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Vikings alive! Film in the university museum: Research communication or reinforcing popular myth?

Abstract

The Viking Ship Museum in Oslo exhibits three original viking ships and attracts more than half a million visitors per year. The public have long asked for more information about the viking age, and the university museum has wished to develop a better approach to sharing its research-based findings. In the overcrowded museum, the solution was to create a film to breathe new life into the artefacts on display. The film *Vikings Alive!* has become a unique visual journey into the viking age. In only five minutes, we follow a viking ship from the time of its construction, through adventures on norwegian fjords and expeditions to foreign shores, to when it ends its days as a grave ship for a viking king. The site-specific film is projected directly onto the vaulted ceiling. The museum architecture with a ship as its centerpiece, heightens the experience. It is as if the viking age is played out in front of our eyes. Many historians criticize historical films for simplifying causality and dramatizing conflicts. And in the urge to create a stunning experience, we may run the risk of reinforcing popular myths about the past. But the reception of *Vikings Alive!* demonstrates that the film medium contributes constructively to communicating our research. Among other things, we are able to illustrate what we now know about how viking raids and the trade in slaves financed power struggles in the viking homelands. We can also paint a large picture of how we imagine vikings performed a burial ceremony. « By emotionalizing and personalizing history, film can do something written words cannot » (Robert A. Rosenstone). But we need broader surveys and research in order to say more about the effects of integrating film and exhibitions in the Viking Ship Museum.

Keywords : vikings, research communication, museum films.

Résumé

Le Viking Ship Museum d'Oslo expose trois navires vikings originaux et attire plus d'un demi-million de visiteurs par an. Le public demande depuis longtemps plus d'informations sur l'ère viking, et le musée universitaire a souhaité développer une meilleure approche pour partager les résultats de ses recherches. Dans ce musée fortement fréquenté, la solution a été de créer un film pour redonner vie aux objets exposés. Le film Vikings Alive! est devenu un voyage visuel unique dans l'ère viking. En seulement cinq minutes, nous suivons un navire viking depuis sa construction, en passant par des aventures sur les fjords norvégiens et des expéditions sur les rivages étrangers, jusqu'à la fin de ses jours comme navire funéraire pour un roi viking. Le film, spécifique au site, est projeté directement sur le plafond voûté. L'architecture du musée avec un navire comme pièce maîtresse, rehausse l'expérience. C'est comme si l'ère viking se jouait sous nos yeux. Beaucoup d'historiens critiquent les films historiques car ils simplifient la causalité et dramatisent les conflits. Et dans l'envie de créer une expérience étonnante, nous courons le risque de renforcer les mythes populaires sur le passé. Mais l'accueil de Vikings Alive! démontre que le support cinématographique contribue de manière constructive à communiquer nos recherches. Entre autres choses, nous sommes en mesure d'illustrer ce que nous savons sur les raids et la traite des esclaves qui ont financé les luttes de pouvoir dans les pays vikings. Nous pouvons aussi présenter la façon dont nous imaginons que les Vikings procédaient à une cérémonie d'inhumation. « En personnalisant l'histoire et en y intégrant des émotions, le cinéma peut faire quelque chose que les mots écrits ne peuvent pas faire » (Robert A. Rosenstone). Nous avons cependant besoin d'enquêtes et de recherches plus larges pour mieux évaluer les effets de l'intégration du cinéma et des expositions au Musée des navires vikings.

Mots-clés : vikings, communication de recherche, film au musée.

Introduction

With more than 600.000 visitors each year, The Viking Ship Museum is the most visited museum in Norway. The numbers can be explained by both the attraction of the exhibited artefacts and the current popularity of Vikings in films, TV series and other popular media. As university museums in Norway are stewards for all pre-Reformation archaeological finds, they hold notable collections of public interest. They are also easily accessible to visitors, as they are not hidden within the walls of university campuses. As part of The Museum of Cultural History, The Viking Ship Museum is a department within the University of Oslo. It is situated on a peninsula in the capital alongside a number of other well-visited museums. Despite high visitor numbers, we are nevertheless faced with other university museum challenges, such as traditional scenography and the need for increased public participation. We also need to make research undertaken at the university more visible. Or as the University of Oslo has rephrased research communication: to put knowledge to use.



Figure 1 - Tourists make the Viking Ship Museum come alive all year round, but the museum has traditionally offered little contextualization of the Vikings. This project aimed at making the Vikings come alive in the architecture surrounding the ships. Photo: Eirik Irgens Johnsen, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo (UiO).

The Viking Ship Museum exhibits the world's three best preserved Viking ships from the 9th and 10th century, along with a number of other artefacts offered at these ship burial ceremonies. Due to little oxygen in the burial mounds, the archaeological wood was fairly well preserved until the excavations in the late 19th and early 20th century. The ships have over the last 100 years become central symbols of the legendary Scandinavian Vikings. However, the crowded museum was built for only a fraction of the number of visitors we welcome today, and it has little space and tradition for in-depth presentation of new research. In addition, many of our visitors come and leave in a hurry, as they are part of organised tourist groups visiting the capital on a tight schedule.

The museum wanted to change this situation. We were fortunate to find a partner who was willing to finance a project to visualise more of what we currently know about the Viking age to visitors with little or no pre-knowledge. As our medium, we chose the interplay between film projection, original artefacts and the architecture of the museum. Was it possible to make history and the Vikings come alive through modern technology without reducing the attraction and value of the original objects? And could we succeed in our goals without resorting to the exact same myths and imagery common in popular media?

1. Films in the museum

Films about the Vikings are almost as old as the media itself (HARTY 2011), and they come in all genres and qualities. We wanted to combine documentaries and fiction into one single programme. Three short documentaries were devoted to the Viking ship building technique, the Vikings' journeys, and the textile tapestry found in one of the ships. These were to be screened on smaller TV monitors in different parts of the museum. But first and foremost, we wanted to create a fictionalised story that could immerse the audience into the Viking world through projections in the vaulted ceiling above an authentic 9th century Viking ship.¹ This main film would leave out verbal explanations and didactics, and the following reflections are concerned with this most expensive part of the project.

As a university museum, it was paramount for us that all content be based on research conducted by the museum's archaeologists and wider research community. However, it should also be informed by a clear understanding of who our audiences are, what they ask for, what they need and what they enjoy. The museum's project team was therefore composed of some of our senior professors in Viking studies, as well as interpreters « with experience and understanding of how visitors respond to the museum's message » (SIMPSON 2015, p. 532). The members of the museum's project team had little experience with film as a means of museum interpretation. Still, in order to settle for a film producer in line with the public procurement procedures, we had to outline thoroughly our visions for the films beforehand. In this brief we asked our future partner help us « extend the audience's stroll among the exhibited objects to a suggestive and imaginative experience »,

¹ The main film is produced by Storm Films and Storm Studios. The documentaries were produced in partnership with Hacienda film A/S. The immersive film was produced to be projected on a curved ceiling and can only be viewed on site, whereas the documentaries can be viewed on our website, see:

khm.uio.no/english/visit-us/viking-ship-museum/vikings-alive/videos/vikings-alive-journeys.mp4
khm.uio.no/english/visit-us/viking-ship-museum/vikings-alive/videos/vikings-alive-the-ship.mp4
khm/english/visit-us/viking-ship-museum/exhibitions/oseberg/the-textiles-among-the-oseberg-finds/videos/oseberg-tapestry-no-en-final-version.mp4

even creating a museum experience that our visitors had never had before (MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HERITAGE 2016).



Figure 2 - The goal was to make the Viking Age come alive for people with little or no pre-knowledge about this era in an interplay between original artefacts, museum architecture and film technology. Photo: Ellen C. Holte, Museum of Cultural History, UiO.

Among the candidates, we chose as our partner the film company that actually promised the least when it came to new technology, but which - in our view - had most credibility in storytelling and computer graphic competence. In our brief, we underlined that impressive effects were not a success criteria; content and aesthetics were. Some of our initial requirements soon became subjects of discussions with the director and film crew. As producers of experiences in movie theatres as well as TV commercials, their first and foremost trade is to tell stories with impressive pictures. They challenged us on how we were hoping to make people of the past come alive without introducing characters to identify with, and by not showing faces and «original» costumes, as we had suggested in our brief. Moreover, why avoid brute violence, when this is what people are familiar with from other depictions and can therefore can relate to? The reason we suggested this was to avoid another film where « [...] men in various combinations of fur, leather and armour hack one another to death with primitive weapons, and women are randomly naked and frequently abused » (GENZLINGER 2013). In other words, we were faced with the question of whether it was possible to make use of the « full visual and dramatic power of the medium » (ROSENSTONE 1995) without risking the museum's academic integrity. Films are powerful and may reach a large number of people at one and the same time by precisely simplifying and compressing a complex story into a few minutes and appealing to the audience's emotions more than to their thoughts.

2. Preparations and release

One thing we quickly learned was that in this business, time is a lot of money. A film studio is a big apparatus where every minute counts and is accounted for. We had to give swift answers to the film team's calls, and the time slots for making changes were short. Our researchers needed to decide upon several difficult questions without resorting to nuanced considerations. What did a Viking sail really look like? How high a wave could a Viking ship endure? In contrast to what we may believe about written texts and oral dissemination, we had to accept that film images are released without reservations but with great impact. We simply had to dare to make a story without being able to control the impressions it would have on the viewers and what different people would learn from it. The film was produced without a narrator, voice over, subtitles or any interpretation material in print available in the museum. Therefore, our university museum adjustments to popular media depictions of the Vikings – mini myth busters you may call them – are not directly pointed out or commented upon in the film. We chose not to do this for the good of an effective and emotionally charged story of a Viking burial ship, instead of an educational museum film.

Still, we wanted to convey as much factual knowledge and novel perspectives as possible. A driving force in the movie's plot is new research on how the need for resources in local power struggles was a driving force behind Viking raids and ship burials (BILL & DYLE 2012). To prepare for war and present gifts to strike up or strengthen alliances, the chieftains required major resources that could only be found abroad (BILL & DYLE 2012, BAUG *et al.* 2018).

Detail after detail in the movie was reworked in order to present them correctly according to research. A panorama with Viking ships at sea and northern lights would definitely be alluring. But did the Vikings really sail at the time of year when the northern lights are visible? What does a wooden – not metal – spade sound like when digging in the earth?

Sound effects like distant voices, waves, etc., should enrich the atmosphere, alongside suggestive music. We chose not to speculate how authentic Viking music might have sounded with the medieval-like string instruments, flutes or drums they might have used. The music is rather cinematic and meditative, and it was composed by an experienced film music composer educated in California. The sound should not consist of too much bass because of the fragile wooden ships, and it had to be tolerable for museum and security personnel who would hear it again and again, 25 times a day.



Figure 3 - Viking warriors rush away with a valuable bucket after a successful raid in Ireland. The burning village lights up the sky behind them. Artefacts on display play « supporting roles » in the film, but do the museum visitors become aware of the interplay between film and objects? Montage. Photo: Eirik Irgens Johnsen and Mårten Teigen, Museum of Cultural History, UiO.

The films premiered in March 2017 after one and a half years of writing, shooting and technical preparations. Since then, we may assume that close to two million visitors have encountered the scenes of the main film. It is screened once every 20 minutes across several hundred square metres above the remains of the Viking ship from Tune in eastern Norway, the least well preserved of the three ships. The time remaining until the next screening is counted down by a digital clock on the wall. As the museum is in fact only one room made up of four wings, all visitors are able to observe the start-up as lights are dimmed in the particular wing and the film score is audible. The five-minute long film tells the story of a Viking ship, from the day the chieftain selects wood for his new ship, the ship is built, and he and his crew later sail to foreign shores to loot and burn. They return home with treasures and hostages, only to be attacked by local enemies who kill the chieftain. His family and followers then pull the ship ashore and bury him in a grave hut in the ship filled with valuables, before covering the whole ship up with earth, whereby it sails off to the realm of the dead.

The immediate reception of this renewed interpretation was encouraging, and the overall enthusiasm has continued. As the projected Viking cairn lights up to commence the film, we see a number of visitors quickly walk towards the screening. Sometimes we hear spontaneous applause as the film ends with the virtual ship dissolving into the ceiling. Tourist guides busy with their hordes of cruise ship tourists quickly let us know if there are any technical issues with the film. Our own conversations with visitors signal that they both enjoy the film and learn from it. Many of them simply did not know that the Vikings also used

the ships for burying their dead and that this is the reason we have the preserved ships today.

3. Communicating new research or confirming myths?

Despite succeeding with grand pictures, suggestive music, and a storyline that can be easily followed, it is not difficult to point to some imperfections in our project. Representation of gender is one of them. By and large the few minutes of moving pictures depicts a male world. The chief, warriors and traders are men, and few women take active roles, with the subtle exception of the ship itself, which may be counted as female. Both genders were active social participants during the Viking Age, but a male bias is still a common flaw in both research and communication of the Viking world (MOEN 2019).



Figure 4 - The graphic style of tapestries found in the Oseberg Viking ship was utilised for depicting fictional events. Here we see an imagined encounter from medieval Spain. Photo: Mårten Teigen, Museum of Cultural History, UiO.

Although some have commented on the lack of women, we have yet to receive a comment on the small family depicted in one of the scenes. The intention of this scene was to communicate that the wife, chieftain and heir was an important upper-class structure, and essential in the fight for power. If the father died, the mother would make sure that the son took his place. The unintended message may, however, be that the Vikings lived in small nuclear families as many in the Western world do today, something which at best is a simplification. Most households consisted of kinfolk, servants and thralls, in various numbers depending on the size of the farm (ROESDAHL 1999, p. 58).



Figure 5 - The Chieftain stirs up his followers before a raid. As it turned out, the film came to carry a male and elitist inclination. An original burial hut and Viking rowing boats on the floor add to the immersive experience.
Photo: Mårten Teigen, Museum of Cultural History, UiO.

The film also neglects social stratification. One reason for this is that we wanted to build the story around artefacts exhibited in the museum, and these grave goods belonged to members of a powerful elite and primarily thus tell their story. That being said, this is also a traditional point of view. We could instead have chosen to follow the chieftain's nameless thrall, for example.

We wanted to avoid any glorification of Viking violence and had to take into account that this film could not have any age limit - children of all ages will see it. We solved these challenges by keeping the Vikings « at arm's length », showing them only as shadows and sometimes as cartoons inspired by the graphic style of the tapestry from the Oseberg ship grave. We thus lost some of the emotional identification with people, critics have said. Perhaps we faded down the violence and its consequences too much? With its idyllic scenes of Norwegian fjords, bold explorers and exotic journeys, the Viking Age perhaps comes across as too attractive to the viewers. At a conference we organised the same year the film premiered, this dilemma became accentuated. A researcher showed some photos of visitors at a newly opened museum in Turkey as they looked up and admired mural paintings in the ceiling depicting the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople. Some similarities to our project were striking: museum goers admiring grand landscapes, bold warriors and fierce attacks. Reading the museum's home page gave even stronger reasons to reflect: « We hope that your enthusiasm for the conquest remains fresh and permanent

as is, and gives inspiration for the conqueror of the future... ».² Using heritage to inspire national pride and new raids was not our intention when making the Vikings come alive.

Conclusion

Although limited in time and scope, our project has confronted us with many fruitful dilemmas and compromises. Central is the already mentioned need to accept the intrinsic logic of film media (ROSENSTONE 1995), and not to confuse or compare it to history constructed through written words. Words can analyse, make abstractions and reservations, whereas film summarises, synthesises, and symbolises in images. Perhaps we might say that the museum, in cooperation with the film company, created a hybrid between fact and myth, or as some label it, a « faction ». And, yes, we are willing to accept this « faction » for the good of making the Viking ships sail again in the imagination of the visitors.

Let us turn our attention to Viking images watched for hours and hours by millions worldwide. Michael Hirst, the director of the HBO/History Channel series *Vikings* expresses that: « Everything I write is absolutely rooted in research, it's based in history, it has some historical claim to authenticity, but it's a story, it's a drama, it developed out of my reading and out of my research. I'm trying to make the past live in the present » (quoted in FERRER 2015). In another interview, Hirst explicitly suggests a correlation between the series and the doubling of visitors to our museum (HISTORY EXTRA 2016). Although the film in the museum differs extremely from cinema and TV series with respect to length, objectives and costs, it is possible for us to appreciate popular media's courage to imagine, its courage to make history live. Historian Marlene Ferrer, educator of future history teachers in Norway, stresses that: in the encounter between history as science and history as enigma, a lot can happen (FERRER 2015). In our attempt to renew interpretation at the Viking Ship Museum, we have painted a broad canvas with the risk of simplifying and conveying inaccurate pictures, but we also hope to have inspired the visitors to seek new information and strengthen their ability to understand history with their own experiences, knowledge and imagination. The main job for the interpretation team should now be to investigate how the visitors apply the film's images, sound and featured original objects in their own construction of history and meaning - and to apply this knowledge in our ongoing planning for a total renewal and extension of the Viking Ship Museum, projected to open in 2026.

² See home page for 1453 Panoramic Museum, <https://www.panoramikmuze.com/en/about-us> (downloaded on 26.04.2020).

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Biographical notes

Martin Hager-Saltnes works as a museum educator and project leader for new exhibitions at the Museum of Cultural history at the University of Oslo (NO). He has studied social anthropology and theology, and he is trained as a teacher. He has also worked with dissemination at Oslo's open air Museum, and takes a special interest in using storytelling in museums.

Ellen Marie Næss is a archeologist and university lecturer and she works with exhibitions and dissemination at the Viking Ship museum, Museum of Cultural history, University of Oslo (NO). She has many years of experience from archaeological fieldwork. Her professional interests are especially dissemination, the Viking age, the Viking ship finds and the Vikings' religion and mythology.