

## The exhibition as a multimodal pedagogical text

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In recent years, museum professionals, visitors and politicians have directed their interest towards the museum as a new arena for communication and learning. In this article, I explore the museum as an educational site from a multimodal and social semiotic approach. This approach implies a view of communication and learning as a social process of sign-making, where the meaning of a message is realised across several resources or modes of communication. As an example, I study the characteristics and the design of an archaeological exhibition at the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm, Sweden. The exhibition is described and explored as a multimodal pedagogical text. In my ‘reading’ of the text, I examine how the design encourages a specific reading path and how it creates coherence through ‘framing’ and through the use of colour. I examine how meaning is made through objects, text, image and sound.

## Introduction

In recent years, museums have often been presented as places where people can meet, learn and communicate by actively engaging in the construction of meaning from exhibits (Hein 1998; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Bradburne 2002, Smeds 2003; Fors 2006). Studies which focus on analyses of exhibitions usually proceed from a museological and/or an aesthetic point of view. Early studies often operated from a traditional, Shannon and Weaver model of communication, which suggested that the visitors (in some way) received the intended message of the exhibitor, gave feedback to the exhibitor, which enabled the exhibitor to modify the message (Hooper-Greenhill 1991). However, the problems of this linear model have become evident to many researchers, which now emphasize the complexity of communication.

In recent years, some researchers have been concerned with aspects of form and aesthetics in exhibitions (Mordhorst & Wagner Nielsen 2000), while others have taken an interest in the meaning of exhibitions, or to extent the exhibition as text (Smeds 2000, Hooper-Greenhill 1991). In the latter studies, the exhibition and its structure are being described as a text, which in its extension is 'read' by the audience when it comes to the museum and engages with the exhibition. Smeds (2000) discusses how the reading depends upon the social and the cultural background of the curators, their view of history and society and their aims in terms of what they want to show to the audience. In these studies, the analysis of the exhibition seems to be mostly about objects and language as writing.

In what follows, I will suggest a perspective that takes into account the profound changes that has taken place in our society the last decades (see e.g. Bradburne 2002:17). These changes are visible in the multitude of signs, messages, images and other modes that characterize our everyday life. Kress and others have described these changes in terms of multimodality, where language is only one and not necessarily the dominant mode of representation. In this paper, I want to take a look at the exhibition as an educational site, where I discuss communication and learning from a multimodal and social semiotic perspective (see e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen 2001). In such a perspective, communication and learning is seen as social processes of sign-making. Multimodality also entails attending to all resources and communicative modes involved, and not just the linguistic aspects of the exhibition as media of communication. I suggest that this approach also can contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of learning in museums. The multimodal approach offers a perspective on communication and representation, which allows me to take into account the many signs, messages, images and other modes that characterize an exhibition.

The discussion focuses on a specific exhibition, at the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm, called Prehistories. The analysis of this exhibition starts from an overall account of the multimodal resources that are available in the exhibition. What can be said about the possibilities for learning in this setting? Central in the article is the concept of design, which here has reference to the active sign-making process, where the interest of the participants is crucial for both the design of the message and the meaning which is made (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001, Kress et al. 2001). This work is part of a larger study which focuses on questions about the way visitors make meaning from what is being offered to them in terms of various resources and representations. In this particular paper, I will not deal with the response of the visitors or with the story of the curators. Instead, I will concentrate on the resources available in a specific exhibition, as I introduce some theoretical tools that can be used in a multimodal analysis.<sup>1</sup>

## Social semiotics and multimodality

In this paper, I use a multimodal and social semiotic approach (see e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen 1996/2006, Kress & van Leeuwen 2001, Kress et al 2001, Hodge & Kress 1998). Since multimodality can be said to be linked with social semiotic theory, the central concepts of this perspective also derive from semiotics. For instance, semiotics starts from the assumption that language and the cultural world can be read as signs. Kress and van Leeuwen give the following definition of a sign: 'A sign is a unit in which a form has been combined with a meaning or, put differently, a form has been chosen to be the carrier of meaning.' (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996/2006:4). In sign-making, objects or entities are represented in different modes. The sign-maker makes a selection of what is seen as the most important aspects of the object to be represented, and finds the best means to make the representation. In a social semiotic approach, a sign is thus never arbitrary, but motivated by the interest of the sign-maker (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996/2006:8).

Kress & van Leeuwen describe multimodality as ' [...] the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined [...]' (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001:20). The concept mode is thus very central in this approach. Modes such as sound, colour, image and writing are given equal attention, as they work together in an ensemble, in the realisation of a message (Kress, 2003: 170). Further, Kress argues that different modes have different affordances, or different representational potentials. This means that potential meanings are realised differently within different modes; they are used for different purposes and are constructed upon different principles (Kress et al. 2001, Kress 2003, Kress & van Leeuwen 1998/2006). Writing, for instance, is temporally governed since the author arranges units in a specific sequence; one word is placed after another. Image, on the other hand, has a spatial organization and presents its elements centrally, marginally, at the top or at the bottom of the space (Kress 2003: 2).

Multimodality emphasizes how the producer of a text chooses from among several semiotic resources in order to best communicate with the reader. Interest is equally directed towards interpretation and to the way people engage with the resources of a context, in order to make meaning (Kress et al 2001:2). Within the multimodal perspective, the notion of design gets a somewhat new meaning. It's accentuated how the readers of today form their own reading of a multimodal text, makes selections and decide in what order the text is to be read. This process is discussed in terms of 'reading as design' (Kress 2003). In this sense, I prefer not to discuss learning or meaning making in terms of 'reception', since this leaves out possibilities to focus on the visitors interests and the design-aspects of learning. If we are to consider the entire communicational process at a museum, we can argue that the design is realized only when it has been interpreted by the visitor, even though these interpretations may differ from the intentions of the curator. In this paper, I use the term 'text' in a wider semiotic sense, in which I also include the exhibition as a whole. Hodge & Kress refers to the term as 'a structure of messages or message traces which has a socially ascribed unity.' (Hodge & Kress 1988:6).

The reading of a text also depends upon the organization of the text, and if it is coherent and logic to the reader. The concept of framing is used to show how different elements in a visual composition can be disconnected from each other, for instance by lines or empty spaces. Equally, the absence of such devices can also imply continuity and that the elements belong together (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996/2006: 203-204, 2001:2).

In line with this reasoning is also the question of 'reading paths' in texts, or how texts can be read. The book, for example, is to be read linearly from the first page to the last. However in my view, an exhibition is structured differently, which I will discuss further below. Kress & van Leeuwen have examined the reading of newspaper text, and state that the reader first 'scans' the page in order to get an overview of the elements it contains and further how these

elements belong together. Then, the reader tends to start with the most apparent elements and moves later on to the rest (Kress & van Leeuwen 1998:205). I start from the assumption that this reasoning is valid also for the reading of exhibitions.

## Pedagogical text

As others have suggested, there are several similarities between an exhibition and a textbook, (c.f. Axelsson 2006). In both media, there is a mixture of facts, explanations and stories which exercise influence on the reader/visitor. Both media contains regulations. Exhibitions can be used as tools for learning, just like textbooks. Both exhibitions and textbooks deals with storing of knowledge and they work as a social memory (Selander 2003a:2). There are also some differences that can be noted. Unlike some (older) textbooks, in an exhibition, the visitor is in most often free to choose what to engage with. In textbooks, the pupil must often read everything, or the pages decided by the teacher. One might also argue that teaching is not as central in museums as in schools, since other aims might be just as important. The museum is often presented as a meeting place, or as a place for entertainment or bildnung in a wider sense. Nevertheless, when we visit an exhibition, we learn what is counted as the central knowledge of for instance prehistory. There has been a selection and a delimitation of the content which is to be presented (Selander 1988:17).

Thus, it seems like there are more similarities than differences between the two media. Nevertheless, an exhibition is not a book, so we need to find a concept that is closer to its characteristics. Selander has suggested that the notion pedagogical text can replace the notion of teaching materials, since it contains a wider understanding of what a text can be. The pedagogical text reproduces existing knowledge and it explains the subject content according to educational standards. The relation between the producer of such a text and its reader is expected to be more asymmetric than in many other situations of communication, in that the producer is more knowledgeable and well-informed on the subject content (Askeland et al. 1996:166). In most cases, this is true also for exhibitions, which makes it possible to describe the exhibition as a pedagogical text.

Selander suggests that texts (together with images), can be divided into the following genres, according to their design and purpose: texts can be explanatory, persuasive, instructive or narrative (my translation). Visitors that come to the museum probably know what to expect when they visit an exhibition and they know how to act. On some level, visitors are perhaps also familiar with its, say persuasive or narrative, powers. This pre-understanding may give the visitor/reader some directions for how to read the exhibition (Selander 2003b).

According to Selander, a text is persuasive if it contains orders, advice or suggestions. The purpose is to convince the recipient and to affect the recipients' attitudes and actions. (One might add that other texts may be persuasive, even though they don't give orders or suggestions in an open way). Instructive texts also use orders or requests, but they have a chronological structure that have to be followed step by step. An explanatory text contains verbs like 'is' or 'has' in order to explain a specific subject or notion. Narrative texts often refer to individuals, places and events. Such a text contains verbs in the past tense, like 'were', 'had' and 'did'.

A text doesn't have a fixed meaning, but can be said to gain new meaning each time a person reads it. However, the type of text gives the reader certain directions for the reading. Also the producer of a text might have had a target group or a 'model reader' in mind during the production of the text (Eco 1984).

In what follows, I will make a description of the exhibition Prehistories, which will serve as an example and a starting point for the issues and concepts that I wish to introduce. The exhibition will be examined as a multimodal, pedagogical text, where I will take a look at

how different modes contribute to the meaning that is made in the exhibition. I will then move on to discussing its design and possible reading paths.

### Prehistories - an example

The exhibition Prehistories was opened in November 2005. It deals with prehistory from a Nordic perspective, and can be characterized as 'traditional' in the sense that the focus is on the archaeological material, which is presented in chronological order. It has a 'human perspective'; it highlights individuals in stead of the big narrative or structures of history. A number of individuals are staged in scenery with moving images, giant pictures and photographs, illustrations, sounds and lots of different materials. Each room contains 'architecturally' shaped showcases alongside signboards on the wall, together with separate handouts. There are a lot of things to look at, but no objects may be handled or touched, nor are there any stationary IT-artefacts that encourage activity. Apart from signboards and images, there are sounds (birds singing, babies crying, sounds from the ocean etc.) and moving image/film. There is an audio guide, which offers additional information about the objects and the themes in the exhibition.

In the previous paragraph, I introduced the concept of the pedagogical text. Following Selander, such a text can be explanatory, persuasive, instructive or narrative. I believe that all of these types can be found within exhibitions in general, but when studying Forntider, I propose that this particular exhibition is in part both explanatory and narrative. This particular exhibition is explanatory in the sense that the written texts are indirect and speaks in third person. These fragments of writing come from big signboards: 'These types of helmets were adequate, but their principal significance were to signal the power and the high position of the owner...' (authors translation). In the writing, there are verbs like 'is' or 'has' in order to explain a specific subject or notion: 'They are called passage graves and are megalithic tombs. These types of graves are well known over a great area, from Portugal in the south to Norway in the north'. Explanatory images occur in the exhibition, as in maps showing the area of distribution of specific objects, illustrations showing techniques or the usage of objects, or pictures showing humans' use of the landscape.

Further, this particular exhibition is narrative as a whole, by referring to individuals, places and events. The writing contain verbs in the past tense, like 'were', 'had' and 'did': 'The woman from Stora Köpinge had a short skirt made of wool strings...'. In the exhibition, there are also narrative images showing individuals performing specific actions in a specific situation, as for example, an image of a woman holding a bow. She is placed in a forest and seems to be searching for her prey. There are also images of roman soldiers and troops in different settings. The narrativity of the text also has to do with its linear structure in space, where one room is placed after another. It also involves time, since it has a clear beginning and an end, starting with Stone Age and ending with Iron Age (Cobley 2003). The separate rooms are structured differently, though, and can't be characterized in the same way.

I can not find any of the characteristics of the other two genres; the exhibition is neither a persuasive nor an instructive text.

### Resources and modes

A multimodal analysis can start from a survey of the wide range of resources used to produce the text. The different modes of communication which are used are offered as a potential for the visitors' engagement with the exhibition. In my description of the exhibition Prehistories, I can notice a strategy, where different modes often 'do' different things. Writing, for instance, is used differently than image. Colour, is used in a specific way in the exhibition, just like sound.

In the exhibition, photos are sometimes used to cover entire walls. These images are very important for the expression of the exhibit; it is often around images that the main message is constructed. On the left side of one room, there is such a photo, of a forest. Here, the archaeological findings frame and support the meaning already mediated by the photo. In the room, the text on the signboards gives us a picture of time and tells us about the individuals that are included in a narrative. Moving images are used somewhat differently than the big photos. When photos have almost a fixed meaning, the moving image is more complex and flexible in its expression. In a film, the expression can quickly change within the same scene. There is a projection of a river on one entire wall, a moving image of the ocean on another and also a moving image of a sunset. These moving images show us what happens. In some cases, archaeological findings are placed centrally in the room, attracting the gaze of the visitors. In one room, there is a grave with the skeleton of a man and a child placed in the centre of the room. One can assume that this exhibit attracts the attention of many visitors, and seems to be the starting point of the narrative this time. In this case, writing is often used to describe events in a sequence, while image is better for describing spatial relations between different elements.

Another example is the film in the beginning which just like 'ordinary' texts tells a story as sequences in time. The important difference is that the film shows us what happens. The film is informative since it represents ideas and interpretations about the archaeological material culture. It shows us what prehistoric man might have looked like, what kind of clothes he might have worn and what kind of tools or objects he might have handled. Sound is used to add an extra dimension to the scene, which is not possible to achieve with just images or writing. Music, a sparkling fire and bird singing appeals to the sentiment and to what's broadly humane through time and space.

How do different modes work together in adding meaning to a message, as multimodal ensembles? In a few places, I can notice that the ambition to address the general public doesn't always succeed. There is a clash between what the written text tells and what the scenery implies. For instance, in the display of the 'Roman Iron Age', the text says that the Nordic elite imported roman goods and that the higher classes were affected by the customs and lifestyle of the Roman Empire. The scenery, with its roman columns, may lead the visitor in the 'wrong' direction, so that s/he thinks that we might have left the Nordic perspective and now find ourselves in Rome? For someone who doesn't have a pre-understanding of this, or for a person that does not read everything on the signboards, it might be very difficult to make that connection.

## The design of the text

Who is the model reader/model visitor in this case? Do the curators deliberately turn to specific groups or individuals? Such an ideal limits the semiotic resources that can be used for organizing the message of the text. And by extension this means that the design (the form) also says something about how the reading and the learning can happen. In Prehistories, the model reader is primarily an 'interested general public'. This is evident in signboards with texts that are 'non-academic' and easy to read. In the sign boards, specific notions or terms are explained, like the Swedish notion *mjärde*: 'The fish was caught in a *mjärde* [a type of cage], a kind of funnel-shaped cage made of thin wooden bars'.

If a curator wants the audience to make meaning from a text, it has to be coherent and in some way linked together as a whole. It is not enough that the elements of each separate room are connected, there also needs to be coherence between the rooms. Websites often contain a menu or map which in an early stage displays the structure of the site. For exhibitions too, this is important, as a way for the visitors to get an overview and to see how the different parts are linked together and also how events are linked through history. To the visitor, the structure of

Prehistories can be difficult to apprehend, even though there is something like an illustrated index in the form of a film early in the exhibition. In the short sequences of the film, eight individuals represent different parts of prehistory. They also introduce questions tied to the circumstances of the archaeological finds: ‘what happened?’, ‘a sacrifice to the gods?’. These individuals give a very brief overview of the exhibition, but a proper map is actually missing. If a visitor would like to bring an audio guide along, there is a handout containing an index of all the features of the tour along with a site map that points out the different stops. This map can be quite helpful for those who want to navigate themselves inside the exhibition.

In Prehistories, there are walls which separate the different rooms from each other. In this way, themes around the different individuals appear in each room, like for instance life of the Iron Age aristocrats. These themes are marked off from each other, but not very strongly, since there are wide openings between the rooms and no doors. On the other hand, colours are used as to keep together these rooms as coherent periods of time. These periods span over more than one room, which means that colour has a textual function and forms coherence across several elements and rooms of the exhibition (cp. Kress & van Leeuwen 2001:57-58). The colours often begin when the old period stops and when the new period starts. They are also used to articulate aspects of a discourse of living during pre-historic time (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001: 25). Green is used for the beginning of the Stone Age, which spans over two rooms. The first rooms have been designed very much like a forest with trees and grass, with the context of the archaeological finds as a point of departure. This also says something about how the curator perceives life during the Stone Age: man in harmony with nature before the advent of agriculture, the ruling classes or technology. In the late Stone Age the colours are green, grey and brown, in order to reflect the life by the ocean and the cultivation of the landscape. Stones, sand, pictures of the ocean and of the landscape work together to enhance the impression in two rooms. The green colour is still used, as to imply the continuity of many aspects of Stone Age life. For Bronze Age, the colour is orange/yellow, since the sun is emphasized as important in the culture of the time. One big room is dedicated to this period, but the colour is also used for the beginning of the Iron Age. Finally, Red is used in the other three rooms of the Iron Age, which I have interpreted as representative of the colour of iron and perhaps of aggression and the roman god of war. In this way, the cohesion makes it easier for the visitor to understand how different elements in the exhibition are connected to each other. At the same time, the message to the visitor is that materials, customs, and society may be similar across periods. In this way, the shifts in history appear like a slow process of change.

What can be said about the reading path of this text? Do visitors read it like they would read a book, from left to right? Often, readers of newspaper texts start with the most apparent elements and then moves on to read the rest. I suggest that the same strategy is to be expected when it comes to the reading of exhibitions. The exhibition is constructed inside a rectangular space and consists of eight small rooms. The rooms are placed along a closed path with a clear beginning (Stone Age) and an end (Iron Age). Objects that are placed centrally will attract the visitors’ attention. In other cases, objects or arrangements that are noticeable for other reasons, for example by their colour, will probably be noticed first. In line with this reasoning is Kress and van Leeuwen’s understanding of design which is used to put forward the creative dimension of both producing and interpreting texts.

In my view, the design of this specific exhibition is structured into three levels. The first level is the entire exhibition, with a very linear structure of the different exhibit rooms, placed in a sequence one after another, with no entrances or exits along the way. In this way, visitors have to read the exhibition from beginning to end, even though they don’t have to read everything along the way. The second level focuses specifically each separate room, within which the message has a structure of its own. Inside each room, the structure is very much

like a hyper text on a website, with connections and links that in different ways takes the reader in different directions through the text (Karlsson & Ledin 2000:26). The text is 'open' in a sense that the choices made become decisive for the meaning-making process. The reading will imply that the reader chooses some parts and leaves out others, which also makes possible several different readings. The third level is to be found in the audio guide, which makes it possible to get more detailed information about selected objects in the exhibition. In front of some of the artefacts, one can press a button on the audio guide, which plays a recorded message. The guides are similar in structure to the previous level, but with a possibility to enter even more deeply into different themes. The structure is clearly hierarchic with tracks on different levels of different depths (Karlsson & Ledin 2000:26).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have introduced a multimodal and social semiotic approach to the analysis of exhibitions. Such an analysis makes visible the organisation of a text and emphasizes the resources which are available to learners in a possible learning situation. The analysis highlights that meaning is made through several modes, such as image, sound, colour and text. The article suggests that the exhibition can be read as a pedagogical text, and that visitors' reading depends upon the design and the characteristics of the text. The concept 'framing' is used to discuss how the exhibition creates coherence. In the paper, I have discussed how the design makes certain reading paths visible.

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1 In my forthcoming doctoral thesis, I ask questions about what resources are made available to visitors for making meaning? Which resources do visitors make use of in their meaning-making? What can be said about these meanings in relation to the curators' sense of the exhibition?

The multimodal analysis of the exhibition is used as a starting point for further research into the actual response of the visitors, as it provides a basis for an evaluation of the possibilities for learning. The ambition in the study has been to collect different kinds of data; video recordings of nine visits; visitors' own digital photos and their drawings/maps of the exhibition, plus interviews with visitors and with the producer.

The project is connected to a larger project, which is financed by the National Research Council; 'The museums, the exhibitions and the visitors: Meaning making in a new arena for learning and communication'. The larger project will start in 2007, and is planned in collaboration between Stockholm Institute of Education, Institute of Education in London and Umeå University.