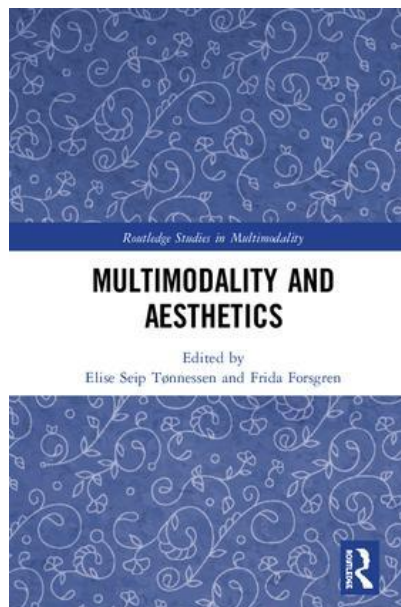




Multimodality and Aesthetics

Edited by Elise Seip Tønnessen and Frida Forsgren

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Review by Dora Renna*

Multimodality is not only a term related to audiovisual products, but it is the way human perception works. This could explain why it is being increasingly acknowledged within humanities (Kress et al. 2001; Bateman 2014) – despite the seemingly inherent contradiction between the analytical tendency to set pieces apart that often characterises research and the need to see multimodal products as a whole. This contradiction, which had most likely caused the delay in appreciating the role of multimodality in various fields of knowledge, is more and more often being compensated with volumes trying to apply multimodal approaches or points of view to other disciplines.

Routledge has dedicated a whole collection, called *Routledge Studies in Multimodality*, to keep up with this research need, and the volume here reviewed is one of its most recent releases. As the title suggests, the essays edited by Elise Seip Tønnessen and Frida Forsgren aim to show the relationship between multimodality and aesthetics, in order to prove that all semiotic resources (thus all the modes of communication) have an aesthetic function.

To do so, the authors “have included contributions that find inspiration from different traditions, but they all share the same interest in multimodal communication” (6), while all the contributors recognise “aesthetics as situated in a context” (8). The interdisciplinary approach adopted in the book brings together the points of view of art history and social semiotics, whose synergy may lead to achieve more valuable results in showing “how cultural, social, and historical contexts frame our interpretations, appreciation, and use of multimodal and aesthetic expressions” (11). The introductory Chapter 1, written by the editors, serves to present the issues that inspired the collection, which is divided into thematic sections.

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The first section contains more general takes on the relation between multimodality and aesthetics, one presented in Chapter 2 by Andrew Burn and Gunter Kress and the other in Chapter 3 by Thomas Illum Hanssen. In particular, Burn and Kress argue the inseparability of semiotics and aesthetics, drawing examples from media and education, while Hanssen aims to “suggest how a phenomenological approach to aesthetics and multimodality can contribute to a development of the field” (37) and to investigate its epistemological foundations. These contributions, offered by key figures of multimodal studies, serve as a guide to explore more specific sectors and case studies.

In fact, the second section includes three essays aimed at showing how the place where an object or an event is situated carry meaning just as much as the object or event itself. In Chapter 4, Eva Maagerø and Aslag Veum prove that a different positioning of a monument can influence the aesthetic experience of its fruition. Patricia Baeza Duffy (Chapter 5) explores how the different functions of the National Stadium of Santiago de Chile in the course of history changed its role in the urban space. The section is concluded by Elisabetta Adami (Chapter 6), whose contribution shows the application of multimodal analysis and social semiotic to the study of social dynamics, bringing as an example the Kirkgate Market in Leeds, UK.

The five essays of the third section are dedicated to multimodal aspects of education. More specifically, textbook fruition, power relations and target audience are explored by Clarice Lage Gualberto and Sônia Maria de Oliveira Pimenta in Chapter 7. The subsequent chapter focuses on digital educational experiences. In Chapter 8, Hege Emma Rimmereide, Jon Hoem and Sarah Hoem Iversen examine student teachers’ development of aesthetic literacy through the production of digital books. Digital literacy is also at the core of Chapter 9, where Jon Hoem and Ture Schwebs report on their experience in teaching how to select and use the appropriate digital tools. In the following contribution (Chapter 10), Elin Westlund “argues for the relevance of metalanguage as a tool for compensatory education in visual scientific meaning-making functions and norm boundaries” (170). In the final essay of this section (Chapter 11), Johnny Wingstedt reflects on the aesthetic potential of vocal sound in online learning situations.

Following, the digital side of multimodality and aesthetics is further explored through digital communication in the four essays of the fourth section. Chapter 12 is an analysis of the role of software and templates in making websites aesthetic; the authors, Gunhild Kvåle and Søren V. Poulsen take Wix as a case study. Following, Chapters 13 and 14 are dedicated to two different aspects of curatorial practices. Sumin Zhao and Michele Zappavigna (Chapter 13) do so by comparing social media practice and “scrapbooking,” while Øystein Gilje (Chapter 14) writes about aesthetic choices and meaning-making through the observation of students’ digital film-making. A discussion on digital aesthetics and multimodality would not be complete without social media: in Chapter 15, Søren V. Poulsen analyses the close links between semiotics and aesthetics in Instagram filters.

Lastly, the fifth section contains four contributions centred on fine arts such as music, literature and film. These are undoubtedly aesthetic products, which also have a strong multimodal dimension. Shaun Tan’s picture book and animation film *The Lost Thing* is Kristin Ørjasæter’s focus in Chapter 16, aimed to show how words and images work together in communicating with the reader. Bjarne Markussen (Chapter 17) analyses how Eric Clapton’s boundary-breaking aesthetics blends together classical elegy and musical elements coming from the most disparate genres. Music is also the theme of Chapter 18, where Kate Maxwell and Lilli Mittner look at the interaction between text and music in Beck’s *Song Reader*. Martin Siefkles (Chapter 19) closes the section and the collection with an essay on the aesthetics of multimodal relations in film, arguing that the aesthetic value of these relations derives from the openness between modes.

Although the volume does not strictly talk *about* linguistics or literature, it can certainly serve as a precious tool *for* linguists and literature scholars. Indeed, while multimodality is increasingly being talked about, the long-standing dominance of the written mode in academic research (Ramos Pinto and Mubarak 2019) might make it difficult to actually embrace multimodality in its complexity. The contributions here collected all share originality and broad scope, while providing a concrete example of how welcoming aesthetics and multimodality in humanities can offer a more complete understanding of products and phenomena. This makes the volume advisable for both those who already work with multimodality and those who have not started just yet.



Works cited

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