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awaywithwords: On the possibilities in unavailable designs

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Abstract

Constraints in our use of communication materials are often socially and historically produced; to ask after the constraints as we teach or compose can help us understand how material choices in producing communications articulate to social practices we may not otherwise wish to reproduce. In this writing, I consider the constraints Gunther Kress often applied to "word" and "image," questioning their temporal and spatial structures.
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1. Introduction

You have assigned a research paper in a graduate class you teach. Under what conditions would you accept a paper handwritten in crayon on colored construction paper?

If you can imagine no conditions whatsoever, then for you color of paper and technologies of print typography are like water or stones: things whose natural properties (seem to) necessarily constrain how we can use them. We do not attempt to make soup from stones nor do we imagine early hominids attacking mammoths by throwing water at them. If paper and typography are similar in having such inherent constraints, then it is the neat rows of typographically clean letters on letter-size white paper that are necessary for serious thought.

But.

My claim about the limitations of water, at least, are incorrect, for we can and do use water as weapon, as when police used high-pressure hoses on 1960s Civil Rights marchers in the southern United States. The lesson is that things can be put to many uses, often neither just nor humane. And were we in our classes to study the pressurized water-as-weapon as an example of such use, we would not focus on what it was about water alone that allowed it to be used so against bodies; although one could argue that it was precisely the natural qualities or constraints[1] of water that allow it to be pressurized and so used, were we to talk about this situation only in terms of the water we could rightfully be criticized for acting as though it is

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ever reasonable to exclude considerations of human life and rights from our work. Instead, in examining this use, we might question what in the context and purposes of the police allowed them to use water in such a way. We might develop an intriguing study into contemporary relations among technologies of water use, law enforcement, and White imaginations about Black bodies. In such a study, we might also learn about the resistances, actions, and particular understandings of material things like water that encourage change in relations among people.

In the preceding paragraphs I am, obviously, trying to use water and its varied applications as an analogy for the materials we use in building communications. If our particular uses of water as weapon—or as soup, swimming place, trash receptacle (as the lake on which we live was used in the nineteenth century), energy generator, scarce natural resource—cannot be separated from the relations that hold among people in particular places and times, then how can we believe that whatever we put on paper or the different screens we use—or the paper or screen itself—can be so separated? If how we conceive of water is unseparable from place and time, how can our communication materials, for which we can make no similar claim to naturalness as we can with water, be otherwise?

My desire in this writing, then, is to push at the edges of where Gunther Kress (2005) directs our attentions in many of his writings. I am in happy agreement with him on the need to encourage a rhetorical focus in our teaching—

> In this social and cultural environment, with these demands for communication of these materials, for that audience, with these resources, and given these interests of mine, what is the design which best meets these requirements? (Presented at CCCC)

—for my experiences working on interdisciplinary software development teams, or with artists working in a range of media, or with people in classes developing instructional materials, have taught me that the question he asks above—entwining context, purpose, audience, and communication strategies (including material choices)—is an approach that helps people working both within and across disciplines or materials to produce effective communication. But there is an addition—or an expansion—that I want to foreground here: I have learned in the process of developing communications that it is always worth asking how our materials have acquired the constraints they have and hence why, often, certain materials and designs are not considered available for certain uses.[2] As with water, constraints of communication materials are often social and historical; to ask after the constraints as we teach or compose can help us understand how material choices in producing communications articulate to social practices we may not otherwise wish to reproduce. That is why, then, I wish to question what becomes unavailable when we think of word and image as Kress has suggested we do, as bound logically and respectively with time and with space.

Did you read my title as "a way with words" or "away with words"? The potential ambiguity, I think, shows how a particular visual space has become natural to how we now read. Space between words has not always been a function of written texts in the West. Our current practices of spacing text on a page developed over hundreds of years, catching on only slowly—as Paul Saenger (1997) has demonstrated through close analysis of manuscripts from throughout Europe—from the seventh through the twelfth centuries and developing out of (Saenger argued) particular practices in Irish monasteries. The development of consistent spacing of words—of

a consistent notion of what constitutes a "word" on a page and hence conceptually—seems to have accompanied a shift from the social reading of texts to silent and individual readings. Saenger wanted to argue, also, that it is space between words on a page that—precisely because it allowed or encouraged individual silent reading—gave rise to notions of individuality and so to individual political responsibility (pp. 264–276). I am not willing to go that far with him, because his arguments (like those of McLuhan) tend to technological determinism, where it is simply and only the shape of what is on the page or of a book itself that causes immense shifts in human behavior, but Saenger's arguments, like the much simpler example of my title, do ask us to acknowledge that how we use space on pages affects how we read and understand. Saenger's arguments also asked us to acknowledge that space on pages both shapes and grows out of how we understand what words, texts, and reading are: Are they objects and practices embedded (for example) in the shared vocal work of monasteries or in the silence of a far library carrel?

The spaces of pages can also articulate with our larger sense of the spaces within which we read. In a study that entwines captivity narratives from the earliest days of the United States with details of the publication of Emily Dickinson's poetry, Susan Howe (1993), for example, has argued that editing practices that constrain punctuation and unconventional uses of spacing in writing correlate to an American desire to tame space by shaping wilderness into a bright, tight comprehensible regularity—whether wilderness be the dark forest at one's door or the imagined darkness of women's internal lives.[3]

When we speak of the various kinds of space we can use when we shape alphabetic text, then—when we speak of the tops and bottoms of pages, and of the left and right, and the placement of textual elements—we tie into other spatial understandings we have of our embodied worlds, as Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996) or Keith A. Smith (1995), for example, have argued that in addition to what I've described above. There is also the front of a book and its back, and all the spatial issues of orientation within a text that so vexed early (and ongoing) developers of hypertext as readers complained that they could not find their ways back to a particular page or could not remember where a text was because onscreen texts did not provide the same learned spatial memory cues as pages in books.

To say then, as Kress does, that what we need to ask when we read is "What are the salient events and in what (temporal) order did they occur?" is not wrong, but I believe—based even on the little I have written about space and words above—it is incomplete. If we are to help people in our classes learn how to compose texts that function as they hope, they need consider how they use the spaces and not just one time that can be shaped on pages. They also need to question how they have come to understand the spaces of pages so that they can, if need be, use different spaces, potentially powerful spaces that—as Howe, for example, has described—have been rendered unavailable by naturalized, unquestioned practice.

When Kress claims that words are governed by a "temporal and sequential logic," his next move is predictable. Because he has implicitly accepted another logic, that of dichotomous splitting, he must, when he grants certain qualities to words, grant the opposite qualities to what he opposes to words—what he names "image-representations." "Image-representations," therefore, must be governed by a "spatial and simultaneous logic."

There is much to question about using a logic of dichotomies in thinking about the possibilities of multimodalities.

There is, of course, the general questioning of dichotomies and dichotomous thinking that has sparked so much late-twentieth and early twenty-first century writing. There ought to be no need for me to repeat what others have written as they have detailed how, since at least the time of Pythagoras, the engine of dichotomies has driven what many now consider most problematic in western thought.[4]

But for the particular dichotomy with which Kress spends so much time, that of word and image, I think it is probably worth mentioning how W.J.T. Mitchell (1986), for example, has examined the historical dance of word and image in the writings of theorists like Lessing, Locke, and Edmund Burke. Mitchell argued that the separation between these two terms is often the same separation—with all its implications for how we conceive of and so treat each other—that holds between male and female, reason and emotion, civilized and barbarian.[5] To treat the realm of modalities as so divided would seem to me to be inviting us in directions we might otherwise want to question. Instead, we should acknowledge that when we work with what is on pages or other surfaces, alphabetic text is always part of what must be visually arranged and can be designed to call more or less visual attention to itself (with the current academic and literary convention to be that of calling less attention to itself).[6]

It is also worth considering what happens when "image" is used to represent all that is not made exclusively of words. First, even if I were to pretend that the repertoire of communication materials available to us has nothing to do with other practices that shape what we do in the world, I think that "images"—if by that term we mean what many of us implicitly imagine when the term is used, a page-sized or no more than 3″ by 3″ realistically representational photograph, drawing, or painting—nonetheless exceed logics of space. Such images can appear to be moments pulled out of sequential time because we can apparently see what is in the image all at once, given the angles of vision afforded by our human eyes and, importantly, given the particularly designed compositions of many such objects. In a painted portrait or photograph of a single person or a small group that fills the frame of the image, we see the composition as singular, and then—in looking at the image's elements to understand better how the composition works—we see how the elements relate to each other, what is at top, what is at bottom, what is at left, what is at right: We notice how the elements have been arranged so that we see them in some ordering. What has the composer emphasized for us to see first and what elements are treated so as to retreat into the background to be noticed later, if at all? Notice, then, too, that temporal strategies of composition are very much present even in images that we can apparently perceive all at once. But even visually designed objects that fit the definition I have given of image can more emphatically emphasize how time can be variously present in such objects: think of any painting by Brueghel, such as "Children's Games" or "The Black Death," which are small paintings and yet they give us no way to see what is in them all at once; they require considerable time for separating out the elements and finding compositional structure.

But perhaps more importantly, were we to consider "word" in this same commonsensical way as "image" is here, limiting it to a particular size and to a set of compositional strategies and means of production, it would be as though we were asking people in our classes to go out into the world believing that the only writing everyone everywhere ever does is the academic research essay. We certainly do encounter innumerable visual representations that follow the commonsense definition of image I gave above: We find such images in our wallets,

magazines, CD racks, and photo albums, as well as on the walls of our homes and museums and on computer monitors. But it does not take much additional looking to see films, billboards, decorated fingernails, sculptures, typography, the Gilmore Girls, abstract non-representational paintings or animations, the backs of shampoo bottles or the fronts of T-shirts, maps, Amy's or Kristin's tattoos, advertising on the sides of trucks, USA Today's illustrated graphs, the interiors of churches and schools and conference presentation rooms, Carole Maso's repeated use of a Giotto fresco in a novel, any car. . .; you will undoubtedly have thought of more.

To compare just two of the visually designed objects I listed above, for example a tattoo and a film, is to quickly see that their particular uses of time and space and their social functionings—how different people in different places and times understand what they do—are different. And so to use image to name some class of objects that function in opposition to word is thus either to make an arbitrary cut into the world of designed visual objects or to try to encompass a class so large the encompassing term loses function. To say that all these objects rely on a logic of space is to miss their widely varying compositional potentials.

Like Kress, I too want to understand what is gained and what is lost through any communication practice, especially as computer technologies heighten our awareness of the visuality of texts—but I also want to understand what is possible. If human practices do entwine, as I have been arguing, to the extent that the spacing of lettershapes on a piece of paper reflects and helps continue unquestioned restrictions on behavior or that a habit of understanding words and images as opposites reflects and helps continue beliefs about relations between men and women, then it is possible that trying new spaces on pages or exploring the visuality of alphabetic text can be seeds for changes in such practices and beliefs. But we can only do this if we look beyond what appear to be constraints. As we analyze and produce communications, we need to be asking not only what is expected by a particular audience in a particular context but also what they might not expect, what they might not be prepared to see. It is in the apparently unavailable designs—Emily Dickinson's idiosyncratically punctuated handwriting that has only recently been published as she spaced it on the page or a graduate-level essay composed in crayon on colored paper—that we can see what beliefs and constraints are held within readily available, conventionalized design. By focusing on the human shaping of material, and on the ties of material to human practices, we might be in better positions to ask after the consequences not only of how we use water but also of how we use paper, ink, and pixels to shape—for better or worse—the actions of others.

Notes

1. I have purposefully avoided using "affordance" here to avoid using the time of this paper to debate or attempt to fix definitions, even though what affordance exists to fix is precisely what is at stake in what I write. What is at stake is the independent life of things—whether those things are water or the shapes of ink on paper: What in any thing is a quality independent of human action and what results from human action and habit? James Gibson's (1979) original discussion of affordance (he said of the term at the time, "I have made it up" [p. 127]) was meant to "impl[y] the complementarity of the animal and the environment"

(p. 127), and that "affordances are properties of things taken with reference to an observer but not properties of the experiences of the observer" (p. 137). Gibson acknowledged, "these are slippery terms that should only be used with great care, but if their meanings are pinned down to biological and behavioral facts the danger of confusion can be minimized" (p. 137). Twenty years later, Donald Norman (1999) wrote, "I introduced the term affordance to design in my book 'The Psychology of Everyday Things'.... The concept has caught on, but not always with true understanding. Part of the blame lies with me: I should have used the term 'perceived affordance,' for in design we care much more about what the user perceives that what is actually true." Norman went on to differentiate among real and perceived affordances as well as among physical, logical, and cultural constraints (and sometimes he replaced "constraints" with "conventions" when he discussed what develops out of culture); in spite of or perhaps because of these careful delineations, Norman also wrote that "I suspect that none of us know all the affordances of even everyday objects." The slipperiness of "affordance"—as of "biological and behavioral facts" or even of "convention"—results precisely from our inability to fix, with any finality, what the things of our world are capable of doing as we use them within the complex contexts in which we live. And so I have tried with purpose in this paper to use terms like "constraint" and even "convention" that (I hope) are less fixed in our language practices, to hold onto the messiness of how we live with things that both resist and work with us and to hold on, therefore, to considering our communication materials as things whose possibilities we should be trying to open and understand rather than fix.

2. My use of "unavailable designs" rests, obviously and with thanks, on the New London Group's (2000) highly useful notion of "available designs." As I understand the term, available designs, the "resources for Design" (p. 20), are what communicators can observe in use around them as they prepare to design new communications; as examples, the New London Group (NLG) mentioned the " 'grammars' of various semiotic systems" and "orders of discourse," which include "particular Design conventions" such as "styles, genres, dialects, and voices" (p. 21). As the NLG described the design process, communicators draw on available designs in designing (which also includes "reading, seeing, and listening" [p. 22]), which involves re-presenting and recontextualizing available designs in order to develop the redesigned, which is always a "transformed meaning," "founded in historically and culturally received patterns of meaning" (p. 23). This process can imply certain circularity, with the redesigned then becoming itself an available design for the next go-round. I am curious about how we can break this circle—should we need to—given (as I argue here) how unquestioned, naturalized communication habits can reproduce (another circular process) social practices we might not want. As I argue in this paper, the notion of "unavailable designs" helps get at this by encouraging us to explore unconventional or outsider designs, which might allow of richer transformation—as long as we figure out strategies for helping audiences understand why we do such experimenting. But that is the subject of other writing.

3. For a perspective that focuses on using textual practices to tame social classes rather than genders, see Adrian Johns (1998) (pp. 408–428), for a discussion of seventeenth century British attitudes toward—and considerations of how to use reading to control—enthusiasm.

4. Oh heck, let's see: see almost anything by Donna Haraway or by Derrida, for starts.

5. For another perspective on how differing approaches to representation—roughly sketched as the verbal and visual—are historically shaped and situated, see Wendy Steiner (1982). For other arguments on social consequences of how we have at this time distinguished words from visual work, see Robert Romanyshyn (1989, 1993).

6. For discussion of the development of pages that call little visual attention to themselves, pages in which tightly regulated lettershapes are the bulk of what is visible, see, for example, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) concerning the work done by ruling classes in the late nineteenth century to preserve their cultural position by claiming the "densely written page" as their own while shaping layout and variety for " 'the masses,' or children" (pp. 185–186). See also Joanna Drucker (1994) on "unmarked pages" and how such pages develop closely alongside practices of industrialization and standardization; Robin Kinross similarly argued that dreams of neutrality in page layout—dreams of pages whose layout has nothing to do with contemporary ideologies—are tied to specific social structurings.

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