This is the author-approved manuscript version of a journal article published in:

Rall, M. 2009. A multimodal social semiotic analysis of a museum rock art display. *The International Journal of Learning*. 16(9): 323-330.

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A Multimodal Social Semiotic Analysis of a Museum Rock Art Display

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Abstract: This paper will report on research on different design aspects of museum displays in a permanent and a mobile museum context. This research has been undertaken in order to understand how different aspects of museum displays contribute to meaning making. It looks at the interrelationship between different design elements and how these influence meaning making. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996; 2001) theory of multimodal discourse and on recent research on communication in museums (Ravelli: 2006; Meng in O'Halloran: 2006), this study considers why it is apposite to consider museums as multimodal, co-deploying different modes to make meaning. The paper investigates the design elements employed in museum displays, which include: linguistic design (labels and captions); visual design (objects on display, photographs and drawings); audio design (video recordings) and spatial design (lay-out of the display). The paper discusses a multimodal analysis of the rock art and rock engraving displays, drawing on inter alia the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996; 2001), which is done with the intention of formulating a metalanguage. It is envisaged that this metalanguage will enable museum practitioners and educators to talk about and better understand meaning making in museum displays and contribute to current debates on communication and meaning making in museums.

Keywords: Social Semiotics, Multimodality, Rock Art, Museum

Introduction

THIS PAPER IS based on a PhD study which investigates the different multimodal elements in a rock art display in a museum and in a mobile museum used in an outreach programme. The museum's education programme, focusing on San rock art, are explored to ascertain what these pedagocic sites enable and how they contribute to meaning making for a group of students who predominantly are disadvantaged black students living and schooling in townships in South Africa.

The study also investigates the semiotics of rock art and the semiotics of spirituality represented in rock art. It draws on multimodal theory as well as on museum-based communication theories to broaden the current debates on meaning making in museums. The design elements that comprise the rock art display, the interrelationships of the design elements and the semiotic weighting given to these elements are interrogated.

Very little research has been done that extends the communicative frameworks in museums beyond language, and little attention has been given to the notion that displays communicate through different design elements such as visual, audio and spatial design – namely a multimodal approach to communication. The notion that museums communicate not only through language has only been tentatively explored. Ravelli (2006:121) alludes to this by positing that 'in considering exhibitions and institutions as multi-modal, meaning-making texts', and by stating that 'the main purpose is to indicate the potential (author's italics) of this approach

and to show that an extension of the communicative frameworks beyond language, to broader notions of “text” can be a productive one’, particularly where the display relates to cultures which are neither western nor scribal.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2001) note that they are mainly concerned with the visual semiotic of western cultures, but do acknowledge that there are differences in the visual semiotic of western and non-western cultures, which this research explores. Research done in a South African context by Stein (2000, 2003, & 2008) and Newfield (2000) on non-verbal representation and non-western aesthetics contributes to knowledge of a non-western visual semiotic, in particular the tensions between different cultural and language groups, ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, and western and African forms of intellectual thought and culture.

By doing a multimodal social semiotic analysis of a San rock art display, this paper addresses the notion that literacy is multicultural and multimodal. The New London Group originated the term ‘multiliteracies’ in 1996 (Stein and Newfield, 2006), which challenges the idea of a ‘singular, universal literacy restricted to a monolingual, monocultural and rule-governed standard forms of language’. Language is no longer considered to be the central or only mode (Kress 2000:53). The tactile is examined in relation to the materiality of rock art and how this materiality is engaged with by the San.

Context and Issues of Power

This research is located in a present-day South African natural and social history museum, the Iziko South African Museum. Museums in South Africa developed out of a specifically European history and social practice. They have become part of an African landscape in complex ways that both reflect their origins in European imperialism, yet carry forward an ideal of preservation of valued cultural artefacts and public education. That museums have become part of the African landscape is reflected in the Iziko South African Museum’s mission statement: ‘Iziko Museums of Cape Town are African museums of excellence that empower and inspire people to respect our diverse heritage’.

Museums, which are pedagogic spaces, hold power, and cannot be seen as neutral, neither the displays nor what is communicated about dislays. Museums are authoritative institutions in which knowledge is generated and meaning is created and controlled through exhibitions. When private collections, that formed the basis of most public museums, were no longer in the private collections of princes and noblemen they continued to be shaped by the cultural élite. Further, as new and specialised methods of curating collections developed, a schism between the producers and consumers of knowledge, the expert and the layman, was created. The producers of museum discourse and those receiving this information are seldom of equal status. Access to cultural resources and knowledge is thus not evenly distributed (Davison 1991:90–91). South African museums have not always been accessible to all. During the apartheid era access to public institutions such as museums and botanical gardens was denied
to people not classified as ‘White’. The Iziko South African Museum, however, was always open to all. This resulted in the South African Museum being disadvantaged in other ways; the government subsidy was much smaller and staff salaries lower than in other museums.

It is in this context that the rock art display, /Qe – the power or rock art (see figures 2, 3 & 4), is situated. This display visually presents the richly detailed knowledge and beliefs

about the San's[1] spirit world, rain-making and healing that inspired the rock art that forms the focus of this display. The stories represented in this display are told from the perspective of the San. The focus is on the rich heritage of indigenous knowledge in South Africa that has been passed down from past generations in a culturally diverse population that has been expressed through story-telling, music, dance, healing practices, initiation practices, and in rock art and objects that are invested with symbolic value.

Multimodality and Museums

In creating a framework in which to address the questions posed in this paper, social semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis are drawn on.

Different affordances are given to different design elements in museum displays such as an object, label, diagram or photograph. Various social semioticians have looked at multimodality in relation to museums (Stenglin 2004, Meng 2004 & Ravelli 2000). When analysing the multimodal nature of museums, one needs to consider the display as a whole and the interrelationship between the design elements, or modes, that are analysed. The modes referred to are the linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial and audio. Cope and Kalantzis (2000) argue that multimodal meaning is much more than the sum of its linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial and audio modes of meaning, and that it involves processes of integration and moving between various modes.

In order to ascertain what semiotic weighting is given to the different design elements or modes in the rock art display, the relationship between these design elements or modes has to be explored.

Multimodality and Rock Art

The semiotic resources drawn on to theorise rock art are: the verbal, visual, spatial, three-dimensional, tactile, and directionality. According to Kress (1996:31) each different resource has its own potentiality, and limits. Kress (1996:18–19) argues that, as societies are not homogenous, messages produced by different people reflect this difference, and as such, in multimodal texts using images (the visual) and writing (the verbal), the writing may carry one set of meanings and the images another. It is therefore possible in some cultures for one mode of representation to 'take over' from another. The verbal can be subsumed by the visual and vice versa.

Rock art represents myths or stories, the verbal and the visual. This is communicated by the shaman, who enters a trance, by the telling of what they encountered in the spirit world. When returning from the spirit world and when no longer in trance, the San shamans use the representational resources available to them to communicate both visually and verbally what they encountered when in the spirit world. The resources drawn on the rock face make it possible to communicate what was encountered in the spirit world.

Rock art is multi-layered and multi-dimensional and therefore both the visual and the spatial designs are represented, and have different affordances. Unlike most western art, this art was often done over extended periods of time by many different artists who participated

[1]As the term 'Bushman' has strong derogatory connotations anthropologists, historians and archaeologists often use the term 'San' for hunter-gatherers (Skotness, 2007:84). The term 'San' is used in this research.

in creating panels (Lewis-Williams 1988:17). This resulted in the multi-layering of images on rock faces (See figure 1). The multi-dimensional aspects of rock art are manifest in the different materials used to make the inscriptions, as well as in the instances of images such as snakes 'entering' and 'exiting' the rock faces.

Materiality refers to what a particular culture provides as materials for meaning making (Jewitt and Kress 2003:14). Cultures select materials, which they then draw into meaning making. According to Jewitt and Kress, a range of materials are used by different cultures to make meaning, and the different materials have inherent qualities, which Jewitt and Kress call 'affordances'. They argue that the semiotic affordances of different materials are selected by people to make meaning.

This paper posits that an aspect of materiality, the tactile, is an important mode that contributes to meaning making of rock art. Aspects of this tactile mode include inscription technologies and the surfaces on which inscriptions are made. In rock art the surfaces are usually rock faces. The inscription are applied with fingers, sticks and feathers, using a mixture of ochre, charcoal, clay, fat, egg white, plant sap, and even blood, to create the image. Ochre pigment was sometimes used as a crayon, drawing directly on the rock face. Rock engravings are typically made on rocks or rock surfaces on plateaux, and are made by pecking away at the weathered surface of rocks with hard stones to expose the lighter stone underneath (Deacon 1998:14, Parkington 2003:39–42).

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996:231) note that different inscription technologies favour different modes of reception and that surface plays a particularly important role in meaning making as well physicality, the tangibility of the surface. The material on which rock art is produced, rock faces, can be considered a text design element or mode. San rock art incorporates the rock surfaces when painting, for instance, rain-animals, buck-headed snakes, realistic eland and human figures emerging from cracks in the rock. This suggests that the rock is permeable, which is the 'veil' through which the shaman moves when entering and leaving the spirit world. The rock face is thus considered an interface between the material and the spiritual worlds, and everything that is painted on this surface can be contextualised as belonging to the spirit world (Lewis-Williams 2004:179–181). The San, when painting, renewing and modifying painted images, engaged with belief about non-real, spiritual beings. As noted, Lewis-Williams (2004:71) adds that religion and spiritual matters were not separated from daily life for the San. The trance dance, through which the shamans went into a trance and thence into the spirit world, was a ritualised activity that made contact with the spirit world. Similarly rock art was a ritualised activity (Lewis-Williams, 2004: 95).

The gestural element, or mode, is also significant in meaning making, but does not have significance once rock art is removed from its origin and place, and re-presented, in a museum. The materiality of rock art is bound up with the gestural mode. The paintings when in situ were not only looked at, but also touched by the San. It is said for instance, that if a 'good' person places their hand on an image of an eland[2] , the power of this animal will flow from the image into the person.

Directionality is a semiotic resource in all cultures, and the way in which directionality is used has relations with other cultural systems, be it religious, philosophical or practical (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). Cultures which have long-established reading directions that are different from western cultures are likely to attach different values to these positions.

[2] The eland, an antelope, was considered by the San as the animal with the most potency (Lewis-Williams, 2004:118).

The investigation of directionality in rock art takes into account that, not only was the art created by a culture who did not have a writing system as we know in western culture, but also that rock art was not merely a depiction of life, but told of the shamans' experiences when in trance and in the spirit world. In other words, rock art represents both the visual and the linguistic. Some sets of rock art can be viewed as compositions as individual humans, animals or elements share some continuation of scale, colour or positioning. The most obvious of these are the lines of procession of animals or humans. Several kinds of animals are depicted in such processions, but never more than one species in a series. Lines of animals and humans are twice as likely to face to the right as they are to the left; it appears that directionality is biased to the right.

Final Comments

An outcome of the research discussed in this paper is the gaining of an understanding of how the multimodal resources in a museum, through focusing on a rock art display can contribute to meaning making. This understanding can also inform the development of pedagogic materials used in museum education progammes. This can be achieved by examining various design elements or modes in a rock art display as well as by investigating how students draw on these design elements or modes to make meaning for themselves. The benefit of a multimodal approach to the analysis of a museum display is that it enables Stein's (2008:1) argument that a multimodal approach to teaching in classrooms goes beyond the linguistic and includes modes such as image, space, gesture and sound to communicate meaning. This paper, in conclusion, has argued that museum communication and museum pedagogy go beyond language and that displays communicate through different design elements or modes such as the visual, audio and spatial design.

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Please note that the images can be used with the text if desired. The text can stand alone without the images.

Figure 1: Photograph of a Rock Shelter in /Qe – the Power of Rock Art Display. Note that the Images are Multi-layered and Multi-dimensional.

Figure 2: Image of an Elephant and Human Figures in /Qe – the Power of Rock Art Display.

Figure 3: Image of the Linton Panel in /Qe – the Power of Rock art Display. Note the Multi-layered and Multi-dimensional Images

Figure 4: Line Drawing of the Linton Panel in /Qe – the Power of Rock Art Display

About the Author

Medeé Rall holds a Bachelor of Arts, a Diploma for Educators of Adults, and a Masters Degree in Education (Applied Language and Literacy Studies) from the University of Cape Town, and is currently registered for a PhD, also at the University of Cape Town. She is currently the Director of the Centre for Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Cape Town. Previously she worked at Iziko Museums of Cape Town as Coordinator of Publications and at Progress College as an educator. She has also worked in as an adult educator, teaching English literacy. Her research interests are museums as spaces of literacy provision, museums and lifelong learning and multimodal communication in museums. Publications include Spirits of the ancestors, The students at the South African Museum speak, and Reinventing South African Museum. She received the Western Cape Provincial Award – Adult Learner's Week in 2001 and 2002 for work done in a literacy class based at the South African Museum.