Research article

Design in Gunther Kress's social semiotics

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Abstract

Gunther Kress's multimodal and social semiotic theory of communication has moved beyond the realm of linguistics, which originally framed his work, and has reached out to inform other fields, such as those of education, museum studies, as well as the humanities and social sciences more broadly. This article brings together our insights in relation to a concept from Gunther Kress's theory, that of *design*. Drawing from our research, we reflect on Kress's conceptualisation of design in social semiotics and discuss how this idea has inspired us to advance research across the domains of formal learning in schools, informal learning and communication in museums, and in everyday communication and social interaction. We consider that the contribution of design is to challenge the boundaries of concepts such as 'competence', 'interpretation' and 'critique', associated respectively with the dominant discourses and practices in the worlds of education, museums and

everyday communication and research practice. We look at design as: (1) learning; (2) transformation of resources; and (3) an engaged and engaging social semiotic research, and argue that as an interpretative resource it enables us to move *beyond* the limitations posed by institutions such as schools, museums and academia.

Keywords design; social semiotics; education; museum studies; communication; discourse; multimodality

Introduction

Gunther Kress spent almost three decades of his career at the IOE (Institute of Education), UCL's Faculty of Education and Society (University College London, UK). He joined the IOE in 1991 as Professor of English, and he was the Chair Professor of Semiotics and Education in the Department of Culture, Communication and Media from 2008. Gunther Kress was one of the pioneering scholars acknowledged not only for the development of the theory of social semiotics for examining meaning making as a social practice, but also for setting the theoretical and empirical foundations of the very concept of multimodality, that is, that meaning can be understood and analysed only by paying attention to all semiotic resources that are used in communication, rather than only (or chiefly) to language – a concept and overall approach that has influenced not only linguistics and education, but all disciplines concerned with meaning and communication, in the humanities, social sciences and beyond.

Together with Robert Hodge, Gunther Kress built on the intellectual traditions of Michael Halliday (1978) in systemic functional linguistics, and applied sociocultural perspectives to interrogate the ways in which meanings are made multimodally in representations and communicative events to express power, ideology and hegemony (Hodge and Kress, 1988). Later, Kress (2010) would go on to develop the concepts in multimodality, which he presents as an overarching framework for understanding multimodal meaning making, and to introduce fundamental concepts such as mode, interest, design, provenance, affordance, recognition and semiotic work.

Drawing inspiration from Bezemer and Kress's (2016) social semiotic account for the analysis of multimodal meaning making in relation to learning, we reflect on Kress's conceptualisation of design in social semiotics, and discuss how this idea has inspired us to advance research, understanding and practice across the domains of formal learning in schools, communication in museums, and in everyday communication and social interaction. We argue that the recognition of learning as design, design as transformation of resources for communication and design as engaged and engaging social semiotic research can be powerful in helping us go beyond the traditional paradigm of competence, interpretation and critique in learning, communication and social interaction, opening up possibilities for positive social change.

Beyond competence: learning as design

The social semiotic lens on learning challenges us to go beyond the focus on 'competence' in education to consider the role of 'design' in learning (Kress and Selander, 2012a). Competence as learning focuses on students' building of predetermined knowledge and skills and applying them with accuracy as an expression of learning. Learning as design, instead, focuses on students' augmentation and transformation of semiotic resources, and their sign making as an expression of learning. Kress (2010) argues that every sign made is newly created. Learning as actively designing meaning demands an acknowledgement of the range of semiotic modes, beyond speech and writing, with which meanings are made in the contemporary communication environment. Learning as design is also premised on students' exercising of agency and the centrality of choice in meaning making. Choice is based on the availability of students' resources for meaning making, and is motivated by their interest. The shift from the focus on competence to that of design in learning directs attention away from 'achieved qualities' to 'the very process of engagement, transformations and sign making to explore the world and take part and communicate with others in a certain context' (Kress and Selander, 2012a: 267). Unlike competence,

which would bring about students' participation by the rules accorded by what is institutionally valued, design empowers students to project their meanings 'into an imagined social future' (Kress and Selander, 2012a: 267).

Gunther Kress's perspective of learning as design has profound implications for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. It must be acknowledged that while Kress's ideas were widely influential, he never operated alone. In the context of education, for example, Gunther Kress was one of the 10 academics of the New London Group (1996), who advanced the notion of 'multiliteracies' in their manifesto. Their argument that the sole focus and privileging of language in literacy learning is inadequate and needs to be broadened to include multiliteracies has revolutionised literacy curricula all over the world. This broadening of the education ministry's official curriculum to include multimodality as part of the learning outcomes for students has been made in countries such as Australia, Finland and Singapore. The Australian Curriculum: English (https://v9.australiancurriculum.edu.au) and Finland's core curriculum for basic education (FNBE, 2016) require students to interpret, evaluate and create both print and digital multimodal texts. In Singapore, the English-language syllabus has also included attention to the viewing and representing with multimodal texts, in addition to the learning of reading, writing, speaking and listening with language (MOE, 2020). This reflects the recognition of the many ways in which meanings are made, and the need to build up the semiotic resources of students, who are the agentive meaning makers across contexts, as part of the literacy curriculum requirements.

Extending from the seminal work of the New London Group (1996) on design as a pedagogy for multiliteracies, Kress (2000: 153) explained that the view of design in learning is required to engage with the 'semiotic changes ... which cannot be adequately described and understood with currently existing theories of meaning and communication'. The design process involves a constant transformation of the existing semiotic resources of the learner in working with products of prior design and expressing the meanings as new designs. The capacity of learning as design to reshape the potential of meaning-making resources adds to the focus of learning as competence to use the possibilities of an existing semiotic system.

Staffan Selander (2008), a close collaborator of Kress, further developed a design theoretic approach to learning. Together with Kress, he showed that everyone engaged in learning, both teachers and students, are designers of meaning, as both are engaged in shaping the social interaction between them through communication (Kress and Selander, 2012a). Such recognition has contributed towards the shift in understanding the role of the teacher, beyond that of a knowledge authority to that of a designer of learning. Lim (2021), for example, has described the teacher as a designer of learning with heightened semiotic awareness (Towndrow et al., 2013), and able to orchestrate embodied semiotic resources, such as speech, gestures, positioning and movement in the classroom, as well as to make use of semiotic technologies, both physical and digital (Van Leeuwen et al., 2013), in the design of students' learning experiences. One way in which learning experiences can be designed is to express structured informality through the teacher's orchestration of semiotic modes. For example, the teacher may use speech and gestures to express the interpersonal meaning of openness to establish rapport with the students, while body positioning and movement are used to express a sense of authority and power. Recognising pedagogy as design work encourages teachers to be more intentional in their embodied teaching as they design students' learning experiences.

Another implication of learning as design is the importance of creating opportunities for students' design work in the classroom. Students learn through meaning making, and in designing students' learning experiences, teachers should encourage students' use of multimodal representations. In Lim's project on integrating multiliteracies in Singapore English-language classrooms, he observed the classroom practices of teachers in five secondary and primary schools and found that there were limited opportunities for students' multimodal composing, such as creation of websites, comics, posters and videos, during the lessons (Lim et al., 2021). While this may not indicate the national situation, it was observed, at least in these lessons, that when multimodal texts were used during the lessons, they tended to be in service of language learning, such as a prompt for discussion on a comprehension passage, rather than for the purposes of developing the students' multimodal literacy (Lim et al., 2022). The privileging of language in the literacy classroom could be attributed to the dominant language focus in the Singapore national examinations, in which students' multimodal literacy is hardly assessed (Lim and Tan, 2021). In the interviews with the teachers and students on the project, it was observed that the 'spectre of assessment haunts teaching and learning even in lessons that introduce new and historically non-examinable curricular material' (Lim et al., 2021: 107). Assessment, we argue, is a crucial frontier of

change with which to engage, if the view of *learning as design* is to take root in our schools in place of *learning as competence* to influence pedagogical practices in the classroom.

Assessment is fundamentally about valuing and recognising students' signs of learning (Kress, 2009). A change in the official assessment coverage for the national examinations necessitates a shift in the values of the institution on what it accords or withholds recognition. For example, including test items that assess students' understanding of image–language relations is an acknowledgement of the ubiquity of multimodal texts in contemporary communication (Unsworth, 2017). This has inspired our research along the lines of examining the fidelity between curriculum goals and assessment practices (Lim and Tan, 2021; Unsworth, 2014; Unsworth et al., 2019).

In light of the broadening of the literacy curriculum beyond language learning, changes in the official assessment regime, as a signal of what is deemed to be socially valued knowledge, need to be made in tandem, to influence deep changes in pedagogical practices in the classroom. In this, the implications of Kress's social semiotics on high-stakes official assessment can be far-reaching. The recognition of learning as design work may not necessarily be in 'the final stage of learning, but as a means of establishing what principles underlay the interpretive work of students' (Kress and Selander, 2012a: 268). Such a recognition requires a valuing of the semiotic work by the learner, and using assessment not just as an evaluation of conformity to certain standards, but more fundamentally as a form of feedback on students' learning. Recognising students' learning as design work can thus allow the teacher to meet students where they are, by first understanding how they have been using their available resources to make meanings aptly, and then making available to them the resources which society has privileged in specific knowledge domains. Learning as design can not only bring about competence in the privileged use of semiotic resources in learning, but can also reshape the potential of existing resources.

Gunther Kress's perspective of learning as design is about students making meaning agentively with their available resources. It is also about teachers augmenting and transforming students' semiotic resources. One of the ways this augmentation can be done is through providing teachers and students with a metalanguage, that is, 'a language for talking about language, images, texts and meaning-making interactions' (New London Group, 1996: 77). Given the diversity and differences in social backgrounds of students, a common pedagogic metalanguage as a resource for the description and discussion of multimodal meaning making can raise students' semiotic awareness by augmenting and transforming their resources for meaning making. The usefulness of a metalanguage for multimodal meaning making in the classroom has been widely advocated (Cope and Kalantzis, 2020; Unsworth, 2006; Serafini, 2011). Likewise, the development of a pedagogic metalanguage, drawing from Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2021) framework for analysing images, has been a focus in our work to support teachers and students in the learning of multimodal literacy from the multiliteracies project in Singapore (Lim and Tan-Chia, 2023). A pedagogic metalanguage offers a common set of understandings in the articulation of curriculum requirements, so as to guide pedagogical practices and explicate assessment criteria. It also offers an equitable way of supporting students' design work in learning by augmenting and transforming the available resources they bring to the classroom (Lim et al., 2022). In this, besides and beyond engaging in learning as competence, by using the possibilities of existing semiotic resources (conceived as systems in a competence perspective), students can more crucially also engage in learning as design, by reshaping the potentials of existing resources to their meaning-making needs.

Beyond interpretation: design as transformation of resources for communication

The work of Gunther Kress has informed domains beyond those of education and linguistics, such as museum studies, in which scholarly work has more recently embraced multimodal social semiotic and systemic functional linguistic perspectives. This work accounts for the multimodality of communication within these institutions becoming manifest in their architecture (Ravelli and McMurtrie, 2016; Pang, 2004), exhibition design (Roppola, 2012; Hofinger and Ventola, 2004; Lindstrand and Insulander, 2012), written texts (Blunden, 2017; Ravelli, 2006; Liao, 2018), digital and physical exhibits and online learning resources (Diamantopoulou et al., 2020; Jewitt, 2012), and visitors' interaction with artefacts and spaces (Diamantopoulou and Christidou, 2018, 2019).

This section reflects on the centrality and relevance of Kress's understanding of *design* in making sense of communication as an instance of transformation of resources through the agentive engagement of the 'designer'. Using the institution of the museum as an example, we argue that the use of this concept for making sense of communication in museums enables us to move beyond 'interpretation', which is often the concept used by museum professionals to account for what museums do. The interpretation of collections through museum expertise is usually understood as the process and product of mediating knowledge to the public (Dobbin, 2019). The semiotic equivalents of 'interpretation' in Kress's work are 'the process of semiosis' and the 'multimodal text'. The conceptualisation of interpretation within Kress's (2010: 36) theory involves a meaning-maker (for example, a visitor) who does the semiotic work of engaging with the multimodal text/museum script – hence, the tenet that 'without interpretation there is no communication'. Transposing the concept of design onto the museum world enables us to offer an integrated account of the overall communication nexus of space, exhibitions and visitors, and of the potential for communication that this triptych, previously discussed as *museum encounters*, actually entails (Diamantopoulou and Christidou, 2019). In the case of the museum, the designer can be any meaning maker who creates multimodal texts within this environment, such as the architects, the curators and the visitors.

The concept of design in relation to museums in the work of Gunther Kress originally featured in The Museum, the Exhibition and the Visitors: Meaning Making in a New Arena for Learning and Communication project, funded by the Swedish Research Council (2007–10). This was Kress's first instance of scholarly engagement with the world of museums through the additional theoretical perspective of Selander's theory of design emerging from the domain of education (Kress et al., 2021; Kress and Selander, 2012b; Diamantopoulou et al., 2012).

In Kress's theory, the concept of design is coupled with that of rhetoric, which closely relates to a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as an institutional set of rules that shape social action. Kress's tenet of discourse as an understanding of 'how the world is and how it should be' is key in understanding the discursive and semiotic foundation of design (Diamantopoulou, 2020: 133), as the materialisation of the meaning-makers' rhetoric. The semiotic action of all meaning-makers is shaped by the institutional discourses which condition them. Their action is also an instance of how they transform these discourses. Their design is a mirroring of what discourses do to individuals and what individuals do to discourses. The implication is that a social semiotic analysis can help us hypothetically recover these discourses, along with the rhetorical intentions and interests of sign makers.

By foregrounding Kress's concept of 'design', we can attend to several instantiations of design in the discursively and multimodally shaped environment of museums. This is in line with our argument that design is the most significant interpretative resource for making sense of all multimodal texts, as it shifts our attention to the meaning makers as agents who select semiotic resources. The provenance of these resources can be traced in several discursive domains and can be associated with various discursive practices beyond those of the museum world. The museum buildings and exhibitions are instances of a design for communication that arises from the transformation of all kinds of resources. These resources carry a discursive load which is also transformed into the new multimodal texts that are shaped by the institution of the museum. The shaping of the built environment and the exhibitions, with all the multimodal texts that this entails, are instantiations of a design that communicates *what should be learned, how and why*, and that stands for what the curriculum is in the educational contexts described above. Thus, exhibitions are also an instantiation of a design for learning which prompts the visitors' engagement and the emergence of their own design for learning (Kress and Selander, 2012b; Diamantopoulou et al., 2012).

Let us take as an example of an instantiation of a design the case of the Acropolis Museum in Athens, Greece, and the British Museum in London, UK; a case known for being politically charged due to the association of the two museums with the repatriation claim of the Parthenon marbles which are exhibited in both places (Yalouri, 2001). These marbles include the architectural sculpture forming an integral part of the ancient Parthenon temple on the Athenian Acropolis. This case is an instance for which we can turn to design as an interpretative resource (that is, design as materialisation of a rhetoric) in order to understand the discourses (national, global, pedagogical and so on) that have been realised through the architectural and exhibition design.

The Acropolis Museum, which opened in 2009, was designed from the start to accommodate the Parthenon marbles in their entirety, in the event of their repatriation, through provision made in the architectural design which allowed additional space for those artefacts housed in London. This provision

realises a rhetorical intention informed by national narratives about the reunification of the marbles. Additionally, the orientation of the top floor of the building where the marbles are housed, its alignment with the neighbouring temple of the Parthenon on the rock of the Acropolis, and the visibility of the temple through the glass walls of the museum are all an instantiation of the pedagogic discourse about what visitors should learn and how.

The museological design of the exhibition is a similar instantiation of a Kressian design, materialising an educational project that is profoundly political, being evocative of the repatriation issue, and of the reunification of the marbles. In particular, the exhibition design in the gallery that displays the Parthenon frieze (the decorative relief sculpture of the top part of the external wall of the temple depicting the story of the religious celebration of Panathenaea) simulates the interpersonal relation between the ancient visitor and the temple. This is done by placing the frieze high up on the external wall of the central core of the gallery. This reflects the actual height at which the frieze was seen in the ancient temple and replicates the angle and distance from which the ancient visitor viewed the original monument. Replicas of the British Museum segments are integrated along with the original ones in the order initially placed on the monument, reinforcing the narrative about reunification through the reintegration of all fragments and the reconstitution of the continuous narrative of the frieze within one museum.

Juxtaposing the design of the Acropolis Museum Parthenon gallery with that of the equivalent ones at the British Museum, we can see a different design unfolding as another educational/political project transforming different materialities and their underpinning discourses. The Duveen Gallery, which has housed the Parthenon marbles since 1937, was purpose-built to house the acquired sculptures, with an interest in displaying these architectural sculptures at eye level as pieces of art, evocative of the aesthetic values of the time, rather than as architectural elements integral to the Parthenon.

Changes in the social world, and the emerging repatriation issue, prompted changes to the overall design for communication, evidenced by curatorial decisions to add more layers to the museum interpretation through the creation of two smaller galleries. These include digital media and hands-on exhibits for visually impaired people that not only recreate the historical and architectural context digitally, but also through tactile means. The original design of the gallery space, and of the exhibition involved the display of only the parts of the frieze held by the British Museum along the two long walls of the main gallery at eye level in the Duveen Gallery. This evoked aesthetic and educational discourses of the previous century, linked to the civilising rituals (Duncan, 1995) of experiencing art and copying art through sketching. The limitations of this design were addressed with the addition of the two smaller galleries. The new repertoire of semiotic resources that these galleries introduce materialises a rhetoric different to that of the original exhibition. It indexes an interest in educating the visitor about the historical context and the place of the architectural sculptures within the Parthenon temple, while acknowledging the repatriation claims through the added layer of narrative. The latter is visible in the digital video exhibit, the replicas and the museum captions, featuring information about the making of the monument and the story of the acquisition of parts of it by the museum. This reconfigured design integrates the marbles into a new narrative that recreates the whole, forming an instance of a digitally mediated reunification which poses a counter-argument to the reunification claims by the Acropolis Museum. However, this is presented by a 'global' museum through a design that realises the museum's rhetoric as a way to 'counteract restitution claims' (Hamilakis, 2011: 628).

These two examples are a reminder of Kress's idea that education is a political project. In our attempt to hypothetically recover the design of a multimodal text and semiotic artefact, whether this is an exhibition, a textbook or a building, it is worth remembering that, for Kress, every instance of semiotic analysis of a design for communication is also an instance of discourse analysis.

Beyond critique: design as engaged and engaging social semiotic research on and within everyday social interaction

We now turn to what we conceive as the more ethical and political import of Gunther Kress's perspective on design and sign making. Beyond its value as a concept for semiotic analysis, which we have discussed and exemplified for learning and for museums, we see design as having the potential to shift our perspective towards how we conceive not only of meaning making, communication and learning, but also of our role as researchers and in our relationship with those whose sign making we engage with. We

discuss this in relation to participatory communication and research in digital environments, specifically in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The focus on design shapes an approach to meaning making that moves away not only from competence, as we discussed earlier, but also from critique:

> In an era when social structures were inequitable yet relatively firm, stable, and in which there was a broad adherence to a sense of the semiotic 'fullness' of language as the means of representation and communication, critique of linguistic texts seemed a possible route of refusal to the imposition of power. In an unstable social world with differing distributions of power, *design* offers a paradigm which keeps the insights offered by *critique* and turns them into means for action in the designer's *interest*, an *interest* focused on the future. (Kress, 2010: 23–4, emphasis in original)

While critique is retrospective, 'oriented backward and towards superior power, concerned with the present effects of the past actions of others[;] *design* is prospective, looking forward' (Kress, 2010: 6, emphasis in original). Design is concerned with 'projecting an individual's interest into their world with the intent of effect in the future' (Kress, 2010: 23). It 'is the motor which drives semiotic change *in line* with social change' (Kress, 2010: 50, emphasis in original).

A design perspective is a perspective that focuses on 'recognition to the *work* of individuals in their social lives' (Kress, 2010: 6, emphasis in original) – hence, it opens social semiotics to researching meaning making in terms of, and for its potential for, 'equitable participation in the shaping of the social and semiotic world' (Kress, 2010: 6). Not only is design a response to new demands, rather than 'competent implementation of conventionally given practices' (Kress, 2010: 136), but also, and as a consequence, design produces change. Beyond looking retrospectively at the semiotic actions of those in power (through critique), it looks prospectively at individuals' sign making, responding to, accommodating, coping with and innovating from existing semiotic regimes; a design perspective can thus help us to see the possibilities for change in a way that not only competence but also critique cannot.

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, we started a transnational collective research initiative aimed at gathering insights into how practices of communication and social interaction had been changing because of the threat of contagion and the restrictions imposed. PanMeMic: Pandemic Meaning Making of Interaction and Communication (Adami et al., 2020; Adami, 2021) has involved both academics and non-academics in the sharing of observations and in contributing to online discussions on changes that we were experiencing or noticing when interacting with others. The project has hinged on the premise that, because of the restrictions put in place, we all have had to undergo a re-disciplining process, with actions that we had formerly habituated and naturalised being no longer viable, and the need for finding new ways of carrying out our daily activities, either re-mediating them online or affected by the need of keeping at a safe distance from other bodies when interacting with them offline. Because of this, particularly in the first months of the pandemic, our self-awareness of our social interaction and communication practices has increased – we all have been more prone to observe, reflect and talk about what we noticed in terms of different ways of interacting and communicating with others. PanMeMic has offered a transmedia space, through a website (https://panmemic.hypotheses.org/) connected to social media profiles – on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WeChat and WeiBo – inviting our social networks to contribute with their reflections. In the first six months, since May 2020, it had involved over 1,500 people – both academics and non-academics – from all continents. The Facebook group has been particularly active in promoting discussions. A first collaborative analysis (Adami and Djonov, 2022) of a sample of discussion threads in the Facebook group has looked at the dynamics of co-construction of distributed semiotic knowledge in society. Findings show that (1) people co-create, share and negotiate semiotic knowledge; (2) they observe, create, share, codify, contextualise, legitimate and challenge semiotic practices; (3) they discuss their applicability and social implications; and (4) they bring in external voices to support their views and contrast those of others.

The potential of a design-beyond-critique lens on meaning making is twofold. First, at the level of observation and analysis of semiotic practices, it opens the possibility of looking at the dynamics of co-creation of distributed knowledge about these practices. It has the potential to counterbalance discourses of online communication as solely fuelling misinformation and feedback loops through echo chambers, and elitist attitudes ridiculing people's effort at making sense and at researching knowledge, particularly over fluid social phenomena and related policies, such as those of the Covid-19 pandemic. A

design perspective combines with Gunther Kress's idea of signs being newly made every time a semiotic resource is used (Kress, 1993, 2010), and enables the recognition of:

(1) people's semiotic work in any act of sign making, starting from the most 'banal' ones, as when, for example, one needs to find new ways to communicate closeness to others when hugging is no longer viable due to risks of contagion (in a first discussion thread analysed in Adami and Djonov, 2022)

(2) their agency in co-creating new viable practices, by sharing them with others and taking them up creatively from others, as when a viable alternative to a hug has been shared on the PanMeMic Facebook group, with the ensuing discussion proposing variants and labelling the practice, and other participants later adopting it thanks to the sharing (in the same first discussion thread cited above)

(3) their role in semiotic design, that is, in designing their sign making in novel ways to have an effect in the world, as when trying to shape one's message so that it can communicate to somebody who has different views – for example, when the sharing of concerns about mask wearing preventing deaf people from lip reading may be interpreted by some as a pretext for anti-mask claims and generate a heated and productive discussion on the tension between ableist and anti-mask ideologies, between the need for inclusive and equitable communication practices and the need for contagion prevention (in a second discussion thread analysed in Adami and Djonov, 2022)

(4) their critical visual literacy, as, for example, when finding images deemed to be sexist, as happened with the images included in the track and trace app in Italy showing a woman holding a baby and a man working at his laptop to signify staying at home (il Fatto Quotidiano, 2020)

(5) their voicing of concerns, as well as their own semiotic creations and co-creations (including memes, as well as alternative possibilities), thus opening up possibilities for social change, as when the above-mentioned images of the Italian track and trace app were promptly changed as a result of the opposition voiced online.

In sum, a design perspective first helps us to recognise people's role as social semioticians themselves.

Second, a design perspective has the potential to shape an engaged and engaging role for academic social semioticians, which reaches beyond the mere scope of analysis. Most work in multimodal analysis, and also in social semiotics, falls within a broadly critical analytical approach akin to critical discourse analysis (which Kress contributed to found; see, for example, Fowler et al., 1979; Kress and Hodge, 1979). It indeed looks at semiotic practices to identify how power is entextualised and embodied in these, and to reveal naturalised ideologies and broader social forces at work as emerging from sign- and meaning-making practices (for a recent example of such an approach applied to identity, see Van Leeuwen, 2021). Yet, while in more stable times, critique could foster action by promoting awareness of power injustices at work in society, in times of instability, critique is no longer enough. When the world is threatened – and human existence with it – revealing the sources of injustice is certainly still useful but, in the midst of contrasting discourses, stopping at critique risks having little effect. On the one hand, critique becomes yet another discourse among many conflicting ones; on the other hand, pointing to power dynamics that have produced certain socio-semiotic effects leaves the question 'what can we do about it?' unanswered. While, in revealing power dynamics, a critical stance can help us be aware of them, it also risks leaving us feeling disempowered and overwhelmed by the import of powerful sources of social, semiotic and discourse production.

Instead, a design perspective that looks prospectively at how to shape semiotic horizons can help open possibilities for social action. In this, as we started doing with PanMeMic, social semioticians can help co-design spaces of engagement and co-construction of knowledge by entering conversations with others about communication and social interaction and fostering positive change towards more equitable practices. While the work of critical analysis needs to continue, a prospective design perspective can help trace possibilities for change already present in everyday acts of sign making, and can contribute to these by opening new spaces for engagement and collective, participatory research.

Conclusion

To many, Gunther Kress's legacy will be mainly associated with his theorisation on multimodality, and its impact in linguistics and education, as well as the humanities and social sciences more broadly. In this article, we have instead chosen to focus on his perhaps less known conceptualisation of design,

and its potential for changing paradigms in our respective fields, challenging how we conceive learning and communication and, more generally, the agents of semiotic knowledge production towards social change.

We have discussed how a design perspective can challenge us to move beyond familiar traditional paradigms in education, museums, communication and social semiotic research within everyday social interaction. Adopting a design perspective helps us move beyond the sole focus on competence and the related risks of normativity and prescriptivism, and to recognise instead the agentive, creative and transformative roles of sign-makers and meaning-makers in learning and teaching. A design perspective allows us to move beyond interpretation in museum studies, focusing both on the process and on the product of mediating knowledge to the public. It enables us to see sign making in all its forms as agentive and transformative also in domains that would be less immediately conceived in terms of communication. In this article, we have used the case of museums as an example, but many more could be cited, such as the operating theatre (discussed in Bezemer and Kress, 2016). A design perspective also helps us to move beyond a solely critical analytical approach in research. It enables us to trace the possibilities for change in everyday acts of social semiotic inquiry and to shape our role as engaged social semioticians who can open collective spaces for dialogue and co-production of semiotic knowledge, as well as of more equitable, inclusive and responsible social interaction practices.

Such an ethical perspective is ever more needed in the light of the social challenges of the world in which we all live. We would like to close by recognising not only the intellectual contribution, but also the great lesson that Gunther Kress has given us as a person, in his attention to the (apparently) banal, in his generosity, openness and humbleness, and in his recognition of others and their sign making – which made him a truly lived example of the theories he developed.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

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Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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