Breast cancer awareness and fundraising campaigns in Sweden from a material-semiotic perspective

Notes on my research at ZtG 15.8 -30.11 2016

My research project is a situated study of the verbal, visual and artefactual expressions for social engagement in breast cancer awareness and fundraising campaigns. The specific case that I am examining is the Pink Ribbon campaigns in Sweden (2015 - 2016), where two main organizing bodies back up the two campaigns, Cancerfonden (The Cancer Foundation) – a research funding organization, and the Breast Cancer Association BRO – a patients’ organization.

The questions I address are: How do the campaigns offer and facilitate social engagement in/as a common cause? What role does the materiality of the campaigns play? Are the articulations of the campaigns only textual products of a discourse of commodification and marketization, or do they facilitate – afford – other (progressive) social possibilities? Finally, what is the performative potential of the campaigns as a social practice?

I approach these questions by studying the implementations of the campaigns graphically, verbally and in video material, but also through displays of material-technical practices such as a reminder app for breast self-examination, which involves the social public in a different way. Overall, I adopt a set of social semiotic tools, meaning that the different expressions of the campaigns – the represented actions, materials and artifacts – account for semiotic resources, or possibilities for meaning making. In addition to being material, resources are also social and cultural. Another central concept is affordances, which refers to the possible uses of the resources in concrete social and discursive contexts. In other words – in a social semiotic perspective, it is the interests of sign makers that shape and realize discourse. However, studying the campaigns I also emphasize (the need for) a more performative perspective – I argue that the campaigns should not only be seen as realizations of discourse, but that they offer different possibilities for participation and social engagement. I study how various references to (and uses of) emotions produce affective resources – building on Sara Ahmed (2006, 2014) but also on studies of the history of emotions (Johannisson, 2009; Ljunggren, 2015), I examine how emotions and affective resources become central in affording social coherence and engagement in the campaigns.

References: