Introduction:
Multimodal Media

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Abstract   Introduced here by its guest editors, this special issue of *Poetics Today* focuses on multimodal media. Its purpose is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to explore the multimodal combination of semiotic resources in a range of primarily aesthetic media forms that until now have attracted comparatively little attention in multimodality studies, including not only multimodal novels, comics, and films but also current television programs, video games, and other forms of digital media. On the other hand, and no less importantly, the articles collected here engage with previously underexplored dimensions of multimodality and thus expand our understanding of what multimodality can mean, including not only perceptual and semiotic but also referential and participatory multimodality.

The term *multimodality* refers to the combination of different modes of communication and representation that are employed in a variety of aesthetic and functional contexts in contemporary media culture, including a range of

art forms from novels and comics via films and television series to theatrical performances and video games. While there is a broad consensus that "representation and communication always draw on a multiplicity of modes, all of which contribute to meaning" (Jewitt 2009a: 14), there is significantly less agreement on what qualifies as a mode and which dimensions of multimodality warrant inquiry. Much of the early theoretical discussion of multimodality in linguistic conversation, discourse, and text analysis primarily aimed to establish that communication is generally multimodal (see, e.g., Bateman 2008; Kress 2010; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 2001; O'Halloran 2005; O'Toole 1994; van Leeuwen 2005). In discourse and conversation analysis, for example, this led to a keener awareness of the fact that most "verbal" communication makes use of the affordances provided by various nonverbal modes of communication, such as prosody or gestures (see, e.g., Fricke 2012; Mittelberg 2006; Norris 2011). Text linguistics likewise developed new theories and methods geared toward acknowledging that few if any media forms rely exclusively on "verbal" modes to achieve their communicative ends (see, e.g., Barthes 1997; Bateman 2014; Stöckl 1997). During the past decade, however, linguistic multimodality studies have increasingly expanded their object domain to other multimodal media, such as comics (see, e.g., Bateman and Wildfeuer 2014; Cohn 2013) and films (see, e.g., Bateman and Schmidt 2012; Wildfeuer 2014), and the concept of multimodality has also started to gain currency in literary theory (see, e.g., Gibbons 2012; Hallet 2014) and media studies (see, e.g., Elleström 2010; Thon 2016).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this disciplinary expansion of multimodality studies has not led to a homogenization of the ways in which core terms such as *mode* and *multimodality* are conceptualized (see the range of approaches mentioned above as well as the contributions in Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 2009; Jewitt 2009b; Levine and Scollon 2004; O'Halloran 2004; Page 2010b; Schneider and Stöckl 2011). Gunther Kress, for example, defines *mode* as "a socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning. *Image, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image, soundtrack* are examples of modes used in representation and communication" (2009: 54). However, as Lars Elleström remarks from the perspective of media studies, Kress's (and Theo van Leeuwen's) "approach to multimodality has its pragmatic advantages but it produces a rather indistinct set of modes that are very hard to compare since they overlap in many ways that are in dire need of further theoretical discussion" (2010: 14). Indeed, Charles Forceville's observation that defining the term *mode* is "no easy task, because what is labeled as a mode here is a complex of various factors" (2006: 382) still applies, perhaps even more so than it did a decade ago. Granted, much of the current discussion in literary and media studies in particular focuses on "semiotic modes

(as opposed to other, specialist uses of the term)" (Page 2010a: 6). Neverthe-less, the range of potentially productive conceptualizations of *mode* and *multi-modality* is broad, but this seems in many ways an advantage rather than a problem in need of resolution. After all, literary theorists have yet to agree on a single definition of *literature*, and media studies successfully operate with a substantial number of different conceptualizations of the term *medium* (see, e.g., Bolter and Grusin 1998; Manovich 2001; McLuhan 1964; Ryan 2006; Sachs-Hombach 2003; Schmidt 2000).

Against this background, the purpose of the present issue of *Poetics Today* is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to explore the multimodal combination of semiotic resources in a range of primarily aesthetic media forms that until now have attracted comparatively little attention in multimodality studies. These include not only multimodal novels, comics, and films—see the articles by Torsa Ghosal, Janina Wildfeuer, and John A. Bateman, respectively—but also current television programs (Anne Ulrich), video games (Jan-Noël Thon), and other forms of digital media (Evelyn Chew and Alex Mitchell). On the other hand, and no less importantly, the articles collected in this special issue engage with previously underexplored dimensions of multimod-ality and thus expand our understanding of what multimodality can mean. This includes not only a range of semiotic resources, from handwriting (which features prominently in Ghosal's discussion of Doug Dorst and J. J. Abrams's *S.*) to interactivity (the common denominator of the three case studies that Chew and Mitchell present), but also the combination of different "modes of reference" in "news satire shows" (as in Ulrich's exploration of the rhetorical medialities that *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* employs) as well as in "ani-mated documentaries" and "documentary games" (both of which Thon examines through the lens of post/documentary).

These various attempts to explore multimodality studies' "roads less trav-eled" are part of an ongoing collaborative research project on the forms and functions of multimodality in convergent media cultures. Ultimately, this project aims to develop a comprehensive multidimensional conceptuali-zation of multimodality that can be productively applied across a range of disciplines, including linguistics, literary criticism, and media studies. Such conceptual work is important for the kind of interdisciplinary collaborations that have become standard practice in current media research. Nevertheless, something more is also required if we are to go beyond existing conceptual-izations of modes and multimodality in order to integrate a broader spectrum of the latter's various dimensions—not only perceptual and semiotic multi-modality (the appeal to different senses and the use of different semiotic resources) but also referential multimodality (the communication of differ-ent referential claims) and participatory multimodality (the combination of

different modes of user agency in the context of interactive, ergodic, procedural, and/or participatory media forms). Beyond a comprehensive conceptualization, what is called for is the anchoring of theoretical and methodological reflections in the specific mediality and materiality of the phenomena under consideration (see also Sachs-Hombach et al. 2018). It is this latter part of the larger project that the following articles primarily contribute to via their explorations of specific kinds of multimodal media that may or may not call into question how we have previously thought about multimodality. Last but not least, this issue of *Poetics Today* is also intended as an invitation to other scholars from literary, media, and cultural studies to join the conversation and contribute toward a fuller understanding of the manifold dimensions of multimodality in our current media landscape.

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