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“Her eyes Confess the flame her tongue denies”: Using Visual and Aural Media to Explore Dido and Aeneas in the Classroom

The multimedia classroom presents a quandary to the technologically innovative instructor, and I found myself in this position when I decided to teach Nahum Tate’s verse drama, Dido and Aeneas, in a multimedia classroom. My problem was not what to teach in this work, but rather how to use the technological resources at my disposal, and subsequently, why such work seemed to be uniquely “multimedia.” More specifically, Dido and Aeneas is the libretto for Henry Purcell’s Restoration opera of the same title, and the computerized classroom allowed me to combine aural, visual, and textual materials in rapid succession; hence, I could demonstrate the multimedia nature of the artwork. Nonetheless, my memory disturbed me with my own encounter with this work in 1993 in a traditional music classroom, where we studied the texts (both literary and musical texts), used a blackboard, listened to recordings of the work (on ‘records’), saw images of productions passed about the room, and eventually sang portions of a chorus. My quandary is this: in what way does my 2002 SMART room at the University of Alberta offer multimediality in a way unique from that which I experienced nearly a decade earlier? In a general sense, I must ask, ‘is the use of the term “multimedia” in reference to technological innovations pedagogically sound,’ and if so, how should we describe the multimediality of traditional classrooms? Students learn and retain materials better in a multimedia environment; however, we as instructors do not necessarily draw careful distinctions between the multimediality of a combined aural-visual experience of a text, as when hearing a lecture and writing it down. Is multimediality in some way

specifically tied to electronic additions to the classroom? In order to examine these distinctions, I will revisit my teaching experience with Dido and Aeneas, detailing what multimediality might actually mean and where it can be positively associated with technological innovations in the classroom, as well as where such innovation functions as little more than a digitized chalkboard, possibly even hindering the Socratic interaction of the undergraduate classroom.

Martijn Hoogeveen notes that in the context of Multimedia Assisted Instruction, the term “Multimedia is used ... in the sense of the property of a system or object indicating that multiple information types, such as speech, music, text, graphic, still, animation and video are used in an integrated manner. In many studies the learning effectiveness of multimedia is presumed” (par. 1). While the usefulness of such a definition to Electronically-Multimedia Assisted Instruction would seem clear, I contend that this definition does not account for other possible conceptualization of multimediality. For instance, does multimediality imply the use of two or more means of sensory communication in tandem? Let me break this down for a moment; I will set aside the possibility of non-sensory-based mediums of communication, since ESP (Extra-Sensory Perception) has not provided positive benefits in my classroom nor any classroom that I am aware of. Furthermore, if we are then defining multimediality quite literally as the use of two or more means of communication, we are not strictly limiting ourselves to the particular sensory medium, but rather finer distinctions that may exist within a given sense. For instance, the multimediality of speaking a given stanza of poetry and then hearing it set to music would seem to be ‘multimedia’ in practice, even though both are aural means of communication. Therefore inter-sensory or multi-sensory

experience is not a useful basis for a definition of multimediality, since it is the multiplicity of communication methods that seems to be at stake.

I must further broaden my suspicions at this point, since a host of other problems are encroaching on my argument. I am sure that most of you are quietly thinking to yourself or are jotting down on your notepads some obscenely difficult question for me at the end of this panel, such as “what are communications methods and why is music being described as one? Music does not communicate in any fashion that can be easily elided with language?” While I must admit to gaining a certain masochistic pleasure from difficult conference questions, for those of you with that particular question, I will try to answer it now. Quite rightly, I must admit that music does not communicate in the same manner as a text does, and I cannot easily describe it as an information exchange; however, as an aesthetic exchange where the audience traditionally consider this aural object in a self-reflective manner, I feel comfortable in describing musical languages as somehow ‘conveying,’ if not explicitly communicating, a culturally specific context of possibly readings. This is much like a text or language, which relies on a specific, given syntax and set of meanings that are themselves flexible and indeterminate. In this manner, multimediality seems to allow for the conjunction of any two sensory means of conveying a ‘certain something,’ which may be quite indeterminate, and which may or may not involve the use of more than one sense.

I should now admit that I have only once used the sense of taste in a multimedia context, using ouzo candies for a travel narrative about Greece, and I had no such opportunities for Dido and Aeneas, though I was sorely tempted to bring orange candies to demonstrate the ability of an Orange Woman in Restoration Theatre to disrupt any

performance, including my performance in the classroom. Would this actually be multimedia? Given my already voiced difficulties, I would find it difficult to argue that cheap orange candies could ‘convey’ and aesthetic ‘je ne c’est qua’; however, as a means of illustrating an aural and verbal description through the visual act of throwing such candies and the multisensory experience of being physically struck by them and then tasting them, I believe that such a multimedia strategy could make certain ideas more ‘memorable’ to a class. Nonetheless, the humour of such a situation provokes a further limiting of ‘multimediality’ as something that is caught up in culturally prescribed notions of aesthetic or information exchange, and taste is not customarily thought of in this context or in educational contexts in general, despite its cultural and historical merits; therefore, I will underscore that Multimedia is a culturally determined notion that must meet certain arbitrary terms in order to be considered in its pedagogical context. I am, however, sure that electronic gaming or other more nefarious ‘multimedia’ researchers would grant a far larger role to taste and other easily excited senses than I do in the context of my multimedia classroom.

Narrowing down to my subject here, in teaching Nahum Tate’s verse drama, Dido and Aeneas, written before he became poet laureate after Dryden, I have certain interdisciplinary and hence inter-media possibilities open to me. First, this is a dramatic work, which implies a visual and aural experience, in addition to the verbal one, and moreover, Henry Purcell’s operatic setting of the work further compounds the aural experience. (At this moment, let publicly say, ‘Thank Gawd’ he didn’t set Tate’s version of Shakespeare’s King Lear, also known as the ‘happy ending’ Lear). Back on track, I would like to collapse some of the received notions in these sensory divisions as well, in

much the same fashion as I have already done. First, sensory divisions are not easily made here, unless we fall back on accepted, though incorrect, notions of the sensory nature of a given medium. The act of reading is language-based and for many students involves a complex combination of sub-vocalizations, actual vocalizations, visually scanning a page, and tactile contact with the printed surface. This is already a multi-sensory experience, as are most human experiences, so the easy notion of multimedia is confused. Primarily, however, we are referring to a linguistic mode of communication or conveyance, so it is this language property that determines the “media” in this case, not its actual medium. Whether I use a vellum sheet, a bound book, stone tablets, an overhead sheet, Brail, or an LCD display makes no difference to our sense of ‘multimediality’ here, as we are basing the ‘single-medium-ness’ on the singularity of the written language-based mode of communication. While I am sure that Harold Innis and Marshal McLuhen are rolling over in their graves at such a statement—and given my respect for Innis, it is not a statement that I make lightly—I believe that it, nonetheless, suits our pedagogical discussion without causing too many undue difficulties for the argument.

The multimediality in my current example of the opera lies in the differing modes of communication available through the oral recitation of the work; dramatic performance invoking the visual appreciation of gesture, expression, and movement; and the aural experience of both hearing the spoken words, the instrumental music, and the sung text. These modes of communication do not only overlap, as occurs in every classroom when students use tactile senses to write, visual means of reading and observing the teacher, and aural skills to listen to the discussion; more importantly, these

modes of communication in the musical drama interact with each other in a mutually transformative manner, and I suggest that this is what is at the heart of our received notions of multimedia assisted instruction. What makes my pedagogic shifts from reading a text, to aurally speaking it, physically demonstrating its dramatic prospects, and musically performing its setting is the manner in which each sensory mode influences and transforms the perception of its predecessor. Recitation will alter the first impressions of visual reading, just as a dramatization will again mutually transform the concepts and perceptions derived from both recitation and reading. All are yet again influenced by the musical invention.

As an example of this mutually transformative function, let me elaborate on one of the many elements I use this work to illustrate for my class. Firstly, it is a sad fact that most students who arrive at these hallowed halls of academia have not learned to read poetry in High School. This appears in a variety of situations, such as the inability to recognize scansion; a complete unawareness of poetic rhythm, meter and where rhythm and meter perform differently than they appear on paper; and difficulties in recognizing that punctuation can play a role in poetic line. For example, on your paper copy of my abstract, you will notice my transcription of my titular quotation from the opera: “Pursue thy conquest, Love; her eyes / confess the flame her tongue denies” (4). As most first year students would render this: “pursue thy conquest love her eyes-----confess the flame her tongue denies”—and I can only imagine that this is how they silently read it to themselves if it is how they speak it, especially after having perfected their interpretation of it through a number of silent readings! Nevertheless, I persevere onward like a dutiful Christian Soldier and draw my class’s attention to the visual layout of the lines and the

existence of such visual-linguistic clues as punctuation, including both where punctuation does exist and where it does not. While this is not yet electronically multimedia, I would argue that the distinction I draw between the oral presentation and visual reading brings out some elements that are mutually transformative, and therefore multimedia in our pedagogical context. I am usually fortunate enough to find one kind soul who will read for me: “Pursue thy conquest, love! Her eyes confess the flame her tongue denies,” which would seem to imply that in some mysterious fashion, learning—whatever it may be—has occurred through my juxtaposing of differing modes of communication.

Continuing with this, I then introduce a musical element into my lessons, giving an aural example of these two lines, which become an entire da capo aria in the opera:

PLAY DUET

This musical example of the division of the poetry into multiple phrases further reinforces the elements of punctuation and dramatic delivery that I previously attempted to develop. Moreover, the music nicely divides the various repetitions into “Pursue thy conquest, Love” and the simple statement preceding the comma, “Pursue thy conquest”; this is followed by the contrasting “B” section of the aria where the line break is ignored and the sentence is divided into the simple statement “her eyes confess the flame” and the more complete, “her eyes confess the flame her tongue denies.”

Following on, I then introduce different notions from within the operatic tradition that further exemplify some of these distinctions that I want my students to incorporate into their reading. The “recitative” is one such notion; to define it simply, opera incorporates semi-spoken portions in order to better reflect dramatic urgency and the distinction between a soliloquy and a dialogue. These can be actually spoken passages,

such as in a musical or a semi-opera, or in opera itself they become speech-like sung passages that more easily allow for dramatic action or a faster expression of text. The most famous example in Dido and Aeneas is the recitative that precedes Dido's Lament, the concluding aria of the opera where Dido perishes. For my purposes, however, I have used Aeneas' recitative in Act II scene ii, as it demonstrates more emotional shifts, the aural versus visual qualities of poetry that I have already emphasized, and it is of a greater duration.

PLAY RECITATIVE

Now that I have demonstrated how I incorporate 'multimedia' materials into my specific course planning, as well as the difficulties I have with easy notions of 'multimediality,' I will put all my cards on the table. I also incorporate a broader variety of aural examples of the opera itself and selected video selections of scenes, which I put in PowerPoint, along with notes on the history of Restoration theatre in general. This allows me to highlight the interdisciplinary nature of the materials while providing background information for later and larger Restoration theatre works my class will study. Moreover, I would even go so far as showing a complete video, since the opera is under 50 minutes with the overture omitted; however, no such work is currently available in North American video systems.

Nonetheless, while I must admit to have been a little cheekier than the conference organizers perhaps anticipated, I do hope that my glib talk has prompted at least a few questions about the nature of multimedia and how we evaluate its pedagogical value. I also very firmly want to express my challenge to the easy elision of multimedia with electronic media, since the two need not be the same. Moreover, I believe that

multimediality infiltrates every level of our teaching work, whether it is writing on an overhead, reading aloud, or combining digital video, audio files, still images, and text materials in a PowerPoint presentation. None is more or less multimedia than the other; however, the question that I would offer up for potential investigation (and I must admit that I cannot give it an 'easy' answer) is how our awareness of multimedia can positively benefit the classroom. The Socratic dialogue has been a pedagogical tool throughout the known history of education, and while I admit the value of the electronic classroom, I am very often troubled by the apparent difficulties encountered in soliciting student discussion and interaction with the electronic materials on display. As soon as I turn on PowerPoint I see eyes glaze over and minds become a *tabula rasa* that transcribes without comprehension. I specifically integrate student readings from these electronic materials and have become well known in my classes for wandering quite a distance from the materials actually projected onto a screen via an LCD or overhead; these are deliberate tactics for moving students away from simple transcription to questioning and debating the otherwise irresistible erudition of the screen. If I find I need to use taunts, teasing, cajoling, or even flying orange candies to disturb this otherwise passive reception of 'received notions' of the knowledge they must imbibe and regurgitate, I am willing to make such sacrifices. Hopefully, after two days of passive reception, I have raised enough ire (and blood sugar levels) to spark some feverish response from you all.

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