



More-Than-Digital Meaning-Making: Paratexts of the Postdigital

Lesley Gourlay¹

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I write this commentary as a companion piece to Ibrar Bhatt's 'Postdigital Possibilities in Applied Linguistics' (2023), published in September. I'm late, very late, having agreed to write it over the summer. I have a book deadline at the end of the year, I agreed to do this Special Issue on 'Postdigital/More-Than-Digital Meaning-Making' after Ibrar suggested it because I'm fascinated by the topic, but I've kept putting it off and feeling a bit uneasy that I 'should' exclusively focus on my book. As on previous occasions, Petar Jandrić's patience has allowed my deadline to be repeatedly delayed.

So, it's no longer summer here in the UK, instead, it's November. I'm writing this in the middle of the night due to severe jetlag. My laptop is the only light in the room. I took a picture of a tree while on a day trip after a conference last week and put it on the laptop as wallpaper. It's a huge eucalyptus, shot close up, in afternoon sunlight. While reading for this piece, I've found myself placing the icons of pdfs of the papers by various scholars on the image of the trunk of the tree, vertically, as if scaling it. I have included one of my own, as I can't quite remember what I wrote in it but feel it may be connected to this piece. The other authors' surnames line up the tree bark. Some of them are people I know personally. Others are only names to me, plus maybe pictures on their university websites. We talk about voice in academic writing a lot, but right now, I can't hear the voices of the ones I know 'in real life'. But when I read their words, I can 'hear' their accents in my mind. They are not present. But I feel like right now, I am somehow part of a temporary, fleeting, secluded gathering with them—at least until this paper is written. Maybe I should place the icons around the bottom of the tree, I think. After that, maybe we will be woven in something like a fabric.

I'm a very poor typist. So bad that I need to look at the keyboard and only use a couple of fingers on each hand. My hands tap at the keyboard while I look at

✉ Lesley Gourlay
l.gourlay@ucl.ac.uk

¹ UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

the letters, which glow in the dark. I stop after each sentence to look up at the bright rectangle in front of me to check if I have spelled everything correctly. I know from experience that if I don't do this, I might get a long stretch of text with a red line under it, misspelled and incomprehensible, causing me to either delete it and write it again more slowly, or ask the spellchecker for help. The laptop tells me it is nearly out of battery. I move carefully to avoid walking anyone up. I plug it in, then find myself fiddling around with the plug and socket. Eventually, it connects and I hear the faint 'ping' the laptop makes when it's connected to the power supply. The screen glows brighter. It's almost 3 am. I feel a sharp need for a coffee but don't want to make noise, so I make do with a slug of tap water. I pause. I look at the word count.

Introduction

Unsure how to begin this piece, I wrote the paragraphs above. They do not adhere to conventional academic writing, and as I wrote them, I wondered if I could even include them in this commentary. But I have decided I will, as I would like to suggest that this piece of description about my own particular, mundane, and unremarkable experience of writing, might reveal something about the nature of what I am calling *more-than-digital meaning-making*. I use the term meaning-making expansively, to take in reading in addition to the production of text, speech, or the use of other semiotic resources, as it seems to me that meaning-taking is also meaning-making in some sense.

Relationality and Copresence

Re-reading my account of beginning this piece, I realise that it first emerged via relationality with others. Through a combination of Ibrar and I listening to each others' academic talks at conferences, through conversations and emails, we reached a point where the idea for this Special Issue came about. I would not have come up with it on my own. So, there is an element of knowing a person in real life and over a long time which has led to this piece of work.

Another related aspect is a sense of duty towards others. I agreed to do it, then felt like maybe I didn't have time, almost dropped out, but thought I would be letting Ibrar and Petar down if I did. I have to confess that without these threads of relationality, I have pulled out of writing another piece recently. I felt bad, but the person was a name on an email, not someone I *know*. A sense of relationality is also present when reading some of the articles I have used to inform this piece, in the cases where I know the author 'in real life'. Memories, previous conversations in person, and my personal history of travel and attending events intertwine in my reading with my consideration of academic ideas.

Emergence

Another element which has led to this piece is its emergence over time as a text. Before the text, there has been at a period of talking about it, considering it, proposing it, discussing deadlines, and so on. So that is the organisational background to its emergence. I have an email subfolder tracing that otherwise occluded thread. But there are several other threads I am (partially) aware of, from my own work and its history. My PhD in Applied Linguistics, many years ago. The nagging feeling that there is something about texts, meaning-making, and the postdigital that I am fascinated by but can never quite put my finger on. (Interesting that we use the idea of the hand to describe understanding.) All the various texts I have written, almost all of them are linked to this one, even if very faintly and tangentially. There is a sense of a hinterland behind me as I write, or echoes, or a loosely woven fabric of some kind.

Embodiment and Materiality

As I described in my opening section, I started writing this because I cannot sleep. My body clock is disturbed. I had hoped to write it last week, but I was also deeply jetlagged on arrival at the distant conference. My biological being and reality are not something which can be overcome through the medium of digital technology, I am reminded. My inability to type is a result of never having trained myself in terms of the motor skill required. This is an embodied limitation. Materiality is also always salient. I dropped my laptop on a hard floor in the summer, and the screen was damaged. In the period between breaking it and having it repaired, I could do no writing. Without the material device, no amount of virtuality could allow me to make meaning in a digital medium. My handwriting is illegible even to me.

Ephemeral Speech

Another element which has led to this text has been speech. That has been in various forms, including academic talks, question sessions, group discussions, one-to-one conversations, and more recently, Zoom calls. A lot of talking has taken place in which the tensile strength of ideas and arguments has been tested, knots have been formed, some have unravelled, and some have looked more-or-less trustworthy. All of this talk has been unrecorded, ephemeral, often circular, unfinished, intermittent, unpolished, tentative, and even throwaway. But some of it gradually coheres, spinning threads of ideas through relationality, emergence, embodiment, and materiality. Voices behind the text—some sort of substrate. A cloth of some sort emerges.

More-Than-Digital

In a recent book chapter (Gourlay 2023), I proposed the concept of the ‘more-than-digital’ as a response to what I consider to be some weaknesses in the notion of the postdigital. My contention was that, despite growing recognition of socio-material perspectives in studies of the postdigital, there is a transhumanist-inflected tendency to still adhere to notions of transcendence of the biological, the embodied, and the material in the concept. Additionally, I argued that some discourses surrounding the postdigital tend to suggest that there is an equivalence between digital connection and physical co-presence; effectively arriving at a position that there is no real need for people to meet in person, as we are able to use digital technologies instead, such as Zoom.

This relates to my further point in the chapter, that because these technologies encourage surveillance and recording, unrecorded ephemeral experiences such as conversation may be overlooked; or in a more extreme outcome, opportunities for spoken face-to-face conversation may be lost altogether in a logic of efficiency which privileges technologies such as video conferencing over real-life meetings. If writing is seen as intertwined with relationality and previous ephemeral speech, then the replacement of the ‘analog’ with the digital may have a negative effect on writing, in addition to other deleterious outcomes; Sax (2022) argues against a false post-pandemic digital utopia, instead making the case for a ‘more human future’.

The Phenomenology of Writing Online

Van Manen and Adams (2009: 10) pose the question ‘[i]s writing by means of online technologies affected in a manner that differs significantly from the older technologies of pen on paper, typewriter, or even the word processor in an off-line environment?’ in order to investigate the phenomenological features of online writing with a focus on space, in particular, focusing on nearness and distance, proximity, and relationality. They set out that to write, we need to find a *phenomenological space* by positioning ourselves bodily, mentally, and temporally. When that space has been found, we can then ‘enter that other space, the space opened by the words that transports us away from our everyday reality to the reality of the text’ (van Manen and Adams 2009: 12).

Van Manen and Adams (2009: 12) remind us that writing with a pencil and paper results in a text with substantiality in terms of its physical existence, ‘[b]ut digital writing involves a less substantial and more ethereal form of sedimentation’. Insightfully, they point out that the notion of the ‘space’ of a digital text is not in fact metaphorical:

Space carries the meaning of temporal and physical expanse as well as the time spent in an experience. When we open up a book or when we open a new page on our word processor and we enter the perspectival space of the text we enjoy a temporal experience of opening ourselves to, and an opening of, the world evoked by the words of the text. Perhaps the experiential meaning of the

space of the text lies in this ‘opening’ that we seek but never quite find. (van Manen and Adams 2009: 12)

They also remind us of how the handwritten essays of the past displayed the messiness of the editing process, with crossings out, notes in the margin, even smaller pieces of paper stuck on, while the digitally typed text erases evidence of this process and appears clean and ‘finished’.

Although individuals have distinct typing patterns, digital text appears uniform, while handwriting is observably personal, idiosyncratic, and unique. However, although digitally typed text may appear ‘finished’, it also has the quality of being constantly open to revision and change. Once the deadline has come, however, the text must be relinquished. As van Manen and Adams (2009: 13) put it, ‘[f]rom now on it will lead a life of its own. It will constitute a *textorium*, a space for others to enter—to gaze at what may reveal itself, with reference to the notion of the autonomy of a text (Barthes 1977; Foucault 1977).

Van Manen and Adams (2009: 17) discuss the nature of digital textual communication in a context where no other modality is available, pointing out that there is no access in this mediatic context to ‘the pre-reflective, tacit understandings of another’s bodily being, voice and gesture, smell and presence’. Although contemporary digital practice involves video conferencing, it remains the case that much of digital communication is in a textual format. Van Manen and Adams conclude that

Online computer technologies intensify the phenomenology of writing—they speed up, accelerate, compel, draw us into the virtual vortex of the experience of writing—while simultaneously raising questions about the potential loss of reflectivity, the unaccustomed yet easy publicness of publishing to the Web, and the uncharted complexity of human relation through text. (van Manen and Adams 2009: 20-21)

Adams continues this line of inquiry with a (2016) piece focused on the ‘gestures of writing’, characterising using a word processor as ‘no mere mechanical pressing of keys, but an intricate ballet of writerly reading eyes and readerly writing hands, caught up in a dynamic environment algorithmic paratexts and copy-paste thinking’ (Adams 2016: 479). Again drawing on van Manen, and also on the work of Flusser, who regards writing as ‘a gesture which occurs on several ontological levels’ (Flusser 1991 in Roth 2012: 27; see also Flusser 2011, 2014; Marin 2021), Adams focuses on the ‘lived materiality of writing’ (Adams 2016: 480). As she puts it:

To understand writing at this level, we must attend not only to the *Aufforderungscharakter* - the perceptual and actional endowments – of its multiple instruments of inscription, but also to its grafting, scratching, penetrating gestures; to the surfaces that writing informs, transforms, or even defaces; to the institution of body habit formations; and to the intertwining and encroachments of writing traditions. (Adams 2016: 481)

Adams (2016: 481) brings this sensibility to an exploration of the lifeworld of the writer using a digital word processor, ‘where the lived writing body encounters and intermingles with algorithmed writing machines and scripts’. She attempts

to apprehend the nature of digital writing by means of focusing on breakdowns, specifically on when a technology fails, with reference to Heidegger's analysis of the hammer as a 'broken tool', which through its brokenness becomes *present-at-hand* (Heidegger 1978), Ihde's (1979, 1983, 1990) postphenomenological varying-the-example approach, Latour's (1996) Actor-Network Theory as applied to breakdowns, and McLuhan's work in media ecology (McLuhan, Hutchon, and McLuhan 1977).

Adams writes about having injured her writing hand, and the experience of struggling to write with the other hand, with the insight that '[c]learly, orthographic literacy inheres in one's own body, but is most finely expressed through one's hands' (Adams 2016: 482). She sees hands typing together as having 'a unique corpus of keystroke dances and jigs' (Adams 2016: 482). For her, '[t]here is no question of encroaching on one another's space: my fingers and hands *are* the space' (Adams 2016: 482). Drawing on the work of French literary theorist Gerard Genette, Adams explores what Genette (1997) calls *paratexts*, 'accompanying productions' which bind together the reader and a text:

More than a boundary or a scaled border, the pretext is, rather, a *threshold*, or – a word [Jorge Luis] Borges uses apropos of preface – a 'vestibule' that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an 'undefined zone' between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either side [turned toward the text] or outside [turned toward the world's disclosure about the text], an edge, or as Philippe Lejeune puts it, 'a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text. (Genette 1997: 1-2 in Adams 2016: 488)

The paratexts of a book consist of elements such as the title, chapter names, the cover, dust jacket, and the paper, all of which in Genette's terms make up the book's *vestibular space* - 'the liminal space through which a text finds its form and shelter' (Adams 2016: 489), referencing Jorge Luis Borges's vestibular preface, or *zaguán* in Spanish, which describes a long hallway at the entrance to a house (Genette 1997: 273) (Fig. 1).

Adams discusses the nature of paper as the substrate for writing, with reference to Derrida's provocation; '[h]asn't "withdrawal" always been the mode of being, the process, the very movement of what we call paper?' (Derrida 2005: 50 in Adams 2016: 489). Paper as a material here is seen as a backdrop, a 'beneath', and archival substrate to writing.

Adams then poses the question as to the nature of the archival substrate of a Word document. In the rest of the essay, Adams describes the experience of writing in Word, compared to handwriting in her journal in a coffee shop, '[m]y computer is littered with unfinished papers, snippets of beginnings. My journal, on the other hand, is *in media res*: always in the middle of things. No beginning, no end'. (Adams 2016: 491) However, she describes the word processor as follows:

its backlit, pixelated surface more regularly provides loom for a different kind of experimental weaving, of tracing back and forth and through lines already laid down. Blocks of previously woven texts, sentences, or para-

graphs may be moved about whole cloth, tried here and then there, ragged edges retailored to fit. This windowed vestibule of writing is a place of laying down alphabetic threads of meaning, of reading, writing, and rewriting, of essay and reflection, of refitting, customising, and polishing. Of copy, cut, and paste. (Adams 2016: 491)

Adams goes on to examine the algorithmic paratexts of Word, in particular, focusing on the features of spell-check and autocorrect, and the gestural routines they bring forth. For her, learning to write involves ‘habituating to a complex of routines and conventions. In the context of the word processor, writing hands and reading eyes become further entangled and silently supported by a host of sophisticated algorithms and paratextual possibilities’. (Adams 2016: 496).

Skare (2020) also considers the concept of the paratext with reference to digital documents. She references the increased recognition of the materiality of texts in new media studies (e.g., Hayles 2003). Focusing on the case of a physical book being remediated through digitisation, she poses the question of what then happens to its material and paratextual features. She points out what she calls the ‘explosion growth’ of paratexts in the digital world, such as the sequencing of a film into episodes or hyperlinks which can be clicked in an ebook. With reference to Benzon’s (2013) notion of DVD *bootleg paratextuality*, she gives the example of a DVD set of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy of films, which includes extra content, and ‘multiple palimpsestic viewings of the films themselves made possible by the four separate audio commentary tracks available for each film in the trilogy’ (Skare 2020: 454). In the next section, I will seek to advance Adams’s inquiry into how the concept of the paratext might shed light on more-than-digital meaning-making.

Fig. 1 A *zaguán* (Wikipedia 2023)



Paratexts of the More-Than-Digital

It is worth considering in depth then what might constitute a ‘vestibule’ in the context of the postdigital/more-than-digital. A further example could be another mundane one, such as checking email.

To read my email, I must first physically pick up and open a material device, my laptop. I touch the lid and curl my fingers under it to open it. It is cold to the touch. My eyes take in the bright glow of the screen and the black rows of keys on the keyboard with backlit letters, numbers, and symbols. This is the first step into the vestibule. It’s a few days since I wrote the passage at the start of this piece, and my screen is now filled with a photograph I took while on holiday in Italy earlier this year. It’s the bright blue of a cove where I used to swim twice a day. I am reminded of the crunch of the small stones under my feet. I see the large, rough volcanic rock where I would pause under the shade while swimming out. I chose this picture as my wallpaper because I want to look at that particular, exact cove and feel the emotions my memory of my specific embodied experience invokes, which would not be generated by a stock image of a beautiful beach I have never visited. The picture is my attempt to connect with materiality and the lived experience of the rough sand, the chilly water in the morning, the sounds of the regular swimmers chatting, and my fumbling attempts to converse with them in halting Italian.

In the middle of the photograph, a small rectangle invites me to log on to the laptop. I do this by placing my finger on the top right-hand button, which ‘knows’ my fingerprint, that part of my biological being. It causes the machine to ‘open’, allowing me to take a further step into the long zaguán leading me to the email. I can now see a series of folders, as the photograph becomes a backdrop to the ‘desktop’. These contain files which relate to the work I have in progress, and I am immediately reminded of my various writing deadlines and doctoral student work for review. I feel a mild flutter of stress, remembering how much I have to do. Along the bottom of the screen, lining the shore of the cove, there is a ‘dock’ which shows 16 icons representing programs I can choose from; these are the most frequent ones I use.

The email icon is second on the left. I tend to ‘read’ the icons left to right, like a text and have placed the email one there as it is probably my most frequently used application. I place two fingers of my right hand on the trackpad, moving the cursor over the icon, and I ‘double click’, hearing the light tapping sound twice. One more step down the vestibule. The email window is divided into three vertical strips. The left-hand one shows my inbox and various folders. The word ‘inbox’ is on the top, and if I have new emails, it shows as bold, and to the right, the number of new emails is shown. I am about to click on the inbox when I hear a ‘ping’, or more of a ‘gadung’, which I recognise as the sound WhatsApp makes when a new message arrives. I hesitate; I am curious to know what has arrived on WhatsApp. I use that application for being in touch with friends or for non-work purposes. I double-click on the green WhatsApp icon on the right of the dock. I see a column of ‘chats’, each with a picture icon. Some of the pictures are of friends,

others represent an activity. I see that someone from my local yoga studio has messaged about the class this morning, they are on their way. I think about how I should really have gone to the class, and I then picture my regular yoga classmates getting ready to chant and then begin their Ashtanga practice, in the warm yoga studio, with the sounds of the street outside.

I then go back to the email. (It seems that the *zaguán* has numerous side corridors that can lead me away, distract me, and present multiple, shifting doorways.) I click on my inbox; 5 new emails have arrived overnight. I know from experience that overnight emails are often spam, so I quickly scan them and delete two which do not look 'genuinely' for me. (Although the email is my private correspondence space, it is porous and constantly allows in unwanted messages from people or agencies I do not know. The 'junk' folder siphons off the more dangerous messages, often offensive ones too.) I can see a number of those have also accumulated overnight. I decide there are three emails which I need to read and respond to on the basis of the identity of the sender, or the subject line, or both. I see that one of them is probably important, but I feel it looks somewhat dull from the subject line and the fact it is an all-staff circular. Another is from a work colleague who is also a friend. I open that one first as I feel the tug of seeking a dopamine hit. I'm working at home, I probably won't see anyone all day, and I like the idea of 'contact' with my friend. However, I am also keen to know what is happening in world news. I feel the tensions of knowing things have happened overnight. I click on the web browser and open an electronic newspaper. I glance over the headlines. I then feel the urge to open the headline story, but I also feel aware that I should be looking at my email that I have already half-started that and it's sitting there, waiting. I am acutely conscious of the close, omnipresent, vast, breathing labyrinth of the Internet which I am on the threshold of entering. I close the website and go back to the email. Finally, after these various steps, I click on the subject heading from the colleague and begin to read the text of the message.

Discussion

This brief description of the mundane act of checking my email on my laptop reveals, I suggest, some features of postdigital/more-than-digital meaning-making. Focusing on the paratexts of email allows us to see how fundamentally different in nature the 'threshold' of a digital text is, in comparison with those of a physical book. The paratexts of the book, as discussed by Genette (1997), have the effect of focusing the reader on what is to come. The cover, the title, the preface, and other features arguably have the effect of narrowing the vestibule, clarifying the way to enter the core of the text, the inner sanctum. Using Borges' (1998) metaphor of the *zaguán*, it is a clear and straight hallway of meaning, leading one to enter the main 'house' of the text. In contrast, the threshold and vestibule of the digital text contain multiple doors which, if pushed and entered, lead the reader into alternative pathways, and a multiplicity of labyrinthine passages open up, which are as infinite as the endless shelves of Borges's *Library of Babel* (Borges 1998).

Where the physical book is largely a singular entity when held in the hands, although the laptop opens like a book on its side, but is more like a form of a palimpsest, consisting of multiple layers of digital text and other forms of meaning-making, which can be present simultaneously, either by having multiple application windows open (again we see the metaphor of a house), or simply being present as a possibility. This multiple, complex, and entangled nature is, I would propose, one important feature of more-than-digital meaning-making. The entangled nature of these texts is also apparent in the equally entangled emotions they evoke. Stress, sense of focus, duty towards work, curiosity, desire for personal connection, memories of places ‘in real life’, awareness of activities taking place at a distance, single lines in a newspaper which summarise large-scale complex events, and profound human tragedies. The presence of generative artificial intelligences, the surveillant nature of social media—all of these threads are present and active in the quiet metal rectangle which transfixes my eyes for so much of my day.

I have no conclusions to this piece, only more questions, and a desire to continue to consider the nature of more-than-digital meaning-making, to try to apprehend *what it is like*, in all the profound strangeness inherent in the apparent mundanity of these gestural routines.

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