Putting Multimodal Writing on the Page

Sarah Gibson Yates

With a background in film-making, university lecturer and PhD researcher Sarah Gibson Yates shares some of the challenges and opportunities she’s experienced expanding her creative practice into prose fiction for young adults.

The challenges of representing multimodal and digital languages within fiction are multiple, varied, and, I would say, unavoidable if you’re writing contemporary realist novels aimed at young readers. Young adult literature readers are more likely to be immersed in social technologies than other demographics[[1]](#endnote-1). With this in mind it would seem that learning how to better represent the stories and languages of digital culture in our fiction should be a real concern for writers wishing to connect with those readers. In what follows I consider some of the ways I’ve approached this challenge in my PhD novel, drawing on ideas presented at the NAWE Conference in 2018. I also share some of the lessons that I’ve taken forward to writing classes with undergraduate film and media students, as well as the general public. These are formulated as guiding principles, and illustrated with writing practice examples from the classroom, which may hopefully be of interest to other writers looking for ways to incorporate the impact of digital culture into their writing practice, and/or, teaching.

*Towards a Multi-Disciplined Writing Practice*

Nine years ago, I received a small award from The National Lottery through Arts Council England to develop a novel exploring the behaviours and consequences of digital culture centred around a group of networked young people. Their real lives happen in a thinly fictionalised Cambridge, where I still live, and the plot takes the shape of a crime investigation; my protagonist, 18-year-old Taylor, the self-appointed detective piecing together the parts of the victim’s life left behind while trying to make sense of the virtual and real connections with her own story. I used most of the award to buy in expertise to develop the manuscript—then a novel aimed for adult readers—in the form of a writing mentor, through Jill Dawson’s Gold Dust Scheme[[2]](#endnote-2). I learned a great deal about writing prose fiction in that time and I am hugely grateful for the experience of being able to develop my writing practice in this guided space. Although I had a background in fiction, or drama, filmmaking, including an MA in Creative Writing: Scriptwriting (UEA, 2015), I quickly realised that while some of the tools required for fiction where similar—characterisation, plotting, genre, pace—others were not—in particular, narrative perspective and narrative voice. The challenge of achieving the right voice for this novel has taken me through many drafts. Finding a writing style that conjured the voice that matched my intentions for the work was in part troubled by my insistence to include a range of digital elements of form such as instant messaging, videos, podcasts, photo sharing, blog posts, geo-location maps, etc. alongside conventional prose passages. In retrospect, I see that this project was a difficult starting proposition for a writer still learning her craft but I have since understood that the problems that beset me around finding the right voice and right mode of stylistic expression are central to the problems many writers might encounter faced with the challenges of putting multimodal writing on the page.

*Multimodal Writing*

Digital culture is multimodal by default and the implications of this for my practice found extension through two publically engaged creative-practice-as-research workshops held in the Cambridge Festival of Ideas (2014). The remainder of the grant was spent on providing a range of artists and tools set up to explore identity construction in online contexts via multidisciplinary practice including video, photography, writing and performance. *Digitize Me* was my first attempt to actively think about and practice multimodal writing and the workshop succeeded in engaging a lively creative session where selfies were taken and questioned, profile indicators visualised and investigated, status updates documented, fictionalised and framed. The ideas and practices explored there have formed my research questions and consisted in the formulation of a particular kind of aesthetic for the work—*a digital aesthetic in book form.* It is an aesthetic that draws on the multimodal, intertextual, multi-narrational world of digital technology, including, specifically, social technologies, through which significant portions of the novel are narrated (discourse) and which seeks to unify these fragmentary elements into a coherent novel narrative.

As of 2014 I have been developing this novel, alongside a maternity leave, lecturing and mothering, as part of a part time PhD. As I discussed my book with colleagues near the beginning of the journey I was often asked if I was writing an interactive book as I spoke about including texts, posts, videos, photographs, blog post, podcast, comment threads, Tweets, etc., to build an authentic contemporary story world for the post millennial protagonists of my young adult story, but this was, and still is, very much *a novel-book*, one intended to be printed in hard copy, on paper page, turned by real fingers, and become tatty and discoloured over time. This material fixing of the ephemeral digital world is a central part of the initium[[3]](#endnote-3) for the project and inseparable from the narratives core questions such as what are the long-term impact of digital technology on the lives on young people? How does digital technology affect behaviour? And, how does it shape a young person’s sense of self and others?

*Multimodal Transitions*

The process of working out this question has afforded a deep engagement with problem of how to effectively put multimodal writing on the page in a readable and engaging way. Should I represent an instant message by using a different font? Should I indent on a separate line? Keep it within the paragraph? Should the content or experience of watching a video be represented as a prose description, italicized or standard? Could it more effectively be represented as a screenplay? How *should* I move from one representational style to another? And, what are the implications for the reader in terms of experience and meaning making?

The transitions in perspective that occur when a character moves from reading something to watching something or listening to something to saying something are the spaces in which we now live. Within fiction these moments can be explored to define character, to provide insight into a way of viewing the world and reveal much not only about the inner workings of a character but the authors’ mind too. How do you represent the daily acts of our multi-sensory online experiences within fiction?

The specific creative challenges of writing this novel, as well as its potential for opening new ways of thinking about prose fiction for young adults, lays here in figuring out how you *write the transitions* from one representational style to another, and it is central to multimodal writing practice. There are two main choices: To use language from film editing, you can straight cut or dissolve. You either crash two different media objects together or cross dissolve them smoothly, softening the change, removing the jolt. But then jolts are sometimes what you want as a writer. Dissonance reveals much about how we experience not just digital culture but contemporary life more broadly.

The way the story of my novel came to me, via a news article, was itself a form of *transitioned narrative*, one part strange new digital reality, and one part traditional news reportage. In 2006 I came across the story of American teenager Anna Svidersky in an article entitled, *Death on My Space* (The Guardian, 2006). I had just begun to engage with social media and was struck by this story which described how a fourteen-year-old girl’s popularity peaked after being stabbed at the diner where she worked. Anna’s Myspace page had been memorialized by a friend and stories of the girls’ life and death in small town America spread widely online. The intriguing juxtaposition of the futuristic ghost story and human interest news story stayed with me. A curious and uniquely 21st century phenomenon that someone could have more ‘friends’ dead than alive. I began thinking: What were these people doing friending a dead girl? What motivated them? Then: What if she (Anna) wasn’t the person she appeared to be on social media, but that her murder was an end-point to a bigger narrative, that, once unpicked would reveal who she truly was?

The story that flowed from those questions became my novel; a story born of a combination of other narratives, from a variety of sources (text, image, video, sound), spliced together in the imagination, and which gave rise to the questions of multimodal representation that became central to my PhD research.

*Digital Culture on the Pages of Young Adult Literature (YAL)*

From Trollope’s urge to depict *The Way We Live Now* (Trollope, 1875) novelists have sought to capture contemporary life in the stories and languages of contemporary culture and young adult authors are no exception. Contemporary realist young adult literature thrives at an exciting nexus of possibilities—including literary, story-telling, identity-forming and culture shaping—yet these possibilities have still only just begun to be explored. Even as far back as 1996 the tendency for formal invention in YAL was being detected by scholars, with eminent Swedish critic MN describing children’s literature as, “…evolving towards complexity and sophistication … reflected in such phenomena as the disintegration of traditional narrative structure and the extensive use of different experimental forms, in the intricate use of time and space, in a growing intertextuality, in a questioning of conventional approaches to the relationship between text and reality.” (Nikolajeva, 1996, p 207)

In the noughties, this questioning of conventional approaches to the relationship between text and reality took place through the cultural paradigmatic shift in use of digital technology, especially by the young. Since young adult literature is written precisely about and for the demographic most effected by digital technologies, it is unsurprising that a body of work has emerged that addresses the personal, social and moral issues that arise from living so close to technology. It is possible to see the qualities to which Nikolajeva refers emerging and developing in a range of book, a first wave of YAL addressing the impact of technology, identified in a 2010 paper by Jill Olthouse. *Blended Books: An Emerging Genre Blends Online and Traditional Formats* offers an analysis of YAL texts exploring the interface between traditional and new forms of (digitally enabled) storytelling which she calls blended books. Nine years on this definition is ready for an update. I suggest a useful refinement might be to distinguish between books that *adapt* online formatting *wholesale* for the presentation of their stories—*adapted books—*and call those that truly *blend* traditional prose with other digital and multimodal forms—*blended books*. Under this new definition *adapted books* would include Lauren’s Myracle’s hugely popular *Internet Girls Series* (2004-2014), *Entrapment* (Michael Spooner 2010), and *Serafina67 \*urgently requires life\** (Susie Day 2008). All use, either instant message boards or blog formats throughout the whole book. Examples of *blended books* might include YA superstar John Green’s more recent *Turtles All the Way Down* (John Green, 2017) where prose is combined with other digital formatting styles such as blogs, instant messaging technology and photograph descriptions to tell the story; blogger Zoella’s, commercial debut hit, *Girl Online* (2014) (prose with instant messages, blog posts and photographs descriptions); *Fangirl* (Rainbow Rowell, 2013) prose and fanfiction; *Radio Silence* (Alice Oseman 2017) prose, podcasts and instant messages, also her debut novel *Solitaire* (2014), blog posts. It is clear, that it is this latter category that has prevailed, at least within mainstream publishing, with few books of the adapted wholesale formatting kind currently on publishers’ lists. And it is these truly blended books that interests me most, reflecting, as they do, my artistic concerns—*to create a digital aesthetic in book form*—while also creating complex postmodern discourses around identity and narrative-making.

*Putting Multimodal Narratives on the Page*

My novel, *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, now complete and with an agent at the time of writing, is fundamentally a response to a real-life murder and an exploration of what digital technologies can teach us about narrative today; how it constructed and how it’s used. There are many instances of digital technology structuring the narrative of my novel. For instance, the Anna Svidersky story inspired the launching off point.

The first page:

The day after she died, I find a message in my inbox.

Dear valued friend,

Sadly, my time with you on this beautiful, complicated planet has come to an end, but remember I am with still you for as long as you remember me. Please visit my memorial page and keep my memory alive. Peace and love.

Kash x a friend in need [Gone but not forgotten]

Taylor’s decision to accept the friend request is, to use screenwriting terminology, a midpoint, or, *point of no return*. It is also the title of that chapter. As a filmmaker and film student Taylor is immersed in the ideas of this form of narrative structures but she struggles to apply its clean logic to her own life. Accepting the friend request from the girl she found dead the night before marks her commitment to finding more about Kasha and becoming more deeply involved in her story. It is an example of technology not only structuring the fiction of my novel but inspiring it; a narrative starting point that is unique to a specific technology—a Facebook authored algorithm. Without this ‘digital object’—the friend request from a dead girl—my novel would not have its first page.

*Lessons in Multimodal Writing*

There are three guiding principles that have come to define my current research and that I have explored in my teaching of undergraduate film and media students:

1 *Deepen an understanding of the different ways we receive and process narrative information provided multi-modally.*

Classroom: In both my screenwriting and online writing classes I give students a range of film or online writing texts [short films, blogs, posts, vlogs, journalism] to analyse and discuss in terms of what information is being provided visually (through image), aurally (through sound), or textually (through words). We reflect on why the producer has decided to communicate that idea or information in that particular way, and what impact it might have on the meaning of the work. For example, words are most effective for providing information, history on a subject, video excells at conveying action, audio is hugely effective at communicating a sense of place (ambient, or, location sound) and emotions, (particularly through voice).

Writing Exercise: Social Media Share. using a social media object[[4]](#endnote-4) students have selected as a prompt students must respond in a timed free writing sessions (5 minutes). This instant response might be a flash fiction, a post, a message, a letter, anything. They can use the ‘object’ as a launching off point or build their piece about it. They can choose to share their ‘object’ or keep it for themselves. Everyone is then given 10 minutes to edit their work following peer feedback in pairs and then they upload their work to our online discussion group board, where it might be developed into a larger project.

2 *Explore tools for writing multimodal story using screenwriting techniques.*

Classroom: Drawing on my experience of screenwriting where idea generation and developmental processes foreground visualisation and structural planning techniques I work with students to map their ideas using these tools to develop and construct their story ideas.

Writing Exercise: Rule of 3s: Idea generation for the short fiction screenplay. Using 3 photographs they have taken: one each of a place (location); a person (character); or a thing (prop), students must write 3 things about each image. After 10 minutes, they swap photographs in pairs and repeat the exercise with these different images. Then we discuss how to build a scene from each response (6 in all per pair).

3 *Develop an informed, practice-based awareness of the interplay between showing and telling.* (Including mimetic and diegetic forms of narrative making, as well as montage).

Classroom: students are asked to create a multimedia news project using words, video and audio.

Exercise: Multi-media News Story: Students decide on a topic in pairs, research the content for the piece and using a range of visualisation tools decide which elements of the content will communicate their messages most effectively using written word, images (moving or still) or audio. As a group we consider the relationship between information giving (telling) and experience/perspective communicating (showing), before committing to a production plan for all related media, using scripts for podcasts, radio and screen-based work where appropriate.

*Conclusion*

There is a long history of technology being explored by literature and of literature exploring technology[[5]](#endnote-5), but it is only in recent times that this has come into our everyday stories and the texts that carry them. As technology impresses itself ever deeper into every aspect of all our lives so we see it structuring our fiction. Technology provides new structures, new forms for story-telling and as writers we need to better understand the narrative strategies offered technology to see how it demands new behaviours and new stories to be told. Or at the very least, how old stories demand to be *rewritten*; seen through a new lens; de-familiarized and made anew for new generations.

I began with a claim of wanting to write a traditional novel that would address some of the impacts of digital languages for identity construction and authenticity. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the process has taken me to an exploration of what story is itself and what writing is itself: How do we cognitively and creatively piece a narrative together? Today? Immersed in multimedia? We do it all the time. It is what we *do* daily on social media, as we construct our own and others identities in the space between the information provided; it is what my protagonist *does*, her main action throughout the novel as amateur detective and young adult finding her way in the world; it is the readers’ action as they read; and it is of course mine, as an author, constructing a narrative built from multimodal sources.

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1. The most commonly cited age attribution to YAL readers is 12-18, although it is well documented that many adults in the 18-30 year olds make up a large proportion of the market sales (Mushens). A 2018 study conducted by the American nonpartisan fact tank the Pew Research Centre found that 95% of all teens have access to a smart phone and 45% say they are online constantly. <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/> (accessed May 2nd 2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This successful writer mentoring programme has been running for many years and can be found at [www.gold-dust.org](http://www.gold-dust.org) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In, *The Fiction Editor* (1988), Thomas McCormack describes the initium of a work as “what the author had in mind when he began his novel.” p190. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A social media object is an item that can be found on a social media platform, for example a video, a blog posts, a podcast. The comments, shares history or any other interaction with that object can also be consider as part of that object and a meaningful indicator of its cultural discourse. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For further reading on the experimental end of the relationship between literature and technology see the many works of literary critic N. Katherine Hayles, or for more recent work on the topic, *Electronic Literature* (Scott Rettberg, 2018).

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