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Per-Olof Erixon, Johan Elmfeldt

School Writing in a Changing Media Ecology

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School Writing in a Changing Media Ecology

Per-Olof Erixon
Umeå University
per-olof.erixon@estet.umu.se

Johan Elmfeldt
University College of Malmö
john.elmfeldt@estet.umu.se

This article draws on a research project called “Genres in Transition” which took place between 2003 and 2007 and involved about 1,500 pupils in two Swedish upper secondary schools (ages 16-18). The project aimed to investigate pupils’ writing practices in Swedish (the mother tongue). It drew on theory and research in the teaching of literature, pedagogy of writing and media studies as have been developed in Scandinavia under the influence of international research on reader response criticism, cultural studies, media studies, and genre theory. School texts in different formats and settings the pupils produced were collected and analysed. Interviews with both the pupils and teachers were also carried out. This article presents and discusses one of the 113 essays collected for the project. That essay was written by a boy in a vocational programme and, like the other collected essays, was written by hand on paper with a pencil. Drawing on this example, we want to discuss how writing competencies that pupils develop as cultural practices and values change when the media ecology changes. It is suggested that, when writing essays at school, pupils use experiences and strategies from a range of media. In so doing, we suggest the abandoning of the old dominant and Romantic conception based on a distinction between fact and fiction in favour of the experience from everything being mediated, i.e. a transformed epistemology as a result of media reflexivity.

Keywords: Media ecology, Pedagogy of writing, Genre, Genre pedagogy, Aesthetic text act, Media reflexivity

INTRODUCTION

ALPHABETIC literacy has been challenged over the last few decades by the rapid emergence of new media technologies. We now live in a “new media age” (Kress, 2003) in which the screen has replaced the book as the dominant medium of communication; today’s children are thus growing up in what has been called a “screen culture” (Livingstone, 2002). As regards access to and use of computers and the Internet, national quantitative studies indicate for example the enormous success of computers in everyday life in Sweden. Computers will soon be as common in homes as TV sets. According to Nordicom-Sveriges Internetbarometer 2007 (published 02/09/2008), 83 percent of Sweden’s population had Internet access in their homes in 2007. In recent surveys, the figures are 90 percent of the population, 98 percent for ages 9-14, and 99 percent for ages 15-24 (Nordicom-Sveriges Mediebarometer 2009). Together with the other Nordic countries, Sweden has long been regarded as a world leader with regard to IT in education. Sweden is considered to be in third place out of 27 countries concerning IT use during lessons in European schools. The total number of computers with an Internet connection is 16.6 computers per 100 pupils. In a European perspective, this implies that Sweden is in sixth place (Myn-digheten för skolutveckling [‘The Authority for School Improvement’], 2007).

This changing landscape of communication is affecting what is meant by reading and writing as regards the expanding range of semiotic modes and media which are engaged in order to make meaning, communicate and get things done in the world. New media make it easy to use a multiplicity of modes and in particular the image – still or moving – and other modes, such as music and sound effects. Multimodal, or hypermodal, communication via new media has thus become easy and common (Lemke, 2002). Kress pointed out some 15 years ago that there is a “constant transition, translation, transduction” between the different modes of representation and cognition, “even if not necessarily visibly on paper or

with other media or modes” (Kress 1998:39). Accordingly, readers and writers bring into their formal education, at whichever level, communicative experiences and strategies from their informal leisure-time activities.

New media and school

Historically, reading ability from the 16th century was connected with Protestantism (Tyner, 1998). When the Swedish elementary school was established in 1842, the majority of the Swedish population was able to read texts sanctioned by the church, i.e. the Bible and Luther’s Catechism (Johansson, 1977). A symbiotic relationship thus developed between the church, the school and literacy. The change in media from book and page to screen and window involves a shift from traditional print-based media to new information and communication technologies. In consequence, today’s pupils are developing new media specific competencies (Mackey, 2002). The written text as a norm for communication has in this respect been destabilised. These changes pose significant challenges for teachers charged with the responsibility of teaching language, literature and communication (Erixon & Nixon, 2007).

Teachers only reluctantly accept a technology that is incompatible with what they believe is the traditional content and way of teaching within the subculture of the subject (Goodson et al., 2002; Erixon, 2010). New media are regarded with great suspicion in some school subjects as a kind of “Trojan horse” in conflict with a deeply embedded “subject grammar” (Olson, 2000) at a time young people are bringing knowledge and experiences from media and popular culture into the classroom and specific school subjects. Their competencies as “prosumers” are in this respect well developed when it comes to making web pages, handling files, downloading pictures, films and music, communicating via e-mail and text messages, seeing friends in social media, and making various kinds of multimedia productions (Olin-Scheller & Wikström, 2010; Erixon, 2007). In both content and form all the texts within these activities may be seen as text acts belonging to social and media technological contexts rather than as products determined by once-and-for-all fixed conventions passed on from one generation to the next e.g. via the formal education system. Verbal and non-verbal text production in educational contexts occupies a wider field of discursive practices that allows different ways of producing and consuming texts (Fairclough, 1995).

A normative perspective has predominated in Swedish research on writing, accompanied by agreed notions of “weak” or “strong” writers which have frequently been used as a means of categorising or assessing texts. Although in recent years such research has emphasised writing as a situated practice, issues concerning youth culture and media or media technologies in relation to alphabetic literacy are rarely addressed. The tendency to associate students’ inadequate reading and writing ability with the influences of media culture and technology continues to be strong, with many examples of concern about deteriorating literacy levels. One reason out forward is that young people’s one-sided assimilation of other media not only takes time away from reading and writing but has a direct negative effect on young people’s ability to read and write. Moreover, it is argued that the teacher’s duty is to protect their pupils from what is detrimental or unsuitable. In its more severe forms, this might be termed a “media panic” (Drotner, 1992). However, we take the opposite perspective; we see media as a positive and integral part of the cultural and social life of children and young people (Elmfeldt & Erixon, 2007).

Media ecology

It is argued that we live in “the media-rich ecology of the twenty-first century” (Hayles, 2002: 273). From a media ecological perspective, (young) people in late modernity thus bring with them a wide range of mediated ways of meaning-making from informal settings into their acts of reading or writing in formal settings, i.e. school. The utilisation of electronic media not only yields a wide range of devices for communication, but also changes the understanding of what it means to be able to read and write. The question now, we claim, is whether it is possible to imagine a communicative and epistemological transformation as a result of media reflexivity.

The transformation is a consequence of the fact that the number of media is constantly multiplying and, at the same, combining in various forms of multimodal compositions. Bolter & Grusin (1999) suggest remediation as a process in which new and older forms of media both overlap and are interdependent. This implies that the notion of a direct non-mediated relation to reality or fiction is strengthened at the same time as media are acknowledged as media per se. Changes to the state of interdependence with regard to the development of new media are signs of the growth of “metarealism”, characterised specifically by oscillation between illusion and exposure of the illusion (Manovich, 2001:208f), between looking at and looking through (Mackey, 2002:106).

Just as TV has transformed our lives in many ways, the computer and the Internet are also transforming our ways of thinking, living and communicating. For example, the so-called “database form” as an interface between computer and human beings represents a new way of structuring our experiences and our world (Manovich, 2001). By organising information in specific ways, interfaces offer particular models of the world. The world now appears to us as an endless and unstructured stream of pictures, texts and other data in which all hitherto ideal patterns of thought disappear: and where order and stability are displaced by disorder and instability.

Manovich highlights the techniques or commands with which one has to be familiar in order to be able to handle today’s computerised media. These include the ability to make selections from among all the available information, but also the opposite – the ability to be able to “assemble” and combine things together. Therefore, the argument is that people today are engaging in new literacy and other social practices, and developing different social and cognitive competencies in their use of new media as a matter of course in everyday life. With the intention of showing what is going on we scrutinise the school essay presented below by using Manovich’s idea of the database as a metaphor for analytical purposes to discern a text hybrid which defies unambiguous definitions.

THE STUDY: GENRES IN TRANSITION

SWEDISH upper secondary education, which frames this study, is free of charge for pupils up to their 19th birthday, although it is optional from the age of 16. The curriculum came into effect in 1994 and will be subjected to certain changes in 2011. It includes the prescription of fundamental values concerning democracy as well as basic curricular guidelines and objectives such as programme objectives, course syllabi and grading criteria.

Every municipality in Sweden is legally required to provide access to upper secondary education to all pupils who have completed compulsory school at the age of 16 and is obliged to secure the full range of national course programmes, all of which are 3 years in duration. Each programme gains its character from its specific subject orientation, e.g. subjects within the realm of science or the humanities, or its vocational orientation.

Our study, which we called “Genres in transition”, was conducted between 2003 and 2007 and involved about 1,500 pupils in two upper secondary schools, one in the northern part of Sweden and the other in the southern part. The realm of the study is theoretical and empirical aspects of media. Data were collected through a questionnaire, interviews with pupils and teachers, classroom observations and analyses of texts written by hand and on computer produced in Swedish language studies (or mother tongue education). The overall study focused on the extent to which Swedish upper secondary school pupils traverse the ecology of the contemporary media landscape and which consequences this might have for teaching and the quality of pupils’ writing while at school. From the questionnaire, contours of the media landscape were identified through which young people move. The results provided data showing the extent to which computers, mobile phones, and other media technologies have become part of everyday life.

We wanted to investigate the interface between changes determined by media technology influencing the ability to communicate, and the different ways of handling and relating to these changes within schools. The focus of the study thus concerned how teachers and pupils handle the relationship between literacy and media during various writing activities where different text formats were produced.

Genre theory

Ever since Plato and Aristotle, genres have been understood as forming a static system based on three fundamental forms or basic genres: lyric poetry, drama and epic poetry. The different genres are conventionally perceived as stable forms of expression that can be reproduced over and over again. In extensive genre theoretical discussions within literary studies in the latter decades of the 20th century, the notion of genre division became destabilised. For example, Hættner-Aurelius (2003) takes a pragmatic position by claiming that genres should be understood as “culturally regulated language games, functions, not as scientific terms or classes to be handled in meta language” (p. 52). In other words, genre designations can only be contextually determined since no “absolute exactitude” can exist. This constitutes a dilemma because the idea of genres is the starting point for generally well-thought-out classifications of comparative literary works. Contemporary debates on genre theory within literary studies thus suggest that the adoption of an essentialist position is an impossibility. The debate within linguistics is taking the same turn (Berge & Ledin, 2001; Ledin & Selander, 2003). Even if awareness of genres and therefore a need of genre pedagogy might be a way to empower students, new media are transforming and destabilising what has so far been regarded as genre (Kress, 2003: 84-105).

We take a pragmatic view as we regard different genres as socially embedded activities linked to different situations and institutions, and not as ahistorical sets of semantic or rhetorical rules or structures. Yet we do not abandon the concept of “genre” as such. For us, what is a genre can only be empirically determined, for example, by investigating what is rhetorically or practically defined as a genre in a specific situation. However, such a focus might result in genre losing its universal applicability. Yet it is our view that a practice-oriented genre definition must be able to work with this dilemma.

Norms and genre conceptions

As a starting point for the more qualitative part of our study “Genres in Transition”, we chose to focus on conceptions held of genres in the sense of the application of rhetorical rules and structures. From interviews with more than 60 pupils and 20 teachers a picture emerges of pupils bringing genre conceptions into the classroom from a variety of sources. The pupils express genre awareness, explicitly using the word “genre” itself, determined by popular culture with attendant genre expectations. They are thus able to state, define and name a large number of popular cultural genres in music, films, and computer games. Their genre spectrum stretches from early concentration on written literary forms to an understanding of in which genre designations refer to both written and visualised fiction, as well as different genres of music. In contrast, our study shows that teachers’ perceptions of genres with regard to the subject of upper secondary Swedish are solely based on comparative literary and linguistic traditions associated with the history of literature, literary studies and mostly the literary canon.

Our study also suggests that for pupils and teachers rules for writing are important yet also sometimes unimportant, depending on the type of text involved. As regards so-called free narration or essays, teachers and pupils are both convinced that rules for writing are challengeable and that various kinds of experiments are not only possible but should be encouraged. In accordance with Fairclough (1995), writing essays might be described as activities or events in a discourse order which is challengeable and unstable in various ways. The starting point for writing is inspiration and personal: in other words, writing takes place within an expressive or Romantic discourse blurring the distinctions between facts and fiction, which is not compatible with rules and formulae. For the teachers it is not primarily norms and rules for narration that they want to communicate, but something more open and permissive and hence less mandatory. In this way, the teachers justify a genre destabilisation in their teaching practice. The pupils respond positively to this permissive attitude to linguistic norms of writing but want the rules to be even more flexible and open (Elmfeldt & Erixon, 2007).

We have noticed that the teaching of reading and writing in Swedish upper secondary school is primarily based on a Romantic notion of a distinction between factual and fictional texts (Erixon, 2004; Gossman, 1978). When reading so-called factual or non-fiction texts (“sakprosa”), the activity is focused

on understanding and learning about the “real” world, which Rosenblatt (1978) calls “efferent reading”. The connection between the text and the world is essentially unproblematic. When reading fiction the activity centres on experiences and pleasure, which Rosenblatt (1978) calls “aesthetic reading”. The teaching of writing finds its onset in the same dichotomy between factual and fictive writing. When writing non-fiction, issues of structures and genre perspectives are involved to a certain extent. When writing fiction or so-called “school essays”, inspiration and fantasy is more stressed and issues concerning structures and genres are put more in the background.

Pupils strive to gain inspiration for their own writing, aware that this involves drawing on their own ideas only to some extent. They consider that the media, and hence also popular cultural genres, is more important as material for their own stories. To an ever increasing degree, the experiences they utilise are based on sources from different types of media. In many contexts and for many pupils, pictures, computer games, films etc. are useful not only for interpreting the world but also for writing their stories. This implies the notion of a mediated relation to reality and fiction.

The school essay

The school essay is regarded as a “hybrid genre”, intimately connected with schooling and the teaching of writing, based upon the distinction between fact and fiction (Hertzberg, 2001). It was a feature of written assignments as early as the mid-19th century in Swedish schools, and became part of Swedish as a mother tongue subject throughout the 20th century. According to Nyström (2000), writing activities in upper secondary schools in Sweden are currently dominated by a small number of genres, frequently used and widely spread across all programmes. The two most popular genres are narratives (or stories) and book reviews, both of which are introduced early on at school. In Nyström’s opinion, however, such school writing is strongly characterised by forms of writing rarely practiced outside this context and, as a consequence, allows little genre progression during school years.

For our study we collected texts from 38 classes in three upper secondary schools in Sweden. With the odd exception, each class is represented by three texts, making a total of 113 texts. The selection and collection of the texts was carried out by teachers of Swedish in each school. It was agreed that two essays should represent what each teacher thought was typical of the respective class in terms of quality, content and choice of topic. It was also agreed that one selected text from each class should “stand out” with regard to form and/or content. The authors of all the chosen texts as well as the teachers of Swedish who had made the selections were then contacted for an interview. The school essay presented and analysed below is an example of such a text.

The essays had been submitted to an essay competition held every year in the last week of January in the three upper secondary schools in the north of the country. The initial idea of local educational politicians was that all pupils in the first year should take part. Originally the aim was to gain a picture of young people’s thoughts and attitudes on living in the municipality. In recent years, however, the essay topics have been broadened and the competition has become the responsibility of the schools. But it remains a competition financed by the municipality’s Upper Secondary School Board with one first prize and ten second prizes being awarded to each school.

The essays were written by hand in classrooms without computer access. However, the instructions did not include whether the essays should be non-fiction or fiction. From the perspective of writing pedagogy, it might therefore be assumed that the pupils were positioned at least to some extent in a genre vacuum. The pupils were asked to write on one of five topics. The first had the heading “This makes life worth living”, followed by three statements concerning the psychosocial situation that today’s young people are assumed to be facing, such as “filled with worry”. The second, with the heading “Who cares?”, was also based on equating youth with psychosocial problems. The third had the heading “A meeting in the world of books” and explicitly encouraged the pupils to use their imagination. The fourth entitled “An unforgettable day” provided scope for writing “spiced with some imagination”. The fifth, entitled “The journey to the future”, also encouraged “imagination”. Ideationally, the five essay topics were based on dichotomies, for example, sorrow/happiness, imagination/reality, and facts/fiction.

The school essay: “Who cares?”

The essay “Who cares?” is written by John, aged 16, who is a pupil in a vocational programme. It is analysed in accordance with the media ecological perspective chosen for the study. Using this example we want to draw attention to the habits and competencies that pupils develop, as activated in their writing of texts. We are interested in both the form and content.

The text chosen is not intended to be representative in a quantitative sense of all the texts that were collected; rather, it is an example of one that “stood out” according to the teacher. The topic was “Who cares?”, based as already indicated on the idea of youth as equated with psychosocial problems, even misery:

Many young people fare badly in today’s society. Many feel lost. Who sees and hears them? Does anyone react? Who can they turn to? Talk to? Is there anyone who cares?

The instructions for the assignment clearly emphasise the need for a societal perspective. It is young people’s exposed position in today’s society that is what the teachers ask the pupils to write about.

In the analysis of the essay we initially discuss the text in terms of the concepts of “fact” and “fiction” as well as which genres are drawn on in the sense of poetry, short story, manuscript etc. We then focus on text composition using the concept database as an analytical tool. In this connection, we discuss the extent to which the text bears traces of the media ecology within which the author and, as a consequence, the essay, is a part. We also consider how this is manifested in the text and whether, based on this example, it is possible to speak of an epistemological transformation. “Who cares?” is written in Swedish, but presented here in an English translation. To make it easier to follow the analysis, each paragraph and line is numbered.

Who cares?

- (1) Who can see you, when nobody is looking?
- (2) Who can hear you, when nobody is listening?
- (3) Who cares, when you are not there? (paragraph 1)

- (4) From time immemorial young people have tried to prove their own existence.
- (5) Many fare badly because of this. Proving existence is easy, especially if it
- (6) is one’s own. But only if you know how to do it. (paragraph 2)

- (7) Little Maria has nobody to talk to because nobody wants to listen to her.
- (8) Nobody notices her when she walks through the corridor. Maria wonders
- (9) if she is dumb and invisible. She starts doubting whether she really exists.
- (10) “Fine, then I can drink, take drugs and kick old people as much as I want because
- (11) nobody knows that I exist”, she thinks. (paragraph 3)

- (12) Let us pause there so that I can explain a few things. Senses (seeing, hearing etc.)
- (13) are merely electric signals to the brain. Human beings learn to switch off some
- (14) of them, when it suits them. (paragraph 4)

- (15) Imagine Maria sitting at the very back of the classroom, while the teacher’s field of vision only
- (16) covers the first two rows. Maria could easily have sat down at the very front of the room, but
- (17) because of her fear of being seen, she sat down at the very back.
- (18) Imagine Maria wanting to talk to the group of girls, but their voices drown

- (19) her own. Maria could begin to know them one by one, but she wants to know
(20) the group. Tough luck for Maria, she might have become something good, but an
overdose
(21) put a stop to that. Too bad. (paragraph 5)
- (22) Was she an illusion or a living human being? That she was an illusion
(23) is obvious. Nobody saw her, nobody heard her, but hold on!
(24) She thought to herself, and illusions cannot think. She was there because
(25) she could think. If she had only realised this earlier. (paragraph 6)
- (26) What this means is that you should first see yourself before
(27) you look at others, before you seek help from others.
(28) Prove your existence by means of yourself. (paragraph 7)

DISCUSSION

The different genres of the text

Our initial concern is to identify the graphic form of the text since the arrangement of a text is indicative of its genre affiliation. John's text is originally arranged in seven separate text chunks with extensive space between them. According to genre conventions, looking at a distance, it seems to be a poem. In addition, the first three lines immediately and repeatedly confirm these genre expectations and conventions.

From the graphical point of view, the three opening lines can be apprehended as a stanza. The three questions, divided into three different lines that start with the pronominal "who" followed by a question mark at the end of each, are signs of this. These three lines are also closely connected to the written instruction the teachers have given, as quoted above. It is clear that John follows the instructions strictly. With rhetorical elegance he transforms the three questions in the instruction into a lyrical, addressive "you" and into antitheses: to see is contrasted with "nobody is looking", to hear is contrasted with "nobody is listening" and to care is contrasted with "not to be there". The first three lines thus challenge the essay as a genre.

But the second paragraph (lines 4-6) does not meet the expectations initially created:

- (4) From time immemorial young people have tried to prove their own existence.

The paragraph starts explicitly with a proposition that seems alien to poetry. It represents a discourse that, from a genre perspective, breaks the lyrical sensitivity of the three initial questions: a different voice is mediating facts as the voice-over in a documentary or as the written propositions published in a daily paper. The voice takes a meta textual and a distancing position.

The third paragraph (lines 7-11) does not fulfil the factual touch of the second paragraph. What might be a character in a novel, short story or manuscript of some kind is introduced here by a clearly audible narrator's voice: "Little Maria" is introduced, a girl whose history we know nothing about. The two first paragraphs (lines 1-6) are not explicitly gendered, but we know that a young man has written the text. Now a character is introduced, a schoolgirl with serious personal problems. Little Maria "walks through the corridors", whereby a social perspective is added to the individual. A new genre is required in order to give a virtual body to thoughts about young people. Lines 8 to 11 in the third paragraph are like a scenario for a game or role-play, and is written as if John is giving stage or film directions. Maria's social isolation, alienation and dejection are then captured in direct speech which, because of its proximity in the text, is associated with the character of Maria.

- (10) "Fine, then I can drink, take drugs and kick old people as much as I want because

(11) nobody knows that I exist", she thinks. (paragraph 3)

The fourth paragraph (lines 12-14) is again different. This is not the voice of the persona in the first paragraph, the journalistic reporter of facts in the second or the role-play leader in the third. The voice or entity here assumes responsibility for all the previous paragraphs by asking us to "pause". The paragraph is yet another metatext, a text about the text, and the interpretation of the content is seemingly what this voice wishes to highlight. Drawing on Manovich (2001), John is seen here to exercise the familiar technique or the commands which one needs in order to be able to handle today's computerised media; i.e. the ability to make selections from among all the available information, but also the opposite, i.e. the ability to be able to assemble and combine things together. Pausing then breaks the illusion and is a reminder of the fact that the story within the essay is mediated verbally and alphabetically. The way to this understanding is a metaphor: the pause.

It is as if the narrator, i.e. John himself, is aware the reader cannot keep up and there is thus a reason to highlight the connections between the paragraphs and clarify the ethics of the essay. At the same time, the claim in the paragraph is distanced from what has just been narrated in the form of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, and there is an evident ambition to put the parts together. The feelings previously expressed in Maria's direct speech are dehumanised and reduced to electric signals in the brain. Cognition stands out as a form of mediation in terms of the transmission of impulses and electric signals. By this claim the distancing effect of the paragraph is strengthened.

The initial and ongoing story route in the earlier paragraphs is questioned by "imagine" twice in the fifth paragraph (lines 15-21). In this long paragraph the reader re-enters the fictional context. It is made possible by directions in the style of a manuscript, where the narrator helps the reader identify what is most important in encountering the text, namely re-entering the fictitious world.

Maria sits down (line 15) at the back of the classroom regardless of the fact that the teacher's visual field is further forward. None of her classmates sees her or her fate; her doom is sealed and she dies from an overdose. The comment in English (sic!) is ice-cold, distanced, and breaks the illusion: "Too bad" (line 21). Once again the genre is unclear and the genre expectations are not fulfilled.

As in the former paragraph, the fiction is broken up in the two following and concluding 6th and 7th paragraphs (lines 22-28). Here the narrator super-ordinate to the whole returns and puts things in order. For example, the sixth paragraph (lines 24-25) has a metatextual function similar to the second (lines 4-6) and fourth paragraphs (lines 12-14) in the spirit of epistemological scepticism. It is as if John alludes to Descartes' first principle, "cogito, ergo sum", "I think, therefore I am":

(24) She thought to herself, and illusions cannot think. She was there because

(25) she could think. If she had only realised this earlier. (paragraph 6)

Of course, we do not know whether John is familiar with Descartes' ideas. At one level, the allusion might be unconscious but at the same time revealing how, culturally and intertextually, we may incorporate texts and expressions in our intellectual world without being directly familiar with them.

The seventh and last paragraph (lines 26-28) is also metatextual with a clear set of ethics:

(26) What this means is that you should first see yourself before

(27) you look at others, before you seek help from others.

In the paragraph's last line, the entire moral of the essay is expressed as an appeal:

(28) Prove your existence by means of yourself.

The text as a database form

We notice that the essay has been hovering above, or perhaps moving among, different genres such as poetry, prose with a metatextual function, fiction and role-play instructions. John's essay is seemingly an unstructured collection of genres lacking consistency, as opposed to a linear narrative structure. It is also doubtful whether there are any events in the sense of time passing. Rather, narrative fragments appear as collage or montage, which Manovich (2001) refers to as "the key twentieth-century technology for creating fake realities" (p. Xvii).

We suggest that John's text bears traces of the database form (Manovich, 2001), where a superordinate narrator takes a metatextual position, by turning to his (listening) audience in order to expound what Manovich calls the narrative's "algorithm" (p. 222) or logic. The challenge for the audience is to accept the text lacking logic but is a series of connected events caused or experienced by the narrator. The reader's responsibility here is thus to put together and combine the different parts of the text.

It is not only the relationship between the different text chunks that may seem unclear. Occasionally in the essay there is a built-in obscurity concerning how the narrative is likely to develop. Lines 15 and 18 in the fifth paragraph both begin with the expression "Imagine Maria sitting", which suggests that different scenarios are possible. There seem to be different options for the development of the story. The narrator/role-play leader contemplates explicitly how to proceed. In role-plays and computer games, different possible scenarios are often arranged in a similar way. The organising principle in this respect is hypertextual in the sense it problematises linearity since the text act itself is non-hierarchical, multi linear, associative and leading to different reading routes.

The text as an act of media reflexivity

It is clear that John is both working within the limitations or parameters that belong to the written language and drawing attention to different communicative situations and their characteristics, the role-play leader who arranges an activity or young people watching a film or engaging in a role play.

The essay thus gives a sense that what is actually read is something heard or seen. The readers become the audience. In that sense, the essay appears more as something spoken than written. It is as if we were watching a multimedia production or were listening to a lecture where the speaker needs to stop or pause in order to clarify their purpose. The essay thus gives an illusion not only of something told, but also of something shown.

In consequence, in the fourth paragraph the narrator enters the so-called stage of narration where he directs himself to the reader:

(12) Let us pause there so that I can explain a few things.

The direct speech brings about a "Verfremdungseffekt" or a distancing effect when John metaphorically deploys an everyday media practice in order to halt his storytelling and thus breaks the illusion by pausing as if pressing a remote control or clicking a mouse. In pausing, attention is paradoxically drawn to the present medium, i.e. the handwritten sheet of paper, as it is pushed into the foreground and so its limits as verbal text become more obvious by means of actions when using digital and visual media. In this way a practice from visual media is activated in and on alphabetical text. The result is an oscillating process between illusion and exposure of the illusion, i.e. an oscillation between looking at and looking through, which is media reflexive (Elmfeldt, 2006; Elmfeldt & Erixon, 2007).

Interview with the author

In the interview John who, as already mentioned, is studying a tertiary vocational programme, is given the opportunity to comment on his essay. He is then careful to emphasise that he reads very little. He does not look at himself as a reader, but as a consumer of films and other media. He therefore rejected many of the other proposed essay themes such as "A meeting in the world of books".

But the concept of reading evidently means different things to different people. When John talks about his limited reading experiences, he refers to books, perhaps those read at school or in his spare time but via school. When role-plays are mentioned, he reveals that he in fact watches lots of films and reads many texts. But these are “other kinds of texts”, he says, generally written in English. John also reveals that a large part of his free time is devoted to writing:

If I write something in my leisure time it is of course fantasy. That is my favourite genre. I also play role-plays myself. Then I have like a story and then the players are supposed to play according to that story. I try to write the story so that one can follow it, and get into the action. There is a lot of description, yes a lot of small elements of adventure. I write like a story. But the only problem is that I prefer to write the whole text in English. So it is quite demanding.

It is a surprise that John writes in English since it is a foreign and second language for him. English here offers a challenge to what is possible to write in today’s Swedish, but it must be said that John’s pronouncements about the differences concerning the amount of words do not sound quite right:

Well, it is easier to explain, because the English language has so many more words. I think twice as many as we have in Swedish. Some words are difficult to explain in Swedish if there is a perfect word in English. I have seen so many English films and I have read so many English texts, so finally you start to talk in English.

When asked to describe the meaning of his “type of text” or “genre”, he initially explains the content in this way:

There are like psychological and children’s pedagogies in it. I am involved in that I am standing and criticising /.../. Then there are secret motives in the whole thing.

It is clear that John has little knowledge of literary concepts like theme and motive. Instead, he creates his own concepts, for example, “secret motives”. It is also noticeable that he portrays himself as a lecturer in front of an audience, like a role-play leader, a master of ceremony, rather than writing for an individual reader. He refers to the narrator as “criticising”, standing in front of a listening rather than a reading audience. What John calls “secret motives” are themes developed in, and emerging from the text. Using a formal perspective, he talks about “small stories” that have been “implanted”. He terms the first three introductory lines “pretexts” in order to “introduce the whole”. Pretexts are, as is well known, the label for texts shown at the start of a film or TV programme. According to John, the second paragraph in the text, which breaks the conventional lyrical introduction, represents “some talk about youngsters”. John terms the narrative and fictional parts about little Maria, “an ordinary text”, which for him seems most associated with the typical school essay.

CONCLUSION

FROM a media ecology perspective, we claim that John’s text bears traces of the competencies he has developed in a media-rich environment. John mixes what according to genre expectations are conceived of as non-fiction and fiction. This composition principle emanates partially from the genre vacuum that to some extent exists in the teaching of writing (at least in upper secondary schools in Sweden). We noted, for example, that the writing instructions for the competition allow pupils to write fictitious or factual texts. Yet nowhere is it stated that the two cannot be combined. Education as a discourse order seems open to challenges and experiments, as confirmed by the interviews with both the teachers and pupils, from which only a vague view emerges of how facts and fiction may be differentiated.

The boundaries between them are seen as fluid and the interviewees also indicate that a combination is possible.

It might be seen that John lacks the will or ability to write a traditional narrative since he seeks to establish strong connections between essay, films and role play. But young people produce texts in different formats to accommodate their own narratives (Bearne, 2003). The trans-formation of modes such as images, colours, sounds, movements etc. into written words in different media can be apprehended as re-mediated voices, genres and speech styles or “heteroglossia” which, according to Bakhtin (1986), can be identified in the written text. Writing can in this respect be regarded as a simultaneously recycled and creative process in which modes, narratives and genres are constantly produced and reproduced.

Through this way of writing John brings to the fore the blurred relationship between facts and fiction. This interpretation is supported by his insertion of a metatextual voice calling attention to the text as a whole. The composition, which resembles a database, may also be understood as indicating mistrust of more traditionally narrative texts, where the route or “algorithm” is more explicit and the path that the story is to follow is clearly determined. John’s writing may also be viewed as media reflexive as it oscillates between looking at and looking through. The changes in the state of dependence, via the development of new media in John’s text, are a sign of oscillation and exposure of the illusion.

John’s text might also be regarded as a two-dimensional multimodal text that, in written form and based on John’s ambitions, consists of different types of text, image and sound modalities positioned alongside one another and constituting a whole. In their study of digital multimodal texts created by both children and adults, Hull & Nelson (2005) locate and define the aesthetic force of multimodal texts and emphasise their sense-creating potential that exceeds the sum of the parts. Hull and Nelson were obliged as an analytical step to represent visually what they specifically aimed to focus on in their chosen digital and multimodal texts, namely the combination of pictures and words. To do this, they created a time-coded analysis model divided into sequences of half a second, termed a “transduction” (Kress, 1997). The multimodal production was thus reduced to a two-dimensional representation on paper of pictures and texts, while the music background was dropped for reasons of production technology. We suggest that John worked in a similar way when writing his essay text. First, he visualised the pictures, and imagined the sound of a speaker in front of an audience and various mobile picture sequences, i.e. a kind of multimodal production. He then transferred this to the linear and two-dimensional text via a “transduction”.

The transduction process is an aestheticising text act. This implies that text production is a matter of design (Cope & Kalantzis, eds. 2000/2002). The aestheticising text act thus includes what has so far been defined as fiction and non-fiction as well as the text hybrid termed “faction”. It relates to the changing conditions of text production in contemporary media ecology and to the language material that acquires its forms there.

Our study suggests that the aestheticising text act challenges the discourse order of the hitherto pedagogy of writing. We can see that the Romantic view of writing remains prevalent in Swedish upper secondary schools, on one hand based on the notion that pupils should be given the opportunity in expressive writing to put their feelings and thoughts into words without them having to think about form. On the other hand and at the same time, the pupils seem to be abandoning another old dominant Romantic conception, based on a distinction between fact and fiction, in favour of the idea that everything is mediated, i.e. a transformed epistemology as a result of media reflexive writing in today’s media ecology

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