Reflections on

Reflecting on the context of orality, secondary orality and visible language its
return to orality that technology now makes possible, changing words in space
time (spoken language). The impact this shift will have on objects needing in
exhibits, learning materials on the computer and the nature of learning to r
examples, will cause a re-examination of human cognitive capacities and
difference in listener/reader/viewer control of time is posed as an importan
between auditory and visible language. A comparison, beginning with visib
with auditory and acoustic suggestions, is attempted to better understand the
communication options as available embedded media expands and changes.

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The origin of this journal was in the dissociation with which linguists approached verbal and visible language. Linguistic interest was solely in language as spoken; language's visible counterpart was nothing more than a transcription of the auditory existence of words. The former founder and editor, Merald Wrolstad, believed that visible language had attributes and dimensions that distinguished it from spoken language. Other scholars – Jack Goody, Walter Ong, Umberto Eco, Ivan Illich, Elizabeth Eisenstein and others – have pursued this idea. The pairing of reading and writing – listening and speaking – are commonplace in the curriculum, whether K-12 or in the context of intensive language study at the university.

text

Text, too, has had its champions – Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and George Steiner. Since Gutenberg, text has been privileged despite the platitude that regards a picture as worth a thousand words.

Text remains culturally prevalent:

there are far more writers and potential writers, given the educational predilection to use language for explanation and expression, than there are designers or individuals adept at synthesizing information visually. The computer and digital applications have put words and images easily in conjunction with each other, but the tradition of telling and incidentally showing, to underscore the information or for redundancy rather than to explore the information from another viewpoint or to give more detail, has limited the exploration of and understanding of how to construct effective communication with words and images.

Walter Ong coined the phrase secondary orality, referring to speech that is written to be delivered orally. Drawing on an oral history, now greatly diminished as a primary orality, examples of secondary orality include: presidential speech writing, television news reading and the oral delivery of academic papers, to mention a few. Here writing supports a kind of reading out loud or at least provides a structure that can be enlivened by inserting impromptu remarks.

Writing underpins an oral delivery and an aural reception.

orality

Into this situation of constrained visualization and secondary orality now comes orality itself as a digital phenomena. I can write this text in Simple Text and hear it read to me in any of a selection of voices – from male to female, from more to less human, from melodious to strange. Thus far my computer has nothing significant to report to me that I or someonelse has not "written" – the computer is not yet intelligent. Its oral skills remain secondary. It is the "reader" of my "writing." Likewise, automobiles and appliances talk to us (whether we like it or not).

Words in space – typography (instructions, signs, warnings, etc.) become words in time (words as spoken).

In a world ever more loaded with labels, warnings, sales messages, navigational assistance and exhortations to join, contribute or condemn, where is the silence with which we pursue our own thought? Objects that speak, particularly if controlled by hand held computing devices or that respond based on an infra-red signal can provide for silence. Objects with visible language messages are more aggressive and intrude more completely in visual space. If visible language messages were holographic or otherwise invisible for the viewer unless they are in a position of need (and here I mean position in a literal sense – position in space), then there would be a comparable accomodation to silence in the visual realm. Invisibility or inaudibility – silence – may become a desired state. If so, the auditory now has a technical advantage over the visual.

For example, some years ago I visited the Cleveland Museum of Art on its closed day with Merald Wrolstad. As we wandered through the exhibits, we saw a workman installing an auditory warning system to keep visitors away from the art. If the visitor approached too closely, a woman's voice said:

"Please step back, do not touch the art."

I asked the workman why they were using a woman's voice (which, in my opinion, lacked authority). He replied that they had carefully tested various voices and found that the best response was to a mature woman's voice, rather like a firm, but gentle, mother admonishing a child to do the right thing. No ropes or barriers prevented the visitor from approaching the art. There was silence until someone crossed the invisible line.

And this, curiously enough, brings us to the idea of freedom and how we manage information access, intake and use in a time of tyranny relating to an excess of information regardless of whether auditory or visual. Tolerance for visual or auditory intrusion may differ from person to person. Mobile phones and various forms of mobile music and news are everywhere apparent. Boomboxes have given way to earphones. Annoyance with the projection of individual musical taste into the public realm has largely disappeared, replaced by annoyance with the broadcast of half a private conversation via mobile phones in public spaces. It is possible to be visually selective in what is seen in the environment, but

auditory information is invasive.

Another interesting comparison is the experience of a museum exhibit. One is often in conflict about whether to view and then read labels or other information, or whether to read and then view. Alternating reading and viewing is not always a satisfactory experience. Knowing that museum goers may lack background information, some exhibits are now supported by an auditory guide. Use of this guide overlays spoken text (and sometimes inspirational or cultural music) on the viewing activity. But the viewer gives up much freedom as they view in a prescribed sequence the exhibition materials with only the option to pause the taped narration, if they choose to view longer.

multichannel communications

Multimedia approaches to communication will become more commonplace as bandwidth expands. And it will not be an ensemble of text and images as in print, because they both compete for the same human processing system – vision – yet they require different cognitive strategies, linear sequential or holistic. It will be orality and images that get combined as two distinct sensory channels can be used in a complementary fashion, thereby increasing the amount of information received.

But the tradition of telling and showing needs to be opened for examination and experimentation. When do we show and when do we tell.

Is this different based on the context? the recipient's preferred channel? the use of the information? the claims on attention?

Making a comparison of language as spoken and as read is instructive.

LANGUAGE AS SPOKEN	LANGUAGE AS READ
close listening	*close reading*
qualities of voice	*qualities of typography*
qualities of delivery	*qualities of delivery*
easy or natural	*learned*
one dimensional	*two- or three-dimensional*
trapped in time	*control over time (skim, select)*

Taking each of these pairs in turn: close attention is possible with either channel; qualitative differences (authoritative, casual, dramatic, etc.) can be carefully developed for either; qualities of delivery (speed, clarity, contrast, interactivity, etc.) can be controlled for either. The last three entries, however, are where the differences lie: while speech for most people is easy and naturally acquired, reading is a learned skill; while speech occurs in a one-dimensional, linear space, reading occurs in a two- or three-dimensional space that allows more processing choice; and finally, speech traps the listener in time, while reading allows the reader to control time through selective searching, skimming or indepth reading. This control factor is not unrelated to auditory dimensional limitations.

the verbal and the visual of language

What follows is a comparison, beginning from language as read, followed by a presentation of its auditory counterpart, rendered necessarily in visible language but in a screened back presentation.

The comparison addresses the future of visible language as technology facilitates an increasing application of auditory language.

(Incidentally, other sensory systems that might come into play are also noted. While we have five senses, sight, sound, taste, touch and smell, only the first two are extensively used for specific communication.)

Letting the comparisons resonate without further description, the attempt is to make comparable, although not in a one-to-one correspondence, the visible and auditory presentation of information. Some liberty is taken with the acoustic space as a complement to visible language materiality. For example, the American poet, Vachel Lindsay (1879–1931), made notes in some of his poems concerning the addition of other sounds, such as "tamborines to the foreground," in a sense like stage directions or an accompaniment. John Cage (1912–1992), an American composer and writer, adept at both aural and visible language, developed scores that included a range of sensory information. It is in the spirit of Lindsay and Cage that the following comparisons are presented. It is hoped that the reader/viewer will exercise some imagination while examining what follows.

The first series of images (FIGURES 1.1-1.3) are concerned with identity on buildings. The nature of the letterforms, the technique and the materials that render them are important differences.

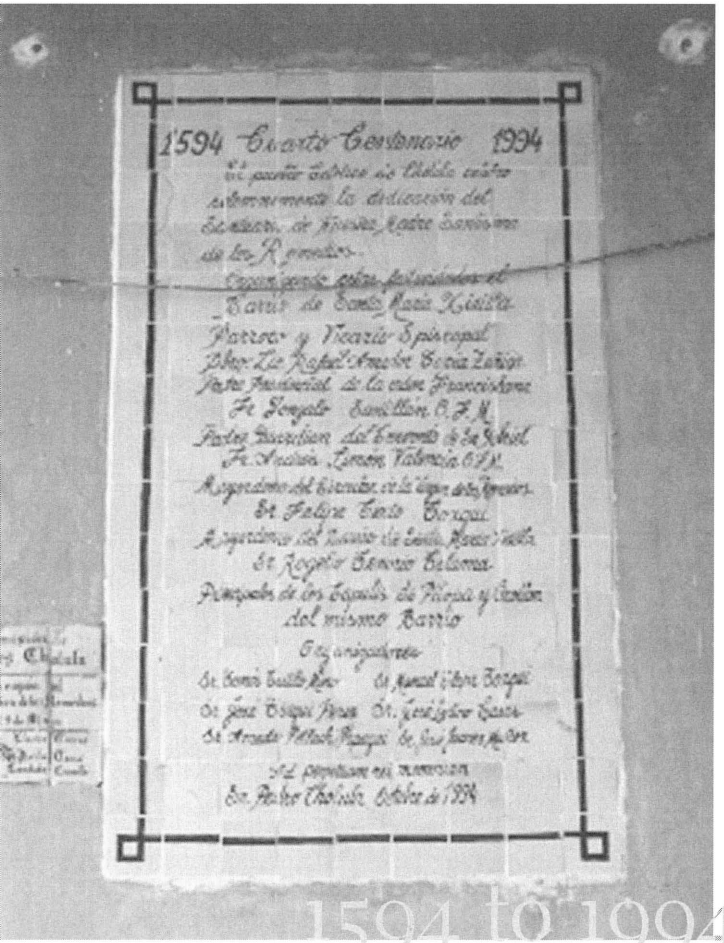
The second set of images (FIGURES 2.1-2.2) are on moving surfaces that also announce identity whether corporate or personal.

The third set of images (FIGURES 3.1-3.2) are concerned with labels and navigation, the system of which is subject to cultural inflection at the least.

The fourth set of images (FIGURES 4.1-4.3) are commercial signs, designed to get attention, create desire and make a sale.

The last set of images (FIGURES 5.1-5.4) are art – mysterious, evocative and carefully mounted in a serene space.

FIGURE 1.1
Handwritten tiles identify history and commemoration on a church in Puebla, Mexico.



WHISPERED

cafe restaurant de l'ogenblik

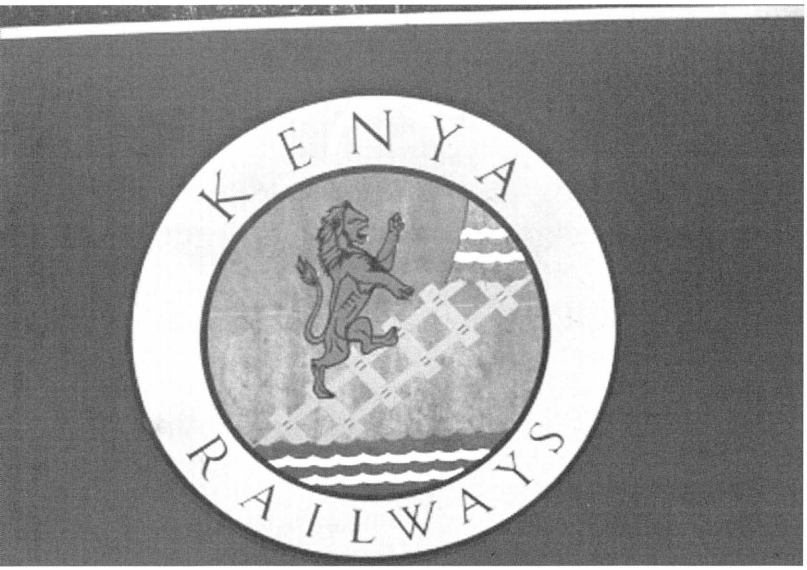
FIGURE 1.2
Calligraphy on glass identifies a restaurant in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

SLOWLY IN RHYTHM TO A MODERATE WALK,
EACH CHARACTER IS SAID BY A DIFFERENT VOICE,
REPEATED TWICE,
ENDING WITH THE WORD
STATED BY ALL VOICES IN UNISON

O C T A V I O – O C T A V I O

FIGURE 1.3
Graffiti on a formal building in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

FIGURE 2.1
The emblem for the Kenya Railway System, Nairobi, Kenya.



WHEN IMMOBILE, A STRONG MALE VOICE SIMPLY SAYS

Kenya Railways

WHEN MOVING SOME KIND OF AIR CATCHER OR CLACKER RESPONDS RHYTHMICALLY TO THE TRAIN'S SPEED

MUCH SURROUNDING CITY NOISE,
HORNS, LAUGHTER, SIRENS, ETC. –
SPOKEN QUICKLY BY MALE VOICES
AND REPEATED AT RANDOM

FIGURE 2.2
Graffiti on New York City subway cars.

FIGURE 3.1
Street label in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

STATED SIMPLY WITH A PAUSE BETWEEN EACH WORD

FIGURE 3.2
Street label in Paris, France.

WITH A FAMOUS FEW CHORDS
ON THE PIANO AS BACKGROUND,
A MALE VOICE SAYS

Rue Beethoven

WHISPERED AS THE VENDOR WALKS

AND THE COFFEE AROMA EXPANDS

coffee-busters – the new columbian coffee culture in europe

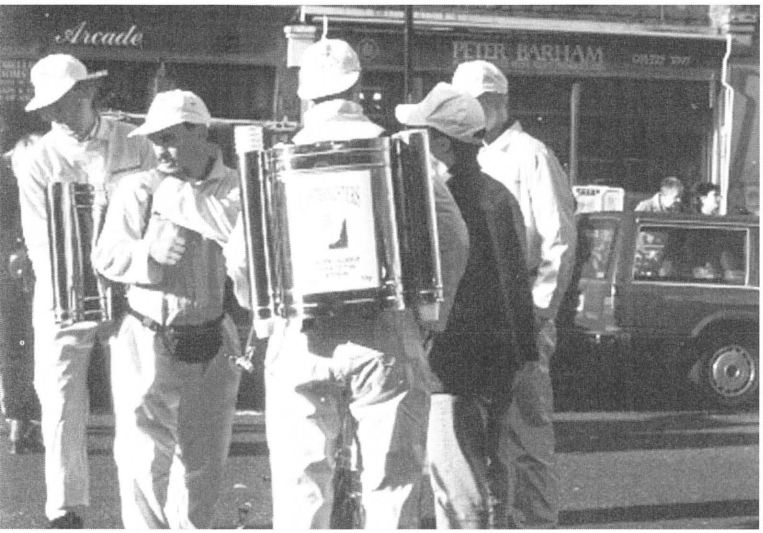
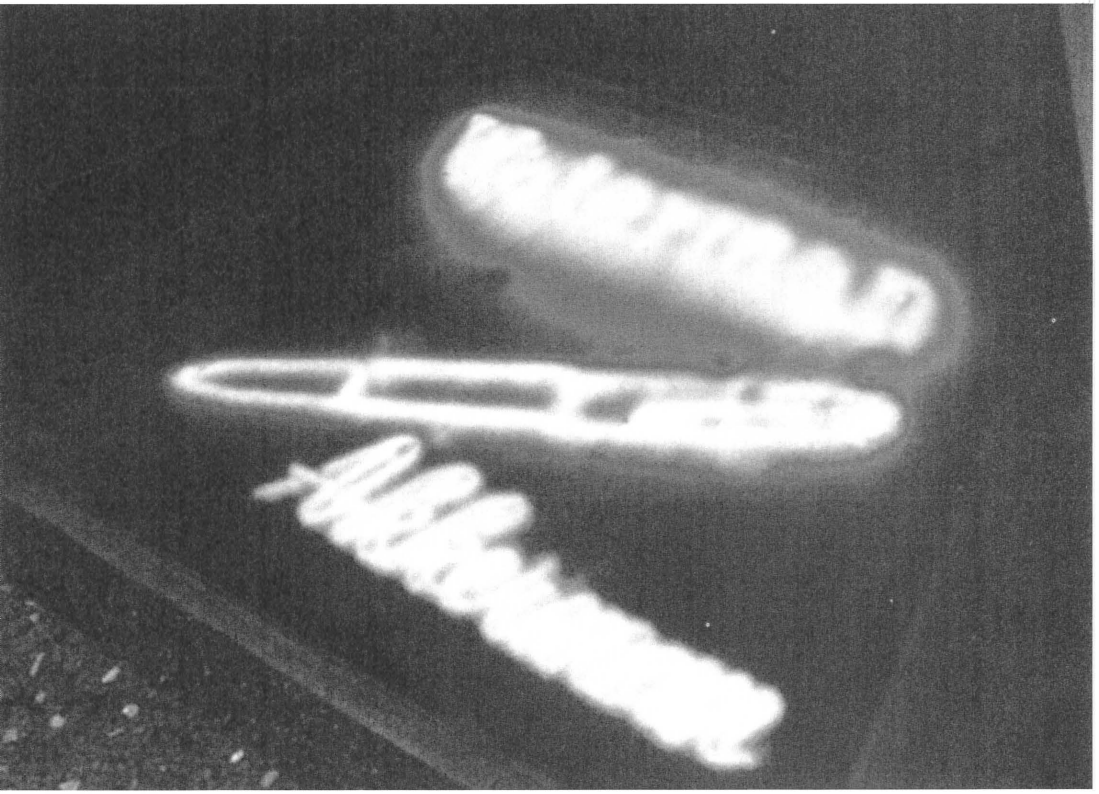


FIGURE 4.1
Corporate street vendors selling coffee in Portobello Road, London.

FIGURE 4.2
Icons and words in neon below a glass floor entry panel in a Brussels arcade announce a shop selling fine pens.

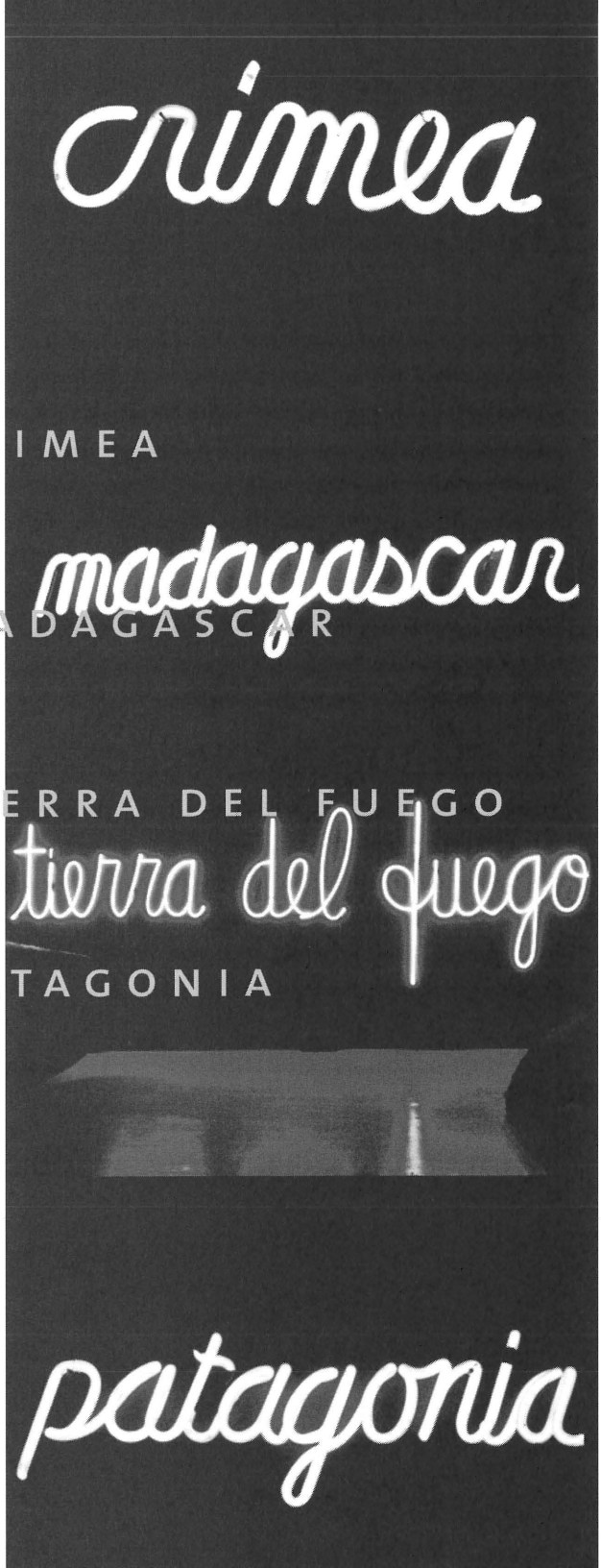


SPOKEN WITH CAREFUL ENUNCIATION
IN RAPIDFIRE SEQUENCE WITH A
DISTINCT PAUSE BETWEEN CONTINUOUS
BACKGROUND SOUND OF WRITING
ON COARSE PAPER

FLAMBOYANT, RICH DECLAMATION,
STARTING LOUD AND GETTING SOFTER
WITH ALTERNATING CATTLE AND CHICKEN SOUNDS

FIGURE 4.3
A very large painted sign on a mill in Sheridan, Wyoming.

AS THE HUMAN SPEECH GETS SOFTER,
THE ANIMAL SOUNDS GET LOUDER
BUT NEVER OVERPOWER THE VOICE.



STATED BY FOUR COMPLEMENTARY VOICES IN ORDER AND THEN OVERLAYING EACH OTHER IN A RANDOM SEQUENCE AS THOUGH THEY ARE FOUR NOTES IN A CHORD

FIGURE 5.1–5.4
Neon words in an environmental installation, Tierra del Fuego, Rafael Ferrer, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1972.

conclusion

Continuously present in radio, film and television (all media that capture the user in time), orality and its visible language counterpart emerge again as competitors with the possibility of communication choices that require renewed examination of their particular advantages. Some questions that need to be asked are: what are the differences in memory quality in relation to auditory or visible messages; can images take on a more specific message transfer role and when should they be accompanied by auditory or visible language information; what are the possible relationships between images and language-based information and to what degree are these relationships common or accepted.

A new chapter is opening in the relationship between oral and visible language in terms of communication goals. Technological developments encourage us to question the formerly stable relationship of these apparent twins. The patterns of what is said and what is shown and the development of communications that pair sensory channels will break with tradition as we better understand the advantages and limitations of these two.

Words in space – oral and visible.

Words in time – oral and visible.