPOSITIONAL SCORE .....	31

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Composition and rhetoric has developed along with the felt need to bring incoming university students ‘up to snuff’ in their writing abilities—and understandably so. Staking a claim on writing, or more specifically written academic composition, allows a certain degree of institutional security. As Sharon Crowley put it, “since its beginnings in the late nineteenth century, university-level composition instruction has maintained an ethic of service” that ties the discipline to teaching freshman composition as its (institutional) justification for existence (“Ethic” 227). As with all phenomena, however, writing is not a static thing—it develops, evolves, takes on new meanings, engenders different effects as the social situation around it changes, and composition and rhetoric displays a particular sensitivity to these changes. Indeed, as it stands today, the disciplinary literature often seems a far cry from the pedagogical imperative. The last seventy years has seen a proliferation of debates about composition and rhetoric’s purpose, object of study, theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and pedagogical approaches, out of which has emerged a vibrant, interdisciplinary body of work that is often difficult to navigate. But it is important to remember, however obscured it may be at times, that the grounding interest in writing and pedagogy structures much of the literature.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the constraints of the discipline’s traditional focus on composition as restricted to alphabetic, print-based texts have been thrown into sharp relief. While it is true that these constraints have always been present,

changing communication practices have prompted many scholars to argue that composition study needs reconceptualizing. In other words, the discipline needs to work to “[bring] into relief the multiple dimensions of all forms of communication” (George 213). It is in this vein that, just over twelve years ago, Kathleen Yancey called those present at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) to attend to the moment. A moment in which, among other things, the discipline’s traditional emphasis on writing has shifted to an interest in communication broadly writ. As Yancey writes, “If we continue to partition [communication practices] off . . . students will not compose and create, making use of all the means of persuasion and all the possible resources thereto; rather, they will complete someone else’s software package; they will be the invention of that package.” (83-84). Thus, for an increasing number of compositionists this imperative to bring student writing ‘up to snuff’ has been redefined. Scholars have recognized the need to develop pedagogies that displace traditional written composition’s privileged position and highlight the flexibility to make meaning in the twenty-first century proliferation of media, modes, and genres. Under various names, including multimodality, new media, multimedia and digital composition, researchers and teachers have worked together to reframe composition for the twenty-first century.

Be that as it may, there are questions about the degree to which pedagogical practices in twenty-first century compositional contexts succeed in minimizing the valorization of written composition. Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, for instance, worry in their 2014 book *On Multimodality* “that composition often just ‘includes’ the multimodal, co-opting it as an ‘extension of traditional composition,’ as opposed to exploring how multimodality challenges our predisposition toward privileging



print textualities” (4). Tracing a brief history of composition and rhetoric’s engagement with (what I, for simplicity’s sake, call) multimodality demonstrates that this worry is reflected in the literature. Further, rather than simply being an institutional, departmental, or individual problem with the execution of multimodal pedagogies, this ‘tacking on’ is a product of multimodality’s theorization. The dominant theory of multimodality necessitates the “[bracketing] off [of] individual senses and the uptake of select semiotic resources,” which then get tacked on to writing, which remains the dominant compositional form (Shipka 2006, 356). Developing a version of multimodal composition that avoids this necessity requires a theoretical reframing. The system of musical modes provides an effective framework for this, as the musical modes are defined by the relationships between a set of common elements, or notes. Using this framework does not, however, mean abandoning the impressive and often rigorous work that has already been done. By using musical modality as a model, compositionists can re-see multimodality productively for the discipline.

## CHAPTER 2

### A VERSION OF MULTIMODAL COMPOSITION

In 1994, ten scholars recognized the growing need to reconceptualize the teaching of writing, and spent the better part of the next two years developing a theoretical and pedagogical vision for the rapidly globalizing world. Under the name the “New London Group”, they published this vision in the 1996 article “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies.” It is perhaps not too strong a claim to suggest this article as the inaugural work of multimodal composition as it exists today. One of the major contributions of the New London Group was to radically shift understandings of literacy itself. As it had been traditionally considered, literacy can be defined as “reading and writing practices that are used to interpret and evaluate knowledge” (*This Rhetorical Life*, Episode 7). In composition and rhetoric, literacy studies had been (and is) intimately linked with questions about how differing communities use language to maintain their boundaries, understand the world, and enact exclusions. The New London Group’s work continues these interests, but also expands on them in important ways. In their article, they coined the term multiliteracies as a way of recognizing that “language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes” (64). Rather than seeing literacy as restricted to the domain of alphabetic language, Multiliteracies works to include visual, auditory, gestural, and spatial resources as well. Further, the concept of multiliteracies

recognizes that communication, in almost every context, makes use of multiple resources at once.

Together, these recognitions prompted the New London Group to “reopen two fundamental questions: the ‘what’ of literacy pedagogy . . . and the ‘how’ of literacy pedagogy” (73). As a means for conceptualizing the “what,” they introduce a “metalanguage—a language for talking about language, images, texts, and meaning-making interactions” (77). This metalanguage, for them, should be built around the term design, for a number of reasons. First, they argue that the popularity of design in both the workplace and in educational research “connects powerfully to the sort of creative intelligence the best practitioners need in order to be able, continually, to redesign their activities in the very act of practice” (73) Second, they feel that design is a term that emphasizes the complexity of any compositional act. Further, they favor design “because it is free of the negative associations for teachers of terms such as ‘grammar,’” making it especially useful for classroom purposes (73).

As such, “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies” lays out a tri-partite theory made up of Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned. Under this theory, designers take the “grammars of various semiotic systems,” as well as the “particular social configurations” that are available to them (Available Designs) and shape them through the process of composition (Designing) to create “a new meaning, something through which meaning-makers remake themselves” (The Redesigned) (New London Group 74, 76).

Throughout, they continually work to emphasize that their vocabulary of design can account for a large variety of modes of communication, like the visual, aural, gestural, and spatial. However, they also emphasize that “of all the modes of meaning, the

Multimodal mode is the most significant, as it relates all the other modes in quite remarkably dynamic relationships” (76). Further, they argue that “in a profound sense, all meaning-making is multimodal,” and suggest taking up the concepts hybridity and intertextuality to examine this multimodal mode (81, 82). Moving to the “how” question, they outline a four-part system which gives students Situated Practice, Overt Instruction, Critical Framing, and Transformed Practice (New London Group 83). Situating their work in cognitive science and other sociological research into learning, they describe their pedagogy, like multimodality, as “components that are related in complex ways,” functioning recursively (85). Their pedagogy, like their theory more generally, is framed as “an open-ended process” that is intended to “strive continually towards reformulations of theory that are of direct use in educational practice” (89).

Even though their disciplinary ties are not strictly to composition and rhetoric, The New London Group’s call to attend to a different and multiple sense of literacy resonated with many scholars in the field. Indeed, it is in this same vein that Kathleen Yancey gave her 2004 CCCC chair’s address, “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key.” While she does not mention or cite the New London Group specifically, she also argues that “literacy today is in the midst of a tectonic change,” and that English departments “may already have become anachronistic” (63, 67). For Yancey, combating the possibility of our historical irrelevance requires a re-examination of disciplinary assumptions about what writing is and how we go about studying and teaching it (63, 67). In order to do this, she suggests that we adopt a new version of composition that emphasizes circulation, the canons of rhetoric, and the deicity (or susceptibility to change) of technology (75). Along these lines, and in other ways, composition and

rhetoric has seen a proliferation of scholarship attending to the call for multimodal composition.

One of the most explicit connections between work in composition and rhetoric, the New London Group, and Yancey's call has been the uptake of the metalanguage of design. Indeed, Richard Marback compared the force of the introduction of design vocabularies into composition and rhetoric with the introduction of James Berlin's "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Composition Classroom" (Marback 258). Tracing the embrace of design vocabularies from Gunther Kress (a member of the New London Group), through Diana George and Mary Hocks, Marback argues that the "richness of design derives [from] its capacity to give expression to wicked problems" rather than its freedom from grammatical connotations (265). Thinking of design work as wicked, a term he takes from Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, emphasizes the situational, "value laden" nature of doing design work (261). In other words, it highlights the rhetorical nature of composition. While Marback's argument for embracing the wickedness of design vocabulary demonstrates one line that multimodal composition has taken from the New London Group, his discussion also points to another important development in the field: the proliferation of scholarship on the visual.

Diana George's "From Analysis to Design: Visual Communication in the Teaching of Writing," one of Marback's touchstones, does a great deal of work to situate the place of the visual in the history of composition and rhetoric. In general, she notes that, historically, "visual studies has been perceived as a threat to language and literature instruction" (George 214). In response, George argues that "for students who have grown up in a technology-saturated and an image-rich culture," composition inevitably includes

the visual, a point she demonstrates through three powerful examples of students' visual compositions (228). Many in the field have taken her point seriously. Jeff Rice, for instance, builds on the work of Marshall McLuhan and other media scholars in his book *Rhetoric of Cool* to create a "pedagogy of the image" for his courses (105). However, the incorporation of the visual into the disciplinary milieu is not limited to the classroom. One outstanding example of non-pedagogical work on the visual is Laurie Gries' 2015 book *Still Life With Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach for Visual Rhetorics*. Working with the "Obama Hope" campaign image, Gries lays out a method, which she terms "iconographic tracking," for studying the circulation and rhetorical transformations of images. As these various trajectories show, one of the legacies of multimodal composition is a rich body of scholarship addressing the visual. However, as Yancey implies in her address, addressing the broader picture of multimodality requires looking beyond the visual and textual forms of communication.

In the opening to their 2006 special issue of *Computers and Composition*, Cheryl Ball and Byron Hawk take just this line. Noting that "we've moved—as a field—from linguistic to visual meaning-making," they suggest that "a logical progression is to include other modes of meaning including audio" (263). While its circulation can seem eclipsed by the visual, scholarship on auditory communication has an extensive presence in the literature, being the subject of four special issues of journals (*Enculturation* 2, the aforementioned *Computers and Composition* 23, *Currents in Electronic Literacy* 2011, and *Harlot* 9) and numerous stand-alone pieces. In the research vein, Jonathan Stone's "Listening to the Sonic Archive: Rhetoric, Representation, and Race in the Lomax Prison Recordings" examines the way "sonic artifacts...productively complicate our

understanding of racial formation” in the United States (Stone). Taking advantage of the digital medium of Enculturation, Stone incorporates both image and sound into his essay in order to argue that vernacular, African-American music of the 1930s was itself “a discourse engaged in changing understanding of race and racial difference itself.” And as with the visual, scholars have also argued for the importance of auditory communication for the composition classroom. For instance, Cynthia Selfe notes that a “strikingly persistent thread of work” in our discipline focuses “on teachers [using] audio recordings to convey their responses to student papers” (Selfe 126-127). More radically, Steph Ceraso has outlined an entire multimodal pedagogy “based on what [she calls] multimodal listening,” which is distinct from more traditional notions of listening in that it emphasizes the embodied nature of sonic phenomena—the fact that “hearing” is always also a feeling, as well as environmentally embedded (Ceraso 104). She argues that by cultivating the practice of multimodal listening, students (and others) can “learn to become more open to the connections between sensory modes, materials, and environments” (120).

Ceraso’s emphasis on the material nature of multimodal listening indexes another important aspect of multimodal scholarship. While it is not explicit in the New London Group’s inaugural work, scholars in composition and rhetoric consistently emphasize the material aspect of multimodality. For instance, throughout her chapter in *Writing New Media*, Anne Wysocki argues that work with new media texts requires that “we keep materiality foregrounded” (18). This foregrounding is evident especially in Gries’ work, which she explicitly situates within new materialist philosophy, as she focuses her research on the Obama Hope image and the effects it engenders as a material

phenomenon. Indeed, in places Gries' analysis seems to forgo the human entirely. On the other hand, in the multimodal pedagogy developed in her book *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, Jody Shipka argues that it is essential to “[keep] mediated action at the center of our attention” (“Toward” chapter 2). Thus, she continues to emphasize the composer while highlighting the necessity of composition's work with materials.

Whether through analyses of the visual, the auditory, printed text, or other forms of communication, multimodal scholarship is heavily invested in attention to the materials involved in our compositions.

Though brief, it is evident in this overview that multimodal composition has developed a significant and diverse body of scholarship. The general trends of this development also reflect Alexander and Rhodes' claim that the multimodal—the visual, aural, gestural, spatial, and otherwise—is “tacked on” to traditional composition. While not always the case—Ceraso's multimodal listening is an important exception—multimodal scholarship tends to break out investigation into specific modes. In doing so, the multimodal becomes a series of different and distinct forms. As is evident in Gries' research, even the interest in materiality is realized through attending to the material dimension of a specific mode. While this trend is not necessarily a problem in itself, it becomes one in light of multimodality's goal of de-privileging the textual. As the traditional focal point of the composition and rhetoric, this series reifies the textual as the valued form or mode to which the others are tacked on. This is not, however, simply the result of an oversight on the part of multimodal scholarship in general. Instead, it is a product of the way that modality has been theorized.



## CHAPTER 3

### THEORIZING THE (MULTI)MODAL

For such a varied field of study, it is not surprising that there are a number of disagreements within the confines of multimodal composition. As Claire Lauer argues in her 2009 article “Contending with Terms: ‘Multimodal’ and ‘Multimedia’ in the Academic and Public Spheres,” “defining terms is an important and necessary practice in any field,” and such practices are rarely without tension (22). That one of the major tensions centers on the concept modality should also not come as a surprise. Because these practices have significant implications for the development of a field, it is important to understand the ways modality has been theorized by the New London Group and the scholars in composition and rhetoric who have responded to them.

Returning briefly to the New London Group’s “Pedagogy of Multiliteracies,” it is necessary to make a few notes about their treatment of modes. While they coin the term multimodal in this article, and despite their careful definitional work in regards to many terms, nowhere does a definition of mode appear. Nevertheless, two important points can be extracted from their discussion. The first is that the word “mode” does not originally occur on its own. Rather, they specify that what they are referring to are “modes of meaning,” marking that modes, for the New London Group, are semiotic entities (80). In other words, their modes refer to various ways of creating and communicating meaning. The second point of interest is in regards to their invocation of the term multimodal; they state that “of all the modes of meaning, the Multimodal is the most significant, as it

relates all the other modes of meaning in quite remarkably dynamic ways” (80). There are a number of important things about this description. In describing multimodality as “the most significant,” they create a hierarchical relationship between each of their modes. At the same time, they cast the multimodal as a mode in itself—on the same terms as the linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial modes. It seems, then, that each of these “modes of meaning” can be addressed in a (generally) similar fashion. However, in their brief description of an “engagement with the mall [involving] a multimodal reading,” they break this reading down into separate operations—the reading of linguistic meaning, spatial meaning, and architectural meaning (they do not mention the possible auditory or visual meanings) (81). They then proceed to claim that “in a profound sense, all meaning-making is multimodal” (81). In brief, based on this discussion, the multimodal is one of many modes of meaning, but the most important one, and all meaning is multimodal. A multimodal reading, however, requires a number of other mode-specific readings to be related through intertextuality and hybridity. And while their work is rigorous in many respects, they do not give any explication as to how this intertextual and hybrid analysis might be accomplished.

Gunther Kress, a member of the New London Group, does significant work to develop this line in his 2010 book *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. Here, he works to develop a theory of communication that can allow for multimodal analysis. In his section discussing the “reach” of his theory, he tells us that “modes are the result of a social and historical shaping of materials chosen by a society for representation” (Kress 38, emphasis in original). While this does not constitute a definition in the strict sense, it does allow for some insight into what a mode

of meaning is. First, it becomes apparent that modes of meaning are not pre-existing things; they are created by human factors. Second, we begin to understand that while they are associated with materials or media, modes name something more abstract. In relating modes to representation, Kress allows us to understand that a mode refers to the process by which materials or media come to stand in for something else—how they create meaning. Bringing this understanding to the examples of modes given in the New London Group’s article, it begins to be clear that modes refer to the general, social system governing how a particular material or media comes to create meaning. The auditory mode of meaning, then, refers to the particular set of meanings that a society assigns to auditory phenomena—as varied as they may be. The necessary variability of these meanings also helps in understanding the relationship between modes and literacy; the ability to compose or design in any given mode of meaning requires being “literate” in the various meanings associated with that mode. While this goes a long way toward developing the concept of modality, it is not immediately apparent how this clarifies multimodality as a mode of meaning.

Developing the social nature of modes, Kress later notes that in any given situation, “what counts as a mode is a matter for a community and its social-representational needs” (170). In other words, the modes used in any particular composition are determined by the composers (or designers) at that point. Rather than simply a process of choosing from a set of available modes, modes are created in the process of composition. Composers make decisions about the resources they will use to communicate, and when these resources make up sufficiently different systems of representation, they create modes. For Kress, this process can be broken down into two

types of arrangement. On the one hand, the composer's "*decisions* lead to the making of *ensembles of modes*" (281, emphasis in original). On the other hand, this ensemble is also orchestrated, which refers to the process of composing the text in question.

But there is another crucial social aspect of Kress' theory of modes; in any given communicative act, both the communicator and the reader function as composers. As he puts it, "'Reading' is now a matter of the design of the 'page' or the 'screen' by the reader" (Kress 311). As such, even when a text has been assembled and orchestrated multimodally, this is not a guarantee that it is *read* multimodally. Kress marks this as "a fundamental point in communication," that while the composer "sets the ground" for communication, it is the attention of the reader that determines the interpretation, the analysis of a given text (287). Kress argues that the multimodal mode is analyzed through attention to the "*elements and processes which link and reach across modes*," which he terms "trans-, inter- or intra-modal" (281, emphasis in original). Regardless, because of the function of the reader as designer/composer, it is always possible that a text be read *monomodally*. And although Kress sets out a powerful understanding of the modes of communication, composition and rhetoric has also dealt with them in other ways.

In "Contending With Terms," Lauer recognizes that "terms such as new media, multimedia, digital media, multiliteracies, and multimodal" are all common in the discipline, and chooses to focus her research on multimodal and multimedia (Lauer 22). At the most general, her analysis shows that these terms are often "used interchangeably in composition scholarship" (22). Lauer illustrates this point with two examples—a call for papers for *Computers and Composition* that uses "no fewer than eight different

phrases” to describe multimodal compositions, and an NCTE survey that used both multimedia and multimodal (almost) interchangeably (28). However, she argues that “multimodal has become preferable to multimedia both because it is more theoretically accurate in describing our pedagogies . . . and because it has been championed by leading scholars in our field” (30). Yet her argument is not as simple as advocating for a shift to the term multimodal. Lauer also investigates terms’ prevalence in public spheres, finding that multimedia is used almost exclusively. The difference, she claims, is that public usage “is out to deliver a product, not a way of thinking” (36). In other words, composition and rhetoric scholars prefer multimodal because it is invested in the process of composing, while the public prefers to emphasize the product through the use of multimedia. Developing from this insight, Lauer claims that the use of each term is a function not of definitional precision, but rather a function of audiences that value multimodal/multimedia compositions in different ways. Because of these differences, she argues that composition and rhetoric scholars should use both terms (depending on context), especially because “multimedia works as a gateway term for composition instructors to interface in familiar ways with their students” (23). One of the scholarly moves for dealing with modality, then, is to approach the situation with a ‘rhetorical’ sensitivity to context.

Not all scholars in the field are quite so comfortable with this solution, however. In her chapter “Opening New Media to Writing: Openings and Justifications,” Anne Wysocki critiques the grounds of the differentiation between modes and media. The New London Group, she claims, makes this differentiation only because “they believe that there can be aspects of a text that contribute no meaning to the text” (14). In other words,

conceptualizing modes and media as separate things assumes that it is possible for media to exist in a non-semiotic form. On the contrary, she argues that while there are aspects of media that seem static, even these factors are always already contributing to semiotic production. As such, there is no difference between talking about a mode or the material aspect of a text. Asking productive questions about our media and the way we compose them, then, requires that the distinction between mode and media be dropped. For her, the term of choice is “new media,” which should specifically designate texts that “highlight the materiality” of their composition, making “as overtly visible as possible the values they embody” (15). While new media texts, like all texts, certainly operate multimodally, the theoretical imprecision embodied in using the term causes Wysocki to move toward a different conception of modality (as media).

While I have placed Kress, Lauer, and Wysocki’s terminological work in a sort of synchronic progression, the reality is of course not so neat. Kress published his book *Multimodality* in 2011, whereas Wysocki’s critique of the term is circa 2004. Lauer’s survey of our vocabulary of this new composition falls in between, published in 2009. Wysocki’s argument, however, as well as the temporal scope of Lauer’s research (figure 2.3 in her article spans 1992-2007) show that the terminological tensions of this subfield are longstanding realities. Curiously, however, another piece from 2004 presents us with a trope that doesn’t appear in the three pieces discussed so far. In fact, Kathleen Yancey’s CCCC keynote address “Composition in a New Key” doesn’t make use of ‘multimodal,’ ‘multimedia,’ or ‘new media’ at all. Instead, much of her discussion of the changing face of composition is centered around a concept much more familiar to composition and rhetoric: genre. Early in her address, as she invokes the same literacy crisis that Richard

Lanham qualified and the New London Group worked to address (terming it a “tectonic shift”), Yancey asks— “don’t you wish that the energy and motivation that students bring to some of these other genres they would bring to our assignments?” (63). With the introduction of genre, Yancey signals another starting point for composition and rhetoric’s theorization of modality.

A brief survey of titles is enough to suggest that this work has been taken up. For instance, since 2002 the field has seen the articles “Academic Literacy in a Wired World: Redefining Genres for College Writing Courses” by Alice Trupe (2002), Robert Davis and Mark Shadle’s “Teaching Multiwriting: Researching and Composing with Multiple Genres, Media, Disciplines, and Cultures” (2007), “Not Your Parents’ Curriculum: Multiple Genres, Technologies, and Disciplines in the Life Writing Classroom” by Victoria Elmwood (2009), Bronwyn William’s “From Screen to Screen: Students’ Use of Popular Culture Genres in Multimodal Writing Assignments” (2014), and Liliana Naydan’s “Just Multiliteracy for Basic Writers: Teaching and Tutoring Genre, Audience, and Agency Using E-Portfolios” (2015). Further, Anis Bawarshi published the book *Genre & The Invention of the Writer* in 2003, and Tracey Bowen and Carl Whitman published an edited collection entitled *Multimodal literacies and emerging genres* in 2013.

Combined with the concept of media, genre gives us another way to understand Kress’ take on modality. Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, in their 2014 book *On Multimodality*, do much of this work in a chapter devoted to the medium of video. Alexander and Rhodes argue that because of the way we use video in the classroom, our “understanding of multimedia, multimodality, and digital composition is impoverished

and emptied of much critical and rhetorical possibility” (71). In order “to celebrate composing in all its multiple potentialities,” they use their examination of video in the composition classroom to “question the legitimizing moves of our discipline” and attempt to demonstrate a path to a richer usage of the video medium (102). Through a few examples from a corpus of video literacy narratives from the internet and various institutional sources, Alexander and Rhodes argue persuasively that “these videos function as illustrated essays,” noting that “an essayistic kind of literacy is [privileged,] with students composing narratives first and then *illustrating* them with visual tools,” thus “[robbing them] of a fuller explication and exploration of literacy” (83, 84). In response, they offer a way of “re-visioning” video through attention to genre. Using Anis Bawarshi’s work on the concept, they suggest that this attention will give students a rich vocabulary for multimodality, as well as rich critical histories of media, and in turn create a “strong sense of the possibilities” of composition (86). This sense helps to prevent “transporting the values of one genre or medium into another,” and encourages students to create richer video compositions (86). In other words, for Alexander and Rhodes, it is attention to genre (and especially the histories of genres) that can work to shift meaning making strategies from the *narrative* to the *video* aspects of video literacy narratives.

But rather than the simple addition of genre, it is the pairing of medium and genre that allows for Alexander and Rhodes’ productive intervention into multimodality. By focusing on both a particular genre and the various mediations of that genre, Alexander and Rhodes argue that students will begin to understand forms of argumentation that are unfamiliar to traditional, print-based textual strategies. Their work in this chapter provides a productive connection between media/genre pairings and Gunther Kress’



modes of meaning— “the result of a social and historical shaping of materials chosen by a society for representation” (38). The two main components here, social conventions and the materials shaped by those conventions, are directly mirrored in Alexander and Rhodes’ theory of genre and media. They offer a powerful model for analysis of what Kress would call modality, the nexus of media and genre, by allowing for a precise investigation into this nexus through two possible ways of “cutting” the text. A cut along the genre axis opens the space for considering the genre as it exists in a variety of media. In this way, analysis is developed along the lines of the social and historical context of the piece. On the other hand, a cut along the media axis allows for investigation into its various histories, affordances, and constraints without being restricted to the specific instantiations of the genre. Through inquiries into each of these axes’ histories, understanding of the mode of meaning is more nuanced in that it is sensitive both to the particular rhetorical moves of the genre and the affordances that a medium allows in making them. However, because this method isolates one particular mode at a time, it can only go so far in understanding multimodality.

## CHAPTER 4

### SENSATIONAL RELATIONS: AN ALTERNATE TAKE

From the beginnings of its circulation through the New London Group, multimodality has been conceptualized as naming the “remarkably dynamic relationships” between the other modes of meaning (80). The New London Group’s example of a multimodal analysis, however, breaks down the object of study into a set of specific modal readings, using the concepts of hybridity and intertextuality to think through the relationships that constitute the multimodal mode. The task of approaching this relationship has remained central to multimodal scholarship, and in most cases, proceeds along the lines that the New London Group set out in their inaugural essay. In this way, the investigations into the visual and auditory modes that have dominated much of multimodal scholarship are modal readings developed as the grounds for thinking hybridity. Further, these bodies of knowledge do significant work in terms of developing Richard Lanham’s new rhetoric—most notably through their engagements with “visual or auditory stimulus, iconic or alphabetic information” (Lanham 14). The embrace of popular culture (evident in Gries’ work with “Obama Hope,” Jon Stone’s with 1930s vernacular African-American music, and many other places) works to complicate high/low culture and commercial/pure usage distinctions. Throughout, questions of genre and medium, sociality and materiality, create more nuanced analysis and deeper understandings of the modes of communication. Still, this work does not fully integrate the modes—as distinct semiotic entities, they get “tacked on” to traditional written composition.

One piece of recent multimodal scholarship, Ceraso’s 2014 article “(Re)Educating the Senses: Multimodal Listening, Bodily Learning, and the Composition of Sonic Experiences,” suggests a particularly appropriate answer for this problem of modality. Ceraso writes that “in addition to teaching students what sound *means*, I argue that it is critical to teach them how sound *works and affects*” (103). Central to her argument—and important for multimodality—is her claim that “listening is a multisensory act” (102).<sup>1</sup> In her extensive analysis of Evelyn Glennie, a deaf musician, Ceraso persuasively details the ways that experiencing sound involves not only hearing, but also touch and sight. This interest in “the multimodal aspects of sonic encounters can provide information about how sound works as a mode of composition to create particular effects and affects—intentional and unintentional” (103). Through multimodal listening, Ceraso shifts from an interest in sound as a medium to *experiencing* sound. The shift to experience answers the question of modality by highlighting sensation, and as a function of any living being, sensation is always operating, regardless of intention, talent, or chance. As such, thinking modality through sensation addresses the final aspect of Lanham’s “new” rhetoric. Further, Ceraso’s take on listening suggests a way of understanding the always already multimodal. By demonstrating that listening is always also a feeling, as well as a seeing, Ceraso creates a line of thinking “that approaches sound as a holistic experience” (105).

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<sup>1</sup> This emphasis on sensory pathways is not unique to Ceraso’s work, however. As Jason Palmeri observes in his 2014 revisionary history of multimodality, Patricia Dunn “argues that it is important to provide students with multiple sensory pathways” in her 2001 book *Talking, Sketching, Moving* (Palmeri, “Introduction”). Further, Palmeri notes that concern for the sensory, and especially the multisensory, is long-standing in composition and rhetoric; it is present (at least) in the work of Flower and Hayes, Anne Berthoff, as well as Donald Murray.

But while Ceraso's article only touches on the interrelation of sound, sight, and touch, the concept of sensation can be pushed further. In his 2002 book *Parables of the Virtual*, Brian Massumi introduces his concept mesoperception, which he says "can be called sensation for short" (62). For Massumi, "mesoperception is the synesthetic sensibility: it is the medium where inputs from all five sense meet...[it] functions as a corporeal transformer where one sense shades into another over the failure of each, their input translated into movement and affect" (6). Sensation-as-mesoperception, then, underscores that every sensational experience—memorable or not—is a function of all five senses; in the most extreme way, it is always already multimodal. Where the understanding of the multimodal as semiotic must allow for the possibility of a monomodal reading, a sensory, multimodality cannot. One cannot *choose* to experience the world through a single sense, they are experientially integrated.

This understanding of multimodality helps to illuminate how communication can always be multimodal, and it can aid in the project of thinking or analyzing the multimodal as sensory. In his chapter "The Political Economy of Belonging and the Logic of Relation," Massumi overviews a number of ways that relations have been theorized, using the example of the chicken-and-egg as a starting point. Massumi notes that "recent theories [privilege] notions of hybridity bordering and border culture, and queering [in the] attempt to defuse the chicken-and-the-egg scenario by valorizing the in-between" (69). In these theories of relations, which include the multimodal a la Kress, "the tendency is to describe the in-between as a blending or parody of the always-already positioned . . . concepts of mixture, margin, and parody retain a necessary reference to the pure, the central, and the strait-laced and straight-faced, without which they vaporize into

logical indeterminacy. Erase the progenitors and the hybrid vanishes” (69). For multimodality, this observation has a two significant implications. Thus far, the multimodal-as-hybrid has been an issue because no method of analysis is provided for it as a mode—instead, analysis through hybridity and intertextuality is determined by individual modes, with no explanation of what this might look like. Massumi’s diagnosis identifies this as a logical necessity of hybridity; “when everything is served up in founding terms of determination— ‘of’ or ‘by’—by design or by default—change can only be understood as a negation of the determination: as the simply indeterminate” (69). Under this theory, the multimodal can only be indeterminate. And further, the logic of hybridity also makes it *necessary* to “bracket off individual senses and the uptake of select semiotic resources,” for it is this bracketing that provides the progenitors, the pure terms that hybridity must reference (Shipka 2006, 355). Resisting this necessity, then, requires a reformulation of the multimodal. And for this reformulation, “the problem arises when no way is provided to conceptualize the in-between as having a logical consistency, and even ontological status, of its own” (Massumi 70).

Addressing this problem requires “asserting the exteriority of the relation to its terms,” understanding the multimodal as a fundamentally different thing than the modes of communication (70). Insofar as the modes of communication name semiotic entities, the beginnings of this understanding are already in place. In distinction from semiotic modes, the multimodal names the holistic, synesthetic level of sensation that works through affect and effect. However, this vocabulary does not go far enough to assert the exteriority of these two terms. Calling sensation multimodal already implies that it is built out of the determination of the individual modes of communication, which pushes us

back into thinking hybridity. To avoid this problem, I suggest a reconfiguration of terms in two parts. First, rather than calling the semiotic entities modes of communication, they can be thought as media/genre pairings. This reconfiguration has a number of advantages. Through Alexander and Rhodes's discussion of video, it is evident that the media/genre pairing covers all the salient bases of the New London Group and Kress' theories, and it does so in a way more continuous with composition and rhetoric's history than the jump to Kress' social semiotics. This reconfiguration also has the advantage of addressing Wysocki's concern with the divorce between media and mode. And finally, it simplifies Lauer's recognition of the different uses of multimodal and multimedia; rather than using multimedia as a gateway for students, the (multi)media/genre pairings allow us to build on student's understandings in ways they are already familiar with.

The second aspect of this reconfiguration is to drop the "multi" from multimodal. Even without the reference to semiotic modes of communication, considering sensation as multimodal pushes us toward bracketing off individual senses. Rather than emphasizing the multiple aspect of sensation, thinking this relation on its own terms is best done by considering the sensational aspect of a text as modal. Further, it is imperative to remember that the modal *is not* concerned with semiotics, but rather with *effects* and *affects*—it is a plane of sensational relations distinct from the media/genre pairings. This does not, however, mean the plane is simply considered as one thing or that the differences between the senses are not important. Instead, it emphasizes how individual sensory pathways organize experience in particular ways.

Together, the shift to thinking sensation as modal and the organizing function of the particular sensory experiences suggest an apt way of thinking the multiple experience

of sensation—musical modality. Historically speaking, the concept of musical modality derives from the different musical scales used in various areas around ancient Greece. What is useful for thinking sensation, however, are the modern musical modes. Crucially, each of the seven musical modes is made up of the same seven notes—the difference between them is simply which of these notes begins the scale. The first note of the mode is known as the tonic or the root, and the composition built in a particular mode is organized around this root and the relationships it has with other notes. For example, Popular knowledge describes the Ionian mode, or the major scale, as uplifting or happy, whereas the Aeolian mode, or minor scale, is associated with darker emotions. While both of these descriptions are overly reductive, what is important here is not that each mode may create different emotions, but rather that a change in the note organizing the mode creates radically different effects and affects. As a model for sensation, the notes in the musical mode correspond to a sensory pathway. Thus, there are five possible sensational modalities; experience can be organized around sight, sound, taste, touch, or smell. In order to develop how this works in terms of an analysis of modality, it will be necessary to take recourse to an example.

Recently, I visited the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art in La Jolla, CA. At that time, the exhibits presented the works of several artists who attended or worked with the artistic community at the University of California San Diego during the 1970s and 1980s, one of whom was Carrie Mae Weems. Among her displayed works was a version of her piece “Family Pictures and Stories,” composed between 1978 and 1984. Under the usual, New London Group derived theory of multimodality, an analysis of “Family Pictures and Stories” would proceed as follows. It would first note that there are

principally three modes at work in the composition. The visual, presented through nine photographs of various sizes arranged on the gallery wall, the aural, amplified through a speaker hanging within a clear half-dome some ways down from the gallery ceiling, and the textual, read through the identifying plaque and the captions below some of the photographs. Each of these modes would be interpreted—made meaningful—on its own terms, and the multimodal would be analyzed by asking questions of intertextuality (where, and in what ways, do the three modes reference each other?) and hybridity (what new meaning emerges from the juxtaposition of these modes in this context?). An analysis of the modality of “Family Pictures and Stories,” however, begins in a very different place; a description of my experience with the composition.

Noting the speaker hanging from the ceiling, I positioned myself underneath it, which put me roughly centered in front of the arrangement of photographs, six or seven feet from them. As I listened to the stories of family histories and anecdotes, I almost immediately began to notice the way my body felt in this position; the hardness of the museum floor underneath my feet, the strain in my back from standing, the way my head unconsciously tilted to the right in an attempt to hear the relatively quiet audio recording better. As the stories unfolded, my attention shifted from these feelings to the photographs, and I wondered which of the people pictured were being discussed. In order to keep up with the stories, however, I found that I had to prevent myself from addressing the photographs too closely. An attempt to inspect the details caused me to stop listening. Thus, for a time I stood and listened, gazing at the photographs, letting the figures they presented populate the stories in my imagination.



After a period had passed—I couldn't say how long—my attention was drawn by the wafting of a particular, unpleasant odor. Looking around, I saw a fellow museum-goer, who I assumed it must be emanating from, and I noted the presence of a particular sourness on my tongue. Returning to the stories, I quickly found that I was lost, as some important event had been communicated during my distraction. This, and my growing discomfort with standing still, prompted me to follow my earlier interest in the details of the photographs, so I stepped away from the hanging speaker and toward the wall to see them. I spent some time inspecting them, taking in the various scenes and the expressions on their faces, although I was still unable to confidently connect any particular person with the stories I had listened to. Moving across the wall, and finally reading the identifying plaque, I moved on, to continue my stroll through the museum.

In many ways, this is an unremarkable experience, the casual taking in of a composition in a museum—certainly not a studied analysis. Nevertheless, through it we can begin to see how a particular modality organizes sensational relations to the composition. Beginning with the aural “note”, which thus becomes the root, I quickly found myself drawn toward the tactile. It was only with a little effort that I was able to focus on the visual. This suggests that, for the auditory modality, the tactile is the dominant sensory relation, which in music theory would be designated “perfect.” This relationship is called “perfect” for two reasons—because the ratio of the frequencies to each other is a whole number, and because the interval is heard as the most “consonant” one in the mode. In other words, it is easy on the ears, or they go well together. Importantly, the dominant is not the only “perfect” relationship; the subdominant also has

this quality. Here, the visual takes the subdominant relationship. Thus, we find that both the visual and the tactile go well with the auditory—but the visual slightly less so.

With two senses left out, however, this three-part relationship does not develop a holistic picture of the auditory modality of this composition. Indeed, musically speaking, this is no accident—within the musical mode, there are only two perfect relationships<sup>2</sup>. In relation to the auditory, the olfactory and gustatory are imperfect relations, which are much more complicated to pin down. Luckily, there is another way to work out the relationships within a mode; the dominant and subdominant positions are different for each root, but also always stay within the general structure of the mode. Because of this, we can work out the positions of taste and smell by considering other dominant/subdominant relations.

Take, for instance, the interruption of my attention caused by smell. As before, we can see the first reaction as the dominant one—in this case, my attention turned to the visual, looking for the source of the olfactory offense. My second reaction, the sourness in my mouth, constitutes the subdominant relation—here, the gustatory. We now have at least one point of reference for each of the sensory pathways, or notes of the mode, and as such can construct the modality as a whole. Traditionally in music theory, a scale build on particular interval relationships is represented as a circle. The root of the mode takes the position at the top of the circle. In this case, where the relation is based in perfect intervals, a dominant relation is signified by a clockwise movement, and a subdominant by a counter-clockwise one. Thus, in the auditory mode, we have:

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<sup>2</sup> Excluding, of course, the unison and the octave—both of which are repetitions, and thus outside the scope of this metaphor.

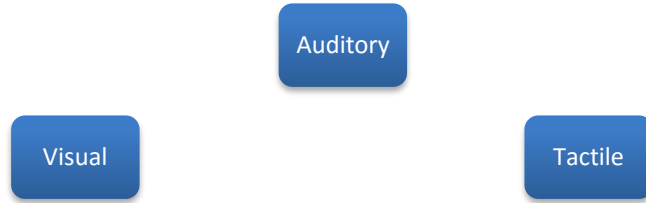


Figure 3.1 dominant/subdominant relations of the auditory

And beginning with the olfactory:



Figure 3.2 dominant/subdominant relations of the olfactory

Putting these together to form the complete mode, we get:

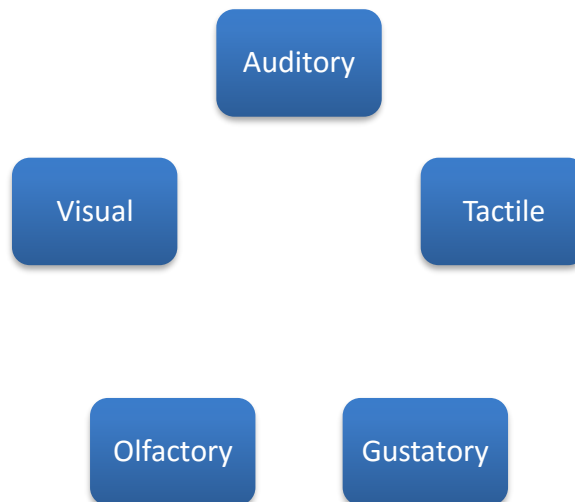


Figure 3.3 the complete auditory modality

The entirety of the experience of the composition happens within this circle of sensational relations. As Ceraso’s work on multimodal listening makes clear, no point of the experience can be reduced to a simple, singular sensation—it must be positioned in the sensational plane with reference to a number of the senses. Musically speaking, we might think of this positioning as chordal—a single sound built out of at least three notes. In my experience of Carrie Mae Weem’s “Family Pictures and Stories,” while I originally rooted the text in the auditory, my attention was also given over to the tactile and the visual. Thus, I began here:

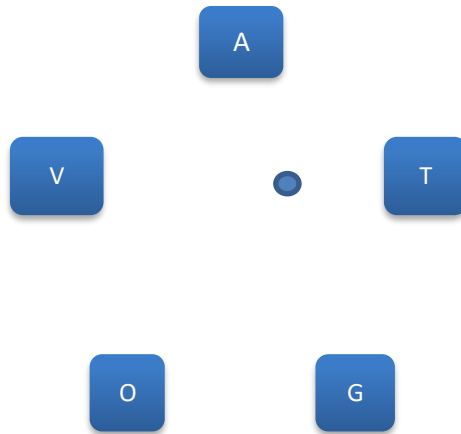


Figure 3.4 rooting the experience

It is important, however, that the experience of engaging with a composition happens over time. In this sense, the composition can be thought of as the movement of sensational chords—effectively, as a musical score. Representing this score on the plane of sensational relations requires tracing the movement of experience. For my experience, the tracing would look something like this:

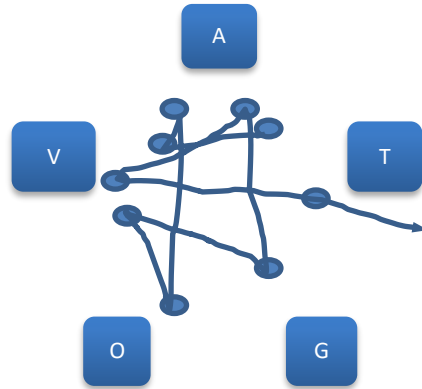


Figure 3.5 the compositional score

Importantly, had I rooted my engagement with this composition in the visual or any of the other senses, the compositional score would trace a very different experience. First, the sensory pathway that takes the twelve o'clock position would change, which would in turn re-orient the positions of all the other senses. Inevitably, the tracing would also move in different ways, as the dominant/subdominant relationships and the constant possibility of new sensory input shift the movement of attention. Within this movement, as in a musical score, it is possible for the modality of a composition to change as it unfolds, if the root of the experience moves for an extended period. It is not the case, however, that the placement of this root is purely up to chance—the media used in the composition and the situation surrounding it constrain the possibilities. In “Family Pictures and Stories,” for instance, the visual and auditory media strongly suggest that the experience be rooted in one of these sensory pathways. Even so, it is conceivable to begin with touching the photographs, even though the conventions of museums generally discourage or prohibit such an approach.

A modal analysis of composition, then, begins with the experiential engagement, which is then traced onto the plane of sensational relations, organized by the rooting

sensory pathway, and described in the compositional score. The plane of sensational relations constitutes what Massumi referred to as the “ontological status” of the in-between, the holistic, real, sensational experience of a composition. Once this ontological status has been asserted, then the work of interpretation and semiotic analysis can begin—however, this work looks very different than it did before. The media/genre interpretations must be grounded in attention to the sensational effects and affects of the composition, as well as to their unfolding over time, the compositional score. In this unfolding—as I move away from the speaker and toward the gallery wall, for instance—they will often change, moving perhaps from an audio/visual narrative into the realm of photographic portraiture. Through the description of modality, media/genre pairings take on the shapes, sequences, and relationships that have significant consequences for meaning making.

While description has often been cast as a problematic intellectual practice, it has many current defenders in rhetoric and composition. For instance, in “Building a Better Description,” Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Stephen Best write that “the practice of description provides the material that gives future scholars (including the future self of the describer) the opportunity to engage differently with their objects” (4). Indeed, for multimodality, it is the score of the sensational composition that allows for engagement with what the New London Group called the most significant aspect of communication, the relations it creates. Rather than reifying the textual, the shift from the multi to the modal refigures it along with all the other media/genre pairings; rather than distinct systems of representation, each pair is a variation on a theme, different tools for the composition of experience. As such, the visual and the auditory avenues that multimodal

scholarship has taken thus far serve as a knowledge base for creating experiences with particular tools. The modal description adds more layers to the concern for materiality as well. As “description connects us to others—to those described, to the makers of what we describe, to other describers,” it emphasizes the materiality not just of a medium, but of all the actors involved (14). In these ways, the shift from the multi to the modal facilitates hearing not composition in a new key, but versions of composition in the same key—regardless of their apparent consonance or dissonance.

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