Title: The Merewether Baths will never look the same again

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of literary texts on our understandings of place and the impact of VRML technologies on the interpretation of the real place and the virtual place made available through a text.

The Australian author, Marion Halligan, frequently locates her work in the real world of Newcastle. In the case of her work, *Lovers’ Knots*, the public ocean baths at Merewether, Newcastle, feature. The impact of the creative writer's imaginative account of this space suggests the possibilities of complementing the textual account through VRML techniques, and constructing further virtual VRML texts that offer to structure the real and virtual in a tension. The real baths are positive (filled up with reality), the textual baths are negative (inherently abstract waiting for imaginative filling), and the VRML baths are somewhere between or in tension between the real and the imaginary.

Through the construction of a VRML account of the Merewether baths it is anticipated that traditional and new textual possibilities will be made evident.

Presenters:

Mr Michael Meany
New Media Coordinator
Communication and Media Arts
The University of Newcastle
http://www.newcastle.edu.au/department/ma
http://www.newcastle.edu.au/department/ma/staff/meany
02 4921 7361 (ph)
02 4921 6944 (fx)
michael.meany@newcastle.edu.au

Michael Meany coordinates the area of new media within the subject offerings of the Department of Communication and Media Arts. These subjects include both screen and paper-based media forms with an emphasis on the convergence between these forms. His research is currently centered on the convergence and representation of older media forms in the new media environment.

Dr Keith Russell
Head of Department
Communication and Media Arts
University of Newcastle
http://www.newcastle.edu.au/department/ma
http://www.newcastle.edu.au/department/ma/staff/russell
02 49 21 6408 (ph)
02 49 21 6944 (fx)
krussell@mail.newcastle.edu.au

Biography

Keith Russell lectures in the areas of new media including Digital Media, Multi Media and The Web, Electronic Media Studies and Virtual and Cultural Places. His PhD is in the area of literary affects.
Introduction

While accepting that words are just words and that words in fiction are, at best, fictional words, at some point all works of fiction need to confront the agony of realism. Are the words pointing out to hard referents, in to themselves, and/or across both themselves as intra-textual pointers and external referents? The complexity of this fictional clustering goes mostly unnoticed to the reader of fiction except when the text bothers to announce a particularly strong version of one aspect of the connection question.

In the case of Marion Halligan's fiction, there are frequent references to real world locations. Such locations are then peopled by characters, who, in the case of Lovers' Knots, have about them the characteristics of history. This double realisation tends then to locate the general system of references in the novel in a world where realism might present an issue. Take this opening passage, from a chapter titled "Rock Platform: Newcastle 1967", as an example.

The cliffs at Bar Beach fall roughly sheer to a rock platform, which stretches a hundred yards from their foot to drop in steps some fifteen feet to the sea bed. This is the littoral, divided into five zones: the supra-, upper-, mid-, lower-, and the infra-littoral zones. It is the water that makes these distinctions; they indicate a range from the mainly dry to the always wet. (p 91)

"It is the water that makes these distinctions?" or so the narrator claims. What then follows this assertion is an extensive portrait of an object or landscape as still life.

The littoral is an ecological community inhabited by plants and animals depending on one another for energy, food, shelter. Though it is not their own doing they all have names. There is tough-tunicked cunjevoi, the only marine animal to have kept its aboriginal appellation; coralline algae branching red; chiton coat of mail shell, Cataphragmus the many-plated barnacle. (p 91)

And so on, until the story brings in humans, like Adam and Eve, to stare in wonder at the named world. Now, all of this might cause us no concern unless we wish or bother to distinguish the god-like nominalist from the God of realism. Such agony was a common state for Charles Sanders Peirce. Such agony returns to confront all of us who would play with offering a data-based account of what goes on in fiction. Such agony is only added to, by this project's intention to extend the range of the possible confusion through the construction of additional and alternative virtues, in the form of Virtual Reality images using Virtual Reality Markup Language.

John F. Sowa, in his commentary on Peirce's Existential Graphs (MS 514), points to the real power of fundamental questions when they are asked with rigour:

As early as 1891, Peirce has suspected that the geometry of the universe was non-Euclidean, and he requested funding (which Newcomb denied) for astronomical observations to test whether the sum of the angles of a triangle is exactly 180°. That suspicion was finally confirmed during an eclipse of the sun in 1919, when a measurement of the deflection of a light ray was consistent with Einstein's predicted value for the curvature of space caused by the mass of the sun. (2001, URL)

On a gentler note, Pierce helps us out with our fiction puzzle, not by adding up the number of degrees, but by pointing to the location of realism:

Anybody may happen to opine that "the" is a real English word; but that will not constitute him as a realist. But if he thinks that, whether the word "hard" itself be real or not, the property, character, the predicate, hardness is not invented by men, as the word is, but is really and truly in the hard things and is one in them all, as a description of habit, disposition, or behaviour, then he is a realist. (CP 1.27n1 - in Sowa, 2001, URL)

For Halligan, the rocks and plants have about them, and in them, the qualities ascribed to them in the nominalising. The sea is the sea is the sea, or perhaps. The vividness brought to these objects, by the fiction, pretends to enclose them in their own virtues. The difficulty in expanding the various ontologies of these descriptions becomes obvious when the vividness is extended through the qualification of a more realist form, that of photography.

Later in the evening, when the heat had gone from the sun and the crowds home, leaving only a few board-riders and fishermen and people who walked briskly along the hard damp sand, Veronica and Mikelis and Eva went down to the beach. Veronica had taken up swimming, she wanted to do some laps in the baths. Eva had a dip, then she and Mikelis wandered among the rockpools, drawing one another's attention to the shells, weed, anemones. It was a kind of game.
Radiance, belonging to people is then the trick of fiction. Because we accepted the earlier category of hardness being in rocks, and, in Halligan's novel, "It is the water that makes these distinctions", then we are ready to agree, if only in fancy, with the view that radiance applied via photography is radiance owned by the beach goers.

The key to this realist/romantic issue is contained in the notion of "illumination" especially as this concept has become distinguished from "illustration". That is, one might establish a ratio such that: as realism is to illustration so romanticism is to illumination. The common feature here is the bringing of light to an object or subject. These two terms, illustration and illumination, offer to assist us further as we again attempt to focus on the extra matters required of any attempt to materialise, in a logical form, a text that finds its vividness in the everyday obscurity of fiction. They can also assist us in locating the possible use of more and less vivid companion texts, such as the VRML and still photographic images that accompany this present paper.

Edward R. Tufte, in his Visual Explanations, outlines a variety of illustrations/illuminations that he calls "confections" (Tufte, 1997 pp 121-151).

And a confection is an assembly of many visual events, selected . . . from various Streams of Story ("... the Ocean of the Streams of Story was in fact the biggest library in the universe" (Rushdie, 1990) pp 71-2)), then brought together and juxtaposed on the still flatland of paper. By means of a multiplicity of image-events, confections illustrate an argument, present and enforce visual comparisons, combine the real and the imagined, and tell us yet another story. (p 121)

The telling of yet another story would seem to be in the service of literature but it is not necessarily in the service of the attempt to determine full and adequate graphs of existence as existence is accounted for already in language events.

In the case of the current images on offer, we can observe several values that they may be seen to add, through the enforcing of "visual comparisons." The VRML and still images of the Merewether baths and car park allow us to divide the beach experience, firstly from its surrounding sensory envelope (there are no smells, there is no grit between our toes, etc) and secondly we are able to divide the car park prelude from the baths and beach event. Holding each of these stages of experience still, even if we are able to spin the VRML, we can put together a variety of understandings that might not otherwise be found. Whether the author would like these extra streams of story is something that we might consider. How we could resist the opportunity to enter the extra streams is perhaps beyond our knowing. That one experience may follow another and then be followed by another is the very ground of the initial experience in the sequence. When we start to play the game then we are open to the unendingness of the sensory world.

The panoptic features of the flat versions of the VRML images are at first quite disturbing. These flattened drums offer to show us a world that cannot exist and yet the concoction of joined together and taken apart attracts our attention towards features that are then supported by the VRML circular skin. Having grown very used to the visual limitations of not seeing more than a field of view, the VRML permits us to play with this field of view without the usual distractions that something might change behind us before we get back, in our spinning around, to where we were before. True, VRML images can present us with doubled images where the same object occupies more than one place in the frozen time of the VRML. This ghosting only adds to the attraction.

What this does for fiction it is perhaps too early to say. In offering to materialise features of fact-based fictional worlds, the VRML device can be seen as simply an extravagant additional to existing illustrated texts that offer to locate the world of the author. There are obviously better and worse examples and obviously there are authors for whom this kind of illustration makes more sense. In the case of Halligan's work, the illustrations seem appropriate if also potentially redundant and confusing to the imagination looking for radiance from within rather than illumination from
without. Adding further HTML features, to connect text and image in more direct ways, permits confections (making together), concoctions (boiling together) and/or illustrations and illuminations? Are we defeated yet?

[For the HTML version complete with VRML QuickTime movies, visit URL: http://www.newcastle.edu.au/department/ma/vrml/baths.htm]

References


