Multimodal Discourse

The modes and media of contemporary communication

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Introduction

Multimodality

For some time now, there has been, in Western culture, a distinct preference for monomodality. The must highly valued genres of writing (literary novels, academic treatises. official documents and reports, etc.) came entirely without illustration, and had graphically uniform, dense pages of print. Paintings nearly all used the same suppon (canvas) and the same medium (oils). whatever their style or subject. In concert performances all musicians dressed identically and only conductor and soloists were allowed a modicum of bodily expression. The specialised theoretical and critical disciplines which developed to speak of these arts became equally monomodal: one language to speak about language (linguistics), another to speak about art (art history), yet another to speak about music (musicology), and so on. each with its own methods, its own assumptions, its own technical vocabulary, its own strengths and its own blind spots.

More recently this dominance of monomodality has begun to reverse. Not only the mass media, the pages of magazines and comic strips fur example, but also the documents produced by corporations. universities, government departments etc., have acquired colour illustrations and sophisticated layout and typography. And not only the cinema and the semiotically exuberant performances and videos of popular music, but also the avant-gardes of the 'high culture' arts have begun to use an increasing variety of materials and to cross the boundaries between the various art, design and performance disciplines. towards multimodal *Gesamtkunstwerke,* multi-media events. and so on.

The desire for crossing boundaries inspired twentieth-century semiotics. The main schools of semiotics all sought to develop a theoretical framework applicable to all semiotic modes, from folk costume to poetry, from traffic signs to classical music, from fashion to the theatre. Yet there was also a paradox. In our own work on visual semiotics (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996). we, too, were in a sense 'specialists' of the image, still standing with one foot in the world of monomodal disciplines. But at the same time we aimed at a common terminology far all semiotic modes, and stressed that, within a given social-cultural domain, the 'same' meanings can often be expressed in different semiotic modes.

In this book we make this move our primary aim; and so we explore the common

principles behind multimodal communication. We move away from the idea that the different modes in multimodal texts have strictly bounded and framed specialist tasks, as in a film where images may provide the action, sync sounds a sense of realism, music a layer of emotion. and so on, with the editing process supplying the 'integration code'. the means for synchronising the elements through a common rhythm (Van Leeuwen, 1985). Instead we move towards a view of multimodality in which common semiotic principles operate in and across different modes, and in which it is therefore quite possible for music t° encode action, or images to encode emotion. This move comes, on our part, not because we think we had it all wrong before and have now suddenly seen the light. It is because we want to create a theory of semiotics appropriate to contemporary semiotic practice. In the past, and in many contexts still today, multimodal texts (such as films "i newspapers) were organised as hierarchies of specialist modes integrated by. an editing process. Moreover, they were produced in this way, with different, hierarchically organised specialists in charge of the different modes, and an editing process bringing their work together.

Today, however, in the age of digitisation, the different modes have technically become the same at some level of representation, and they can be operated by one multi-skilled pen™, using one interface, one mode of physical manipulation, so that he or she can ask, at every point: 'Shall I express this with sound or music?', 'Shall I say this visually or verbally?', and so on. Out approach takes its point of departure from this new development. and seeks to provide the element that has so far been missing from the equation: the semiotic rather than the technical element. the question of how 'this technical possibility can be made to work semiotically, of how we might have, not only a unified and unifying technology, but also a unified and unifying semiotics.

Let us give one specific example. In Reading *Images* (1996) we discussed 'framing' as specific to visual communication. By 'framing' we meant, in that context, the way elements of a visual composition may he disconnected. marked off from each other, for instance by framelines, pictorial framing devices (boundaries formed by the edge of a building. a tree, etc.) empty space between elements, discontinuities of colour, and so on. The concept also included the ways in which elements of a composition may be connected to each other. through the absence of disconnection devices, through vectors, and through continuities and similarities of colour, visual shape and so on. The significance is that disconnected elements will he read as, in some sense, separate and independent, perhaps even as contrasting units of meaning. whereas connected elements will be read as belonging together in some sense. as continuous or complementary. Arnheim's discussion of Titian's *Noli Me Tangere* 11982: 112) provides an example: '[Christ's] staff acts as a visual boundary between the figures', he comments. and 'Magdalen breaks the visual separation —— by the aggressive act of her right arm' (see Fig. 1.1).

Figure 1.1 *Noli Me Tangere*

But clearly framing is a multimodal principle. There can be framing, not only between the elements of a visual composition, but also between the bits of writing in a newspaper or magazine layout (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998), between the people in an office, the seats in a train or restaurant (e.g. private compartments versus sharing tables), the dwellings in a suburb, etc., and such instances of framing will also be realised by 'framelines', empty space. discontinuities of all kinds, and so an. In time-based modes, moreover, 'framing' becomes 'phrasing' and is realised by the short pauses and discontinuities of various kinds (rhythmic, dynamic, etc.) which separate the phrases of speech, of music and of actors' movements. We have here a common semiotic principle, though differently realised in different semiotic modes.

The search for such common principles can be undertaken in different ways. It is possible to work out detailed grammars for each and every semiotic mode, detailed accounts of what can be 'said' with that mode and how, using for each of the grammars as much as possible (as much as the materiality of the mode makes that plausible) the same approach and the same terminology. At the end of this process it would then become possible to overlay these different grammars and to see where they overlap and where they do not, which areas are common to which of the modes. and in which respects the modes are specialised. There have by now been a number of attempts at devising such grammars. all based to a greater or lesser degree on the semiotic theories of Halliday (Halliday 1978, 1985) and Hodge and Kress (1988), and hence sharing a common approach-for instance the semiotics of action of Martinec (1996, 1998), the semiotics of images of O'Toole (1994) and Kress and Van Leeuwen (1999), the semiotics of sound of Van Leeuwen (1999), the semiotics of theatre of Martin 11997) and McInnes (1998), and so on.

We are and will continue to be part of this enterprise ourselves. But in this book we want to pause, as it were, to take stock of what general picture is emerging. We want to sketch a multimodal theory of communication based, not on ideas which naturalise the characteristics of semiotic modes by equating sensory channels and semiotic modes, but on an analysis of the specificities and common traits ofsemiotic modes which takes account of their social, cultural and historical production, of when and how the modes of production are specialised or multi-skilled, hierarchical or team-based, of when and how technologies are specialised or multi-purpose, and so on.

The issue of meaning in a multimodal theory of communication

We indicated in the preface that it was our focus on *practices* and our use of the notion of *resources*, rather than a focus on fixed, stable entities, which allowed us to make progress with a multimodal approach to representation and communication. In relation to one specific question this has been particularly crucial, namely the question of meaning. The traditional linguistic account is one in which *meaning is made* once, so to speak. By contrast, we see the multimodal resources which are available in a culture used to make meanings in any and every sign, at every level, and in any mode. Where traditional linguistics bad defined language as a system that worked through *double articulation* where a message was an articulation as a form and as a meaning, we see multimodal texts as making meaning in multiple articulations. Here we sketch the four domains of practice in which meanings are dominantly made. We call these *strata* to show a relation to Hallidayan functional linguistics, for reasons of the potential compatibility of description of different modes. We do not however see *strata* as being hierarchically ordered, as one *above the other for* instance, or some such interpretation. Our four strata are discourse, design, production and distribution.

Discourse

Discourses are socially constructed knowledges of (some aspen of) reality. By 'socially constructed' we mean that they have been developed in specific social contexts, and in ways which are appropriate to the interests of social actors in these contexts, whether these are very broad contexts ('Western Europe') or not (a particular family), explicitly institutionalised contexts (newspapers) or not (dinner-table conversations), and so on. For instance, the 'ethnic conflict' discourse of war can be drawn on by Western journalists when reporting civil wars in Africa or former Yugoslavia, but it is also an available resource in certain kinds of conversation, in airport thrillers or in movies set in Africa, and so on. War discourses involve both a

certain version of what actually happens in wars, of who is involved, what they do, and where and when, and a set of interpretations, evaluative judgements, critical or justifying arguments and so on, related to wars or aspects of them. The 'ethnic conflict' discourses of war in newspapers, for instance, serve the interests of the countries in which the newspapers ate produced, as perceived by the projected readership of the papers. Hence they usually leave out mention of the influence of colonisation and de-colonisation and defend non-intervention by constructing conflicts as going back hundreds of years or more, to mention just two aspects. There are other discourses of war, for instance discourses in which 'economics' or 'ideology' feature as explanatory categories. These will include and exclude other interpretations, judgements, arguments etc., and serve other interests. And while some discourses include a great deal of emphasis on the actual events and provide few interpretations or arguments, others form a storehouse of abstract interpretation and argument but make do with only a broad and general version of what warring parties actually do.

Any discourse may be realised in different ways. The 'ethnic conflict' discourse of war, for instance, may be realised as (part of) a dinner-table conversation, a television documentary, a newspaper feature, an airport thriller, and so on. In other words, discourse is relatively independent of genre, of mode and (somewhat less) of design. Yet discourses can only be realised in semiotic modes which have developed the means for realising them. In the 1920s, following the Russian Revolution, film had not developed the means for realising Marxist discourses. Hence a film-maker like Eisenstein, for instance, who dreamt of filming Marx's *Capital* set about developing his method of 'dialectical montage' (Eisenstein, 1949), and in the process extended the semiotic teach of the medium.

Design

Design stands midway between content and expression. It is the conceptual side of expression, and the expression side of conception. Designs ate (uses of) semiotic resources, in all semiotic modes and combinations of semiotic modes. Designs are means to realise discourses in the context of a given communication situation. But designs also add something new: they realise the communication situation which changes socially constructed knowledge into social (inter-) action. Consider writers who write thrillers in a setting of 'ethnic conflict', for instance: at the same time as they realise the 'ethnic conflict' discourse of war, they realise a particular mode of interaction in which it is their purpose to entertain an audience of a particular kind. In doing so, designs may either follow well-trodden paths of habit, convention, tradition, or prescription, or be innovative and ground-breaking, just as discourses may either express common sense, or be innovative and perhaps even subversive.

But design is still separate from the actual material production of the semiotic product or the actual material articulation of the semiotic event. The resources on which design draws, the semiotic modes, are still abstract, capable of being realised in different materialities. Language, for instance, is a semiotic mode because it can be realised either as speech or as writing, and writing is a semiotic mode too, because it can be realised as engraving in stone, as calligraphy on certificates, as print on glossy paper, and all these media add a further layer of signification. The writer of the 'ethnic conflict' thriller, apart from using language, also uses the resources of the mode of narrative in designing the thriller. And this mode is separate from the medium of the printed book in which it will be produced. The same design may be realised in different media. The same story may become a mainstream movie or an airport thriller, given a shared communicative purpose and conception of who the audience is. Quite different skills are of course required for actually writing the book or producing the movie.

This view of design also applies to semiotic practices which do not so clearly have a 'subject matter'. An architect, for instance, designs (but does not build) a house or a block of apartments. The discourse provides a certain view of how houses are lived in, of how many and which kinds of people live in houses, of what they do in their houses, coupled with interpretations of why they live the way they do, and arguments which critique or defend these ways of life. The design of the house then conceptualises how to give shape to this discourse in the form of a house or a type of apart-ment. According to architect Chris Timmerman (1998: 11-12), there are architectural projects which are never built, but remain on paper, in the mind, on the hard disk, and they often are ground-breaking architecture because 'one can allow oneself the luxury and freedom of concentrating on the spatial experiential aspects of architec-ture as opposed to the economic and structural reality of building'. He quotes Virilio (1997: 26) to support the idea that architecture can be realised in several different materialities, not only in the form of buildings, but also, for instance, as interactive computer programmes: 'While the topical City was once constructed around the gate and the port, the teleoptical metacity is now reconstructed around the window and the teleport, that is to say, around the screen and the time slot'.

Production

'Production' refers to the organisation of the expression, to the actual material articulation of the semiotic event or the actual material production of the semiotic artefact. A whole other set of skills is involved here: technical skills, skills of the hand and the eye, skills related not to semiotic modes, but to semiotic media. We use the term 'medium' here in the sense of 'medium of execution' (the material substance drawn into culture and worked over cultural time), the sense in which artists use it when they speak of the medium of 'oil', or 'tempera on paper', or 'bronze mounted

on marble base'; it applies of course also to media which do not produce traces that last beyond the moment of articulation, such as speech or music.

Sometimes design and production, mode and medium, are hard to separate. Improvising musicians, for instance, both design and perform their music. They rehearse, perhaps, but even in rehearsals it may be difficult to know where 'design' ends and 'performance' begins. In other contexts there is a gap between the two, and they separate out in different roles: composers design the music and performers execute it. In that case the work of performers will often be seen as adding little meaning, as 'merely' realising and making audible the intentions of the composer as faithfully as possible, and as adding, at best, the 'expressiveness' which black dots on paper do not have. Linguists have the same view of language: the expression plane does not add meaning and 'merely' realises what can also be written down, without loss of essential meaning. Teachers, for instance, may either design their own lessons or merely 'execute' a detailed syllabus designed by expert educators. In other words, when design and production separate, design becomes a means for controlling the actions of others, the potential for a unity between discourse, design and production diminishes, and there is no longer room for the 'producers' to make the design 'their own', to add their own accent. In all this, writing and its ability to provide detailed 'scripts' and 'prescriptions' ('pro-grammes') for action has undoubtedly played a pivotal role.

Distribution

As already mentioned, the stratum of expression needs to be stratified further. Musical performers may need the technicians who record the music on tape and disc for preservation and distribution; designers of a product may need the crafts people who produce the prototype of the product, and the other crafts people who produce the mould for mass production.

Distribution, too, tends to be seen as not semiotic, as not adding any meaning, as merely facilitating the pragmatic functions of preservation and distribution. Just as it is the performer's job to be faithful to the intentions of the composer, so it is the recording and sound-mixing engineers' job to achieve 'high fidelity': 'I want to make records which will sound in the public's home exactly like what they would hear in the best seat in an acoustically perfect hall,' said EM1 producer Walter Legge (quoted in Chanan, 1995: 133). But the public's home is not a concert hall, and acoustically perfect halls do not exist. Introducing orchestral music into the home and being able to hear the same performance over and over already fundamentally changes the meaning of music, for example through the loss of 'aura' of which Walter Benjamin wrote (1977). As time moves on, distribution media may, in part or in whole, turn into production media. The contribution of the sound engineer may become equal to that of the musician, with parameters like reverb used, not to (re)create 'the acoustically

perfect hall', but to act as independent signifiers, able, for instance, to make sounds either 'interior' and subjective or 'exterior' and objective, as in many contemporary dance music mixes (Van Leeuwen, 1999), where the drum and bass are so 'close up' that they do not seem to be played in an actual space at all, but inside the head or body, in a space where all sound is absorbed instantly.

Articulation and interpretation

The terms we have used ('design', 'production', 'distribution') might suggest that we are looking at multimodal communication only from the point of view of the producers. But this is not so. Our model applies equally t° interpretation. Indeed, we define communication as only having taken place when there has been both articulation and interpretation. (In fact we might go one step further and say that communication depends on some 'interpretive community' having decided that some aspect of the world has been articulated in order to be interpreted.) Interpreters need to supply semiotic knowledge at all four of the levels we have distinguished. At the level of distribution. they need to know, for instance, whether they are dealing with a reproduction or an original, even in cases where the boundaries are deliberately blurred, as in some of Andy Warhol's work. They also need to understand the respective values of 'design' and 'production'. Adorno (1976, 1978), for whom 'structural listening' was the highest form of music listening, condemned jazz because of the simplicity of what we call here its 'design' (the simple chord schemas of Broadway songs). For this he was taken to task by Middleton (1990), who argued that he did not know how to appreciate the semiotic richness of what we call here the 'production' of jazz singers and musicians. The same phenomenon sometimes occurs in comparisons between literary novels and their movie adaptations.

Design and discourse play their role in interpretation too, even though a given interaction may be experienced differently, and a given discourse interpreted differently, from the way it was intended. A story may be written to entertain, but an interpreter may not be entertained because of the story's built-in ethnocentric bias against the interpreter's ethnic group. A product may be designed to make its use easy, but certain users may not appreciate products which do their thinking for them. Such users operate from a different discourse, a different conception of what is involved in that task and a different set of associated values and ideas. Which discourses interpreters or users may bring to bear an a semiotic product or event has everything to do. in turn, with their place in the social and cultural world, and also with the content. The degree to which intention and interpretation will match depends on context. For instance, most of us interpret a traffic sign the same way (there are differences: do you slow down when amber appears, or do you speed

up?), unless it is particularly badly designed, or unless an interpreter has recently emerged from a place where there is no traffic. But when, for instance, a traffic sign is displayed as an *objet trouvé* in a" an art gallery, our interpretations are likely to differ significantly.

Stratal configurations

At the level "f the social organisation of semiotic production different configurations of discourse, design, production and distribution may occur. Three of these may be merged for instance, as in everyday conversational Speech, where any speaker or listener incorporates discourse, design and production skills and probably experiences them subjectively as one and the same. Nevertheless, even here they d° remain distinct strata. Speakers need access t° discourses, knowledges which are socially structured for the purpose at hand; they need to know how to formulate these knowledges in the appropriate register and how to embed them in an (interactive event; and they need to be able to speak. Much as we might take these skills for granted and see them as a unified whole, they are distinct, as would quickly become apparent if any one of them became impaired.

At the other end of the scale from everyday conversation we might have the speech, say, of professional voice-over specialists. Here the division of labour is maximised. Each stratum involves different people and different skills. Expert sources provide the discourse, scriptwriters the design, voice specialists the voices, recording engineers the recordings, and so on. Yet the division of labour is not total. The experts will be handpicked for their understanding of what the media need and their ability to provide the kinds of discourse appropriate to t&vision documentaries. The scriptwriters will have to know something about television production so as not to write things which cannot he filmed "rare too expensive to film, and so as to make good use of the medium's specific 'production values'. The voice-over specialists most understand what they are reading and take account of the requirements of the recording engineers, by keeping their voice at an even level, not rustling the paper, and so on. In other words, what we shall call 'strata' ""coupling' is never absolute.

Moreover, the two types of semiotic production exist in the same society. We live in a world where discourse, design and production no longer form a unity, where teachers are trained to teach without any reference to what they are teaching, managers to manage without any reference to what they might be managing, interviewees to being interviewed without any reference to what the interviews might be about. Again, in many contexts we are encouraged or even obliged to reproduce discourses 'in our own words'. that is. without also reproducing their design. And we know that design and production are sometime coupled, so that different

productions of the same design can be regarded as 'saying the same thing' (e.g. performances of classical music) and sometimes uncoupled (e.g. jazz performances, where two different versions of the same tune might be 'saying something quite different). This makes our semiotic landscape **fundamentally** different from that of oral societies where knowledge is indissolubly welded **to** its formulation, and where the distinction **between** 'what you say' and 'how **you** say it' would be difficult to understand.

It is above **all** the invention of **writing** which has made this possible, which has disrupted the direct **link** between discourse and production that **can** still be **observed** for **instance** in the semiotic production of young children **(Kress**, 1971. Writing has produced 'language', a semiotic **resource** no longer tied to its material **realisation**, no longer just 'tongue' (the original meaning of the **word** 'language') but, **'synax'** (a word which originated as a **military** term, meaning **'organisation', 'battle formation',** and only later came also to mean **'organise', 'write'. 'compose')**. As such, writing can be used to create Order, and to **govern** human action, and make it predictable, repeatable, whether **this** is **internalised** as a set **of** grammatical **rules,** Or **externalised** as a script, a **written procedure, a programme,** a syllabus, etc. It is **only** in certain marginal or **marginalised** fields, or **during** times when new discourses, new designs, **and/or new** modes of production and distribution are needed, that a **more** immediate **link** between discourse and production is maintained or reinstated. and that other **less** prescriptive and systematic semiotic principles come to the fore.

In this **book we will** discuss **two** such principles in particular. The first is *provenance*, **'where** signs come from'. The idea here is that we are constantly **'importing'** signs from other contexts (another era, social group, culture) into the context in which we are **now making** a **new sign,** in order **to** signify ideas and values which are associated with that other **context** by those **who** import the sign. To take a **musical** example, in the 1960s **the Beatles** introduced the **sound** of the sitar into their music to signify values which, **in the 'psychedelic' youth culture of that** time, were associated with the sitar's **country of origin:** meditation, drugs as expansion of consciousness, **and** so **on.** The **idea of 'provenance'** is closely related to the ideas of 'myth and 'connotation' as introduced into semiotics by Roland Barthes **(1972, 1977).**

The second is *experiential meaning potential,* **the idea** that signifiers have **a meaning** potential deriving from what it is we **do** when we produce them, and from **our** ability to **turn** action into knowledge, **to extend** our practical experience metaphorically, and **to grasp similar extensions** made by others. To give an example, the **sound** quality Of 'breathiness' derives its meaning from our **knowledge** of the kinds of situation in which **it may occur** – when we are **out** of breath, for instance, and **when we are inable to** control **our** breathing due to excitement. Hence 'breathiness' **can** become a signifier for **intimacy** and sensuality, for instance in singing **styles** or in **the** speech in **television** commercials for products that **can** be associated with intimacy

or sensuality. The same principle may once upon a time have **helped create the** words we **now** use: think of **the** way the words **'language and 'tongue' both** require a maximum amount of tongue **movement** from **the** front **to the back of the mouth. The idea** of 'experiential meaning potential' is **close to** the view of 'metaphor' **elaborated in Lakoff and Johnson (1980).**

Thus the social **stratification of** semiotic production is mirrored **by** the **stratification of the** semiotic **resources** themselves. And while it **can** be argued **that 'distribution',** at this stage, has not yet **been internalised** as **a 'stratum'** of semiotic **modes,** it **is** at least possible that new technologies, increasingly **ubiquitous,** multi-purpose and **'natural' in** terms of their interfaces, **will** help create a **fourth** dimension Of **communication in the** same way that writing **created** a third – and this time **not** at the cost of a decrease in **multimodality.**

Stephanie's bedroom as a multimodal text

We will use **the** discourse, **design** and production of children's bedrooms, and Of texts **about children's** bedrooms, as a **first** example of our approach. 'Children's bedroom discourses' form part of 'family life' discourses, socially constructed **knowledges** about who forms **part** of families, what family members do (together Or separately), where **they** do it, **which** outsiders may take part in which **family** activities, and **so** on. There are always **likely** to be several such discourses, associated, for **instance,** with **different** social classes or **ethnic** groups **(in** Britain and Australia many **middle-class** families sat a **specific** space aside for 'entertaining', for **instance),** or based On deviant practices, wrong ways of living in a family home which therefore form a **danger** for other families **(such as the** demonic children's bedroom of the next door kid Sid in Disney's *Toy Story).*

Discourses which are **still in the** process of being elaborated and have not yet become **common** sense and **subject** to what **Bourdieu** has called 'genesis **amnesia'** are of particular interest. **Early socialist** 'family life' discourses are **an** example of this, **They** were developed **in the** early decades of the twentieth **century in** several European cities. **The** Amsterdam **councillor Wibaut,** for instance, **began** to visit working-class families at home and found **'many** dwellings where **large families with** six, seven, eight children **lived,** cooked, worked and slept **in one** room' **(Roegholt,** 1976: **13).** In **1904** he **inaugurated a** policy of declaring such **dwellings** uninhabitable arid **building** new suburbs for their Occupants. In the process he and **others** developed a discourse of workers' family lives, in which workers would see their homes as fortresses for protecting their families against a threatening outside world, and as a place to relax after a hard day's **work. Architects** then **realised** this discourse in buildings which indeed looked like fortresses **(see** Fig. 1.2). **There were** forbidding facades, **heavy** doors with small barred **windows,** hidden in deep **and** monumental
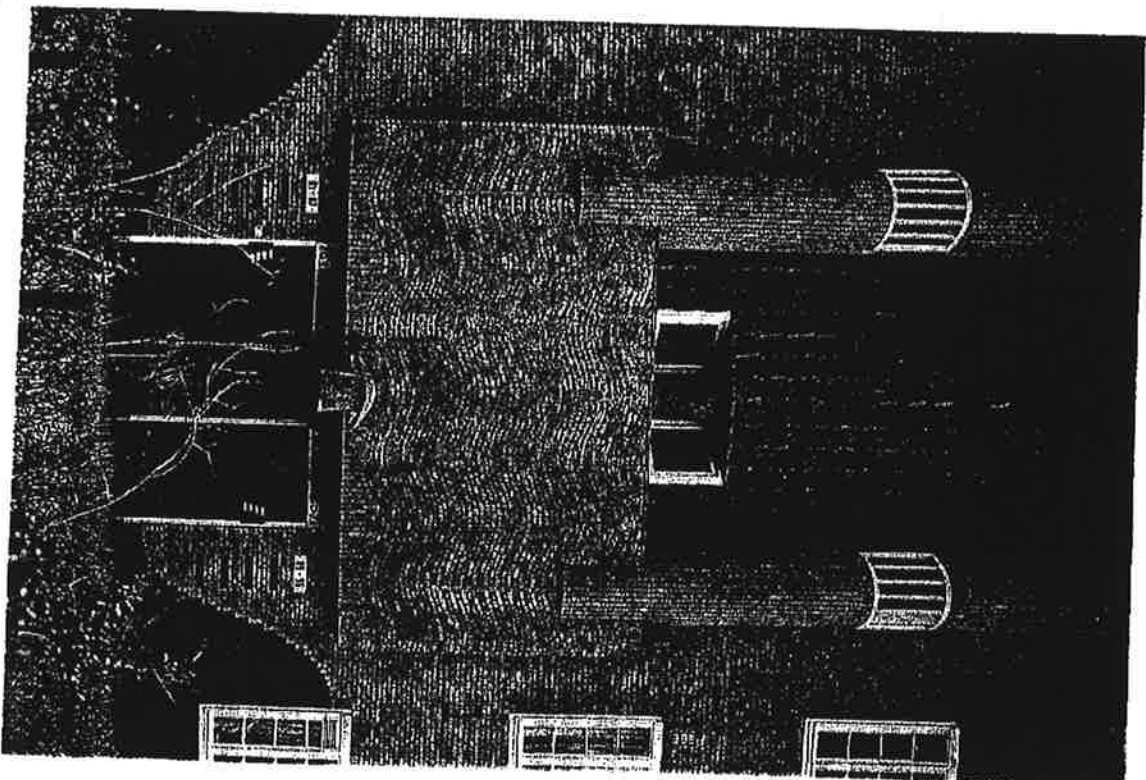
Figure 1.2   *Amsterdam workers' housing complex built 1917–21, architect Michel de Klerk*

entrance **recesses**, and windows so high that the occupants needed to stand on a stool to look through them-protection against the threatening outside world and promotion of inward-looking family values **was** the motivation (**Roegholt**, 1976: 321). Hygiene was another key theme, at least for the city planners, because the workers themselves **often** longed for **their** remembered **cosy** alcoves, used the toilets **as** storage and the showers as broom cupboards, and did not appreciate the washing and drying spaces **in** the attics which had been intended to free them from the smell of drying washing: **'The** women did not like to do their washing communally and preferred to keep their underwear to themselves' (**Roegholt, 1976: 41**).

Public housing projects in Vienna were based on a similar discourse. Eventually some of it became enshrined in the law, which stipulates that there has to he 'approximately 1 0 square **metres** for every person', 'a kitchen and suitable sanitary facilities for every household' and 'a bedroom separate from the living-room **in** the case of families with children'. Today this law is used to prevent immigrant workers from being reunited with their families, and some magistrates **further** elaborate on **it** in an **attempt** to prove that the 'family life' discourse of the **immigrant** workers is not *ortsüblich, not 'in* accordance with local tradition' (Van **Leeuwen** and **Wodak, 1999**). One magistrate, for instance, rejected an application because the applicant's **apartment** of another lacked a separate bedroom for the daughter, a situation which the magistrate judged not to he 'beneficial for the educational development of the **family'**. The child'. The applicants themselves had a **different** view of family life which did not include closed doors, and protested that 'close spatial proximity between parents and children is important'.

The pictures of children's bedrooms in *House Beautiful type* magazines rarely show school-age childrenor teenagers. Only three- **or** four-year-olds are depicted, or mentioned by name in the ten. **An** article about three-year-old Stephanie's room *(House Beautiful,* September 1996: **160–2)** contains some details of what young children actually do **in** their room: 'The **multicoloured** sofa provides Stephanie with somewhere **to sit and read her books'**; **'Handy pegs were attached to the bright yellow** dada that **runs round the room to make it easy for** Stephanie to hangup **her coats and** toys'. Stephanie also has a miniature theatre in her room. 'I sing and dance **with** my friends up here', she says, 'We dress up and act in **our own** plays-it's great **fun.'** She features in **two** of the pictures, once looking up from a **picture** book, once holding up a **marionette** on the stage of her miniature **theatre** (Fig. 1.3). Other pictures provide evidence of at least **two** other activities. drawing (a blackboard on the door of the wardrobe) and sleeping **(a** bed with a **colourful** patchwork quilt).

Three-year-old Noel is shown in his room holding a toy car *(House Beautiful,* September 1996: **32)**: 'Most of the time you **will** find him playing with his model cars'. And three-year-old Will is shown in **two** pictures, building a railway track in one. and playing with a multi-level garage in another. A corner of a bed and a **chest**
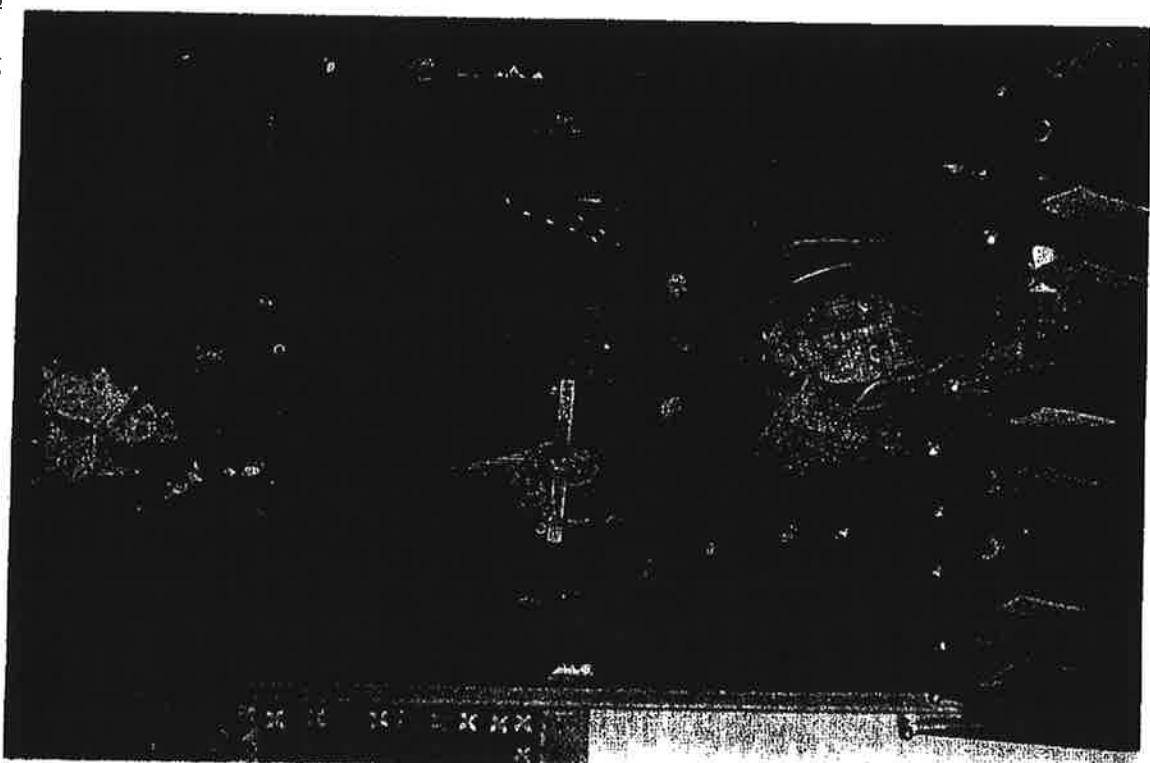
Figure 1.3 *Stephanie in her room* (House Beautiful, September *1996: 162*)

of drawers suggest other activities (*Ideal Homes and Lifestyle*, September 1998, 1001. As a social construction of what kind of (three-year-old) children live in 'beautiful homes' and of what these children do in their bedrooms (playing with toys: neatly putting toys and clothes away; sleeping, always by themselves), these discourses are clearly selective. They are also gendered: although there are toys in her room, Stephanie does not play with toys, but reads, sings, dances and dresses up. Noel and Will play with trains and toys. The magazines also contain pictures of the rooms of some older children. These usually include a desk, typically with a desk light and a globe: a place for home-work. The computer interface in Figure 1.4 shows the children's bedroom as a virtual space for play as well as work, with toys stacked on shelves on the left and labelled drawers for 'work' on the right.

A totally different family-life discourse emerges from the pictures in the 1998/99 IKEA catalogue. As the occasional writings on blackboards, book spines etc. indicate, the pictures were all taken in Sweden. Here children often play together (a boy and a girl are reading together, for instance), and they also play with their parents (a father is served a make-believe cup of tea in his daughter's room). Teenagers have computers and hi-fis in rooms with pictures of pop stars and sports heroes on the walls: 'After a certain age, children want their own bit of personal space, somewhere to keep them happy, and keep all their stuff, somewhere to tell all their friends about' (p. 67).

Discourses not only provide versions of who does what, when and where, they add evaluations, interpretations and arguments to these versions. We have already discussed some of the arguments of the socialist family-life discourses of the early decades of this century. In magazines of the House Beautiful type, the arguments are presented as common sense and are not explicitly formulated. Motivations come across most often through certain aspects of the rooms themselves, for instance the colour scheme, and through value-laden adjectives. Let us have another look at Stephanie's room. There is a strong emphasis on colour, both in the text and in the pictures, and the colours are called, on the one hand, 'bright', 'bold', 'dramatic' etc, and on the other hand, 'sunny' and 'cheerful'. The article as a whole ends as follows: 'With so much inspiration in her new room, Stephanie is full of ideas about what she wants to be when she grows up. She's clearly had plenty of practice at being a mountain climber [this refers to fixtures in the room which were too high for her before the redecoration], and now she can add acting and interior design to her CV!'

This children's bedroom is clearly a pedagogic tool, a medium for communicating to the child, in the language of interior design the qualities (already complex: 'bold', yet also 'sunny' and 'cheerful'), the pleasures ('singing and dancing with your friends'), the duties (orderly management of possessions and, eventually, 'work', and the kind of future her parents desire for her. This destiny, moreover, is communicated to her in a language that is to be lived, lived as an individual identity-building and identity-confirming experience in that individual bedroom. Such a pedagogic
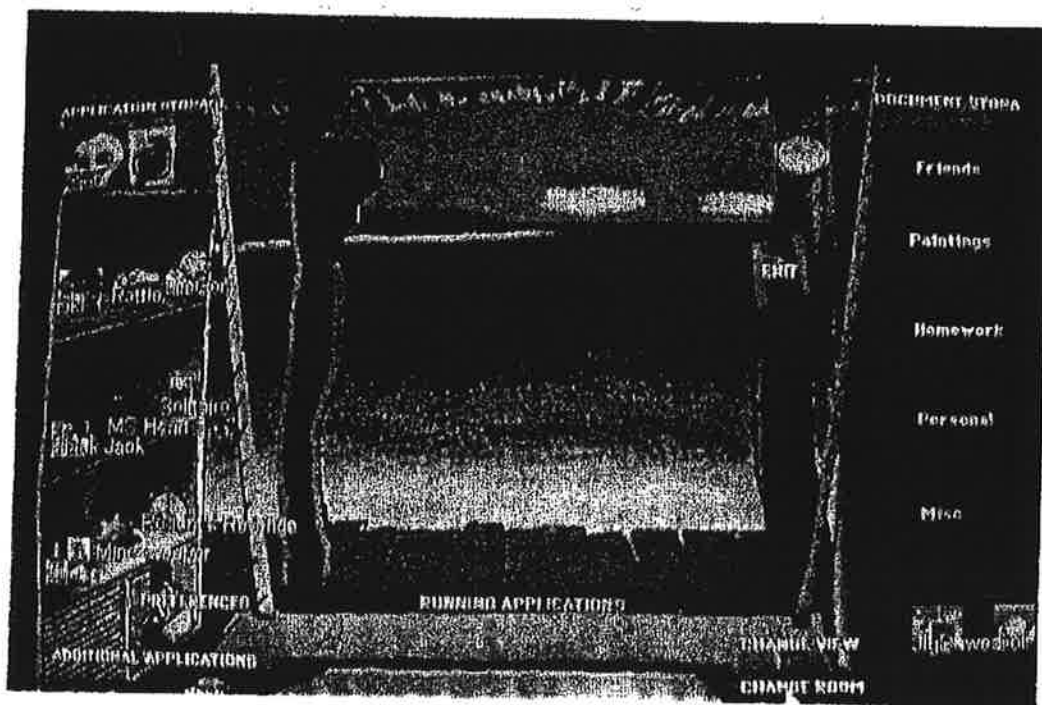
Figure 1.4   *Packard Bell 'Kidspace' interface*

discourse is only one of a number of possible 'children's bedroom discourses. There ate and will be others. But they have not found their way into the British magazines we have looked at.

The pedagogic 'children's bedroom' discourse can be realised in a number of ways. It can he realised as an actual children's room, through the multimodal 'language of interior design' in which meanings are realised by spatial arrangements (the 'dado' which runs right around the room and makes 'putting your things away' literally an omnipresent feature of the room); by choice of furniture (the sofa, a place for reading); by colour schemes (the 'bold' and yet also 'sunny' and 'cheerful' colours); and so on. All this has to he conceptualised as 'design' before it can he produced, regardless ofwhether the parents themselves both design and produce the redecoration, use a professional designer, or follow an explicit pre-existing model designed or endorsed by an expert.

The same discourse can be realised as a *House Beautiful article, in the* text and pictures of children's books, or in IKEA catalogues. Here the practice of communicating pedagogic messages through the design of a children's bedroom is represented in other contexts, contexts such as the magazine, or the children's book. And these contexts have their own communicative purposes and their own 'recipients'. The children's book Mark and *Mandy* (Leete-Hodge, n.d.), for instance, is written to he read to young children and deals with the transition from home to school. The two children are apprehensive about 'the first day', but in the end school turns out to be enjoyable, and the first day at school the most memorable event of theft lives. The children's rooms are implicated: somewhere along the way Mandy's room acquires a new piece of furniture, 'a line blackboard and easel, with a packet of white chalks and a yellow duster, just like school'. Like Stephanie's room, Mark and *Mandy* has a pedagogic purpose, 'getting children prepared tar school'. But it uses a different method, the method of storytelling. House *Beautiful* seeks to provide models for creating the right kind of setting for the right kind of family life. The houses it feature in the articles are 'ideal homes', 'dream houses' to aspireto-the homes of celebrities and of model couples who have tastefully renovated their 'rustic-style cottages' and 'spacious Georgian houses'. The houses featured in the advertisements, on the other hand, are a little more downmarket.

The skills required for designing *House Beautiful* features about children's bedrooms differ from those required for designing children's bedrooms. They include the skill of writing in a style appropriate for the purpose at hand, of producing the right kind of photographs, designing the right kind oflayout, and so on. For one thing, the audiences for the two differ: parents as readers in one case, children as users in the other. The pictures, for instance, must be 'analytical', pictures which clearly show how the room is made up of its component parts (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996). The language similarly must foreground place, furniture, room fixtures, and show how the room and its various parts 'hang together'. But language does this in a different

way from that of image, for instance by 'thematising' the elements of the room (Halliday, 1985), putting them at the head of the sentences:

Handy pegs were attached to the bright yellow dado that runs around the room to make it easy for Stephanie to hangup her coats and toys.

Writers of children's books would design the same content yet again differently. They would most probably 'thematise' character and action, add some detail about the action perhaps, and reduce the detail of the description of the room and its fixtures and furniture:

Stephanie neatly hung her coats and toys on the yellow dado in her room.

Children's illustrated books would in their turn be different. Whereas most of the pictures in *House Beautiful* do not show people, most of the pictures in children's books do, again to put the emphasis on characters and actions, the two vital elements in any story.

Design also involves a knowledge of the relationship between words and pictures. The *House Beautiful* article features no less than ten pictures on three pages, and the pictures are much better at conveying how furniture is arranged in a room, and at 'describing' exactly what a sofa or a colour looks like. In spatial matters, language comes a poor second to image. But then, language is used for other things: to tell the story of the way the house was acquired and the room decorated, to link the layout of the room to the child's activities, and to bring out, however implicitly, the pedagogic 'message' of the room. The 'redecoration' story starts the article, and the 'pedagogic message' ends it. In other words, the two semiotic modes are given complementary specialist tasks, just like the photographer and the writer.

The design of the article is quite similar to other features in *How Beautiful*, and to features in other, similar magazines. Such relative standardisation is typical of much journalistic work, and derives to quite some extent from the standardised routines of journalistic work and the intricate division of labour of magazine production. Yet, there is no 'recipe'. There is tradition, but not prescription, a formula, but not a template, and it is this that makes it possible for the journalists, the photographers and designers and the layout artists to feel that every job presents a new challenge, a new problem to be solved (Bell and Van Leeuwen, 1934: 174). Although semiotic modes have developed in this field, as can be demonstrated by linguistic analysis of the 'generic structure' of journalistic writing and television interviews (e.g. Van Leeuwen, 1987; Bell, 1991; Iedema, 1993; Bell and Van Leeuwen, 1994), the writers, photographers and designers can 'make these styles their own' and develop their

own 'accents'. It is not quite the textual equivalent of wearing a uniform, but rather the textual equivalent of wearing a business suit, a prescribed form of dress which nevertheless leaves the wearer some room for a personal touch.

House Beautiful presents the story of how Stephanie's room was produced as a new invention, rather than as the parents' choice from a mental "i actual catalogue of socially available possibilities. Like the socialist city fathers of early twentieth-century Amsterdam and Vienna, Stephanie's parents knew that rooms have to be 'light' and 'airy', but unfortunately Stephanie's room did not get much light. How could they resolve this?

They didn't know where to begin until a friend came round with a patchwork duvet cover he'd bought as a present for Stephanie. Boasting all the colours of the rainbow, it was perfect for a youngster's bedroom and provided plenty of inspiration for a new look.

This duvet cover is shown in one of the photos. It is made up of a number of squares featuring simple, basic pictures of objects (a boat, a teapot, a car), in bright primary colours. They are instances of a recognisable genre of contemporary pictures and toys for very young children: 'essential' locomotives, cars, planes, birds, trees, in Mondrian-like colours. Yet this conventional colour scheme is here presented as a unique solution to the problem of how to make an existing space, which was not really designed for that purpose, fit a discourse. It is a problem which many families face when selecting an apartment or house which was perhaps built in a different era for a different kind of family life; how i" accommodate it to contemporary family life. Why is this? Is it because families should be seen to have a unique identity, and not one that is, as it were, pre-designed, 'pre-fabricated' by dominant 'designs'? Or is it to justify the magazine's presentation of this room as a 'model' room, an original creation, a piece of art, well worth imitating by lesser parents?

Finally, whereas *House Beautiful* and *Mark and Mandy* are mass-produced and distributed to a dispersed readership, Stephanie's bedroom is of course unique: there is only one and it can only be found in the town where Stephanie lives. There is no 'distribution' stratum in the case of architecture "i interior design. However, new technology may yet change this. Virtual reality can now reproduce a given space in such a way that one can walk through it and have a multi-sensory experience of it. At present, not least as a result of the encumbrances of goggles, datagloves etc., the difference between actual and virtual spaces seems overwhelming. Virtual reality entails a complete loss of actual physical presence. But so did to Walter Benjamin the difference between the work of an and its mechanical reproduction: a complete loss of 'aura'. How many of us still feel an essential lack when looking at the reproduction of a work of art, or listening to the recording of a musical performance? The time may yet come when little girls can while away countless hours in virtual rooms, and

experience a variety of identities, duties and pleasures **realised** in a *spatial* mass medium, a globally distributable language of interior design.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have sketched the outline of a theory of multimodal communication. We have defined **multimodality** as the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined – they may for instance reinforce each other ('say the same thing in different ways'), **fulfil** complementary roles, as in the *House Beautiful* article about Stephanie's bedroom, or be hierarchically ordered, as in action films, where action is dominant, with music **adding** a touch of emotive **colour** and sync sound a touch of realistic 'presence'. We defined communication as a process in which a semiotic product or event is both articulated or produced *and* interpreted or used. It **follows** from this definition that we consider the production and use of designed objects and environments as a form of **communication:** we used the example of a room, but could also have used a designed object as our example.

The main concepts we have introduced in the chapter are recapitulated in the discussion of terms below.

Recapitulation

Strata: The basis of stratification is the distinction **between** the *content* and the *expression* of communication, which includes that between the **signifieds** and the **signifiers** of the signs used. As a result of the invention of writing, the **content stratum** could be further **stratified** into discourse and design. As a result of the invention of modern communication technologies, the expression stratum could be further stratified into production and distribution.

The stratification of semiotic resources has its **counterpart** in the social stratification of semiotic production, certainly in the early stages of the use of new communication technologies. **In later stages it may become possible for one** person to produce the product or event from start to finish, as is beginning to happen today with **interactive multimedia.**

In this book we argue that production and distribution produce their own layers of signification. Indeed, we have **argued** that semiotic modes and design **ideas** usually flow out of production, using principles of **semiosis** typical for production.

Discourse: Discourses are socially situated forms of knowledge about (aspects of) reality. This includes knowledge of the events constituting that reality (who i:

involved, what takes place, where and when it takes place, and so on) **as well as a** set of related evaluations, purposes, interpretations and **legitimations.**

People **often** have several alternative discourses available with respect to a particular aspect of reality. They will then use the one that is most appropriate to the interests of the communication situation in which **they** find themselves.

Design: Designs are **conceptualisations of the** form of semiotic products and events. Three things are designed simultaneously: (1) a **formulation** of a discourse or combination of discourses, (2) a particular **(inter)action,** in which the discourse is embedded, and (3) a **particular way of combining** semiotic modes

Design is separate **from** the actual material production of the semiotic product or event, and uses **(abstract)** semiotic modes as its resources. It may involve intermediate productions **(musical** scores, play scripts, blueprints, etc.) but the form these take is not the form in which the design is eventually to reach the public, and **they** tend be produced in as abstract a modality as possible, using austere methods of **realisation** that do not involve any form of realistic detail, texture, **colour** and so on.

Production: Production is the articulation in material form of semiotic products or events, whether in the form **of** a prototype **that** is still to be **'transcoded'** into another form for purposes of distribution **(e.g.** a 35 mm **telemovie)** or in its final form (e.g. a videotape packaged **for** commercial distribution).

Production not only gives perceivable form to designs but adds meanings which flow directly from the physical **process of articulation** and the physical **qualities of the** materials used, for instance from the **articulatory** gestures involved in speech production, or from the weight, **colour** and texture **of the** material used by a sculptor,

Distribution: Distribution refers to the technical 're-coding' of semiotic products and events. **for** purposes of recording (e.g. tape recording, digital **recording) and/or** distribution **(e.g.** radio and television **transmission,** telephony).

Distribution technologies are generally not intended as production technologies, but as reproduction technologies, and are therefore not meant to produce meaning themselves. **However,** they soon begin to acquire a semiotic potential of their own, and even **unwanted** 'noise' sources **such** as the scratches and discolorations of old **film** prints may become **signifiers in** their own right. In the age of digital media, however, the functions of production and distribution become technically integrated to a much greater extent.

Another key **distinction in this** chapter is the distinction between *mode,* which is on the 'content' side, and medium, which is on the 'expression' side.

Mode: Modes are semiotic **resources which allow the simultaneous realisation of** discourses and types of **(inter)action.** Designs then use these resources, combining

semiotic modes, and selecting from the options which they make available according to the interests of a particular communication situation.

Modes can be realised in more than one **production medium. Narrative is a mode** because it allows discourses to be formulated in particular ways Ways which 'personify' and '**dramatise**' discourses, among other **things**), because it constitutes a particular kind of interaction, and because it can be **realised** in a range of different media.

It follows that media become modes once **their** principles of **semiosis** begin to be conceived of in **more abstract ways** (as 'grammars' of some kind). This in turn will make it possible to **realise them** in a range of media. They lose their tie to a specific **form** of material **realisation**.

Medium: Media are the material resources used in the production of semiotic products and events, including both the tools and the materials used (**e.g.** the musical instrument and **air, the** chisel and **the** block of wood). **They usually** are specially produced for **this** purpose, not only in culture (ink, paint, cameras, computers), but also in **nature** (our vocal apparatus).

Recording and distribution media have been developed specifically for the recording **and/or** distribution of semiotic products and events which have already been materially **realised by** production media, and as such are not supposed to **function semiotically.** But in the course of their development, **they usually** start functioning as production media-just as production media may become design modes.

lastly, we discussed **the specific** ways in which meaning is produced 'in production'. This is not always a matter of 'realising designs', in the way that a speech may **realise** what the speaker has prepared, or a building what the architect has designed, and it **certainly** does not usually happen in the 'arbitrary' ways which have **been fore-grounded by** linguists. In fact, signification starts on the side of production, using semiotic principles which have not yet sedimented into conventions, traditions, grammars, or laws of design. Only eventually, as the particular medium gains in social importance, will more abstract modes of regulation ('**grammars**') develop, and **the medium will become a mode. The opposite, modes becoming media again, is also** possible. The science of physiognomy, for instance, lost its status as a result of its racist excesses, and now semiotic practices like casting **are** 'media' again, operating on the basis of primary semiotic principles such as 'provenance' and 'experiential **meaning potential**'.

Experiential meaning potential: This refers **to the** idea **that** material signifiers **have a** meaning potential that derives from what it is we ___ when we articulate them, and **from** our ability to extend our practical experience metaphorically and turn action into knowledge. This happens, for instance, with the textural characteristics of sound

qualities (**as** when singers adopt a soft, breathy voice to **signify** sensuality), in the absence of a **conventionalised** 'system' of sound qualities (such as **the** symphony orchestral.

Provenance: This refers to the idea that signs may be 'imported' from one context (another era, social group, culture) into another, in order to **signify** the ideas and **values** associated with that other context by those who do the **importing.** This happens, for instance, in giving names to people, places or things (e.g. in naming a perfume 'Paris' when there is no 'code', no sedimented set of rules for naming perfumes,