

Dr Keith Russell
School of Design, Communication
and Information Technology
University of Newcastle
keith.russell@newcastle.edu.au

Effects and Affects, Poetics and Dramaturgics: The Logics of Media Production and Reception

Abstract

All media objects can be semantically scrutinised in their generation, production and reception. The conventions that attend each of these focal moments in the mediation process, allow for systematic investigation of the residual semantic elements embodied in the final media object. In the case of film and video objects, the semantic traces of production emerge most evidently, and conveniently, in the form of mechanical effects. The formal nature of these effects then allows for the determination of grammars, or rule sets of effect usage. These grammatical rules can be seen to arise in the decisions of directors such that the materialisation of an effect is the realisation of a grammatical decision taken by the director. The study and observation of this directorial process allows for a determination of a poetics or formal understanding of the making process.

Beyond this poetics there is the dramaturgics or analysis of a text that is both prior and subsequent to the actual media production. Dramaturgics is the systematic determination of the semantic elements of the object as a whole, both in its initial generation and in its final audience reception. In a simple sense, dramaturgics can be looked at as the determination of the genre semantics of a media object. In contrast to poetics where the semantic traces can be found in the patterns of mechanical effects, in the case of dramaturgics, the semantic traces will be found in the logical relations of identity affects.

Introduction

All aesthetic objects share in the mystery of mediation. In this sense all aesthetic objects have about them both cognitive and material characteristics made evident in their forms. In the case of many traditional or old media forms, the material aspects have long been studied and normalised such that the understanding of their material features or effects is of interest mostly to practitioners. Encyclopedias of poetics of various arts gather dust on shelves so much so that one can study major literary works and periods, at leading universities, without the perceived need for formal introduction being in any way imposed. By way of contrast, in the case of new media forms, students are commonly required to acquaint themselves with bodies of knowledge about the forms as if there is a mystery and a sense of excitement about film and video as material objects that is wholly missing about the sonnet, or tragedy or a novel.

Whole "new" understandings are made evident, such as pace and cutting and point of view as if most young students had never spent 18 or so years absorbing these features. Along with the cultural studies excitement about all things popular, these new forms have taken to themselves the very name "media" as if all traditional arts were not also media forms. Film, for example, arose within living-memory. The determination of its foundational grammar has been open to sophisticated scrutiny in ways that poets and dramatists and novelists already understand. Somehow this kind of grammar is a revelation to lots of other domains of intellectual concern when it is presented as part of the feature-set of new media.

While the spreading of the news about media grammar is a revelation of just how much interest and inspection a cultural form can cause and sustain, it is salutatory to recall that there are understandings about traditional forms that are open to informing new media studies that are not being brought into the general discussion. That is, the general commentary and theory about film and video, for example, has very quickly fallen into the hands of second generation theorists and critics who have no first hand in depth acquaintanceship with either the history and/or practice of traditional forms and/or the history and practice of the informing humanities, especially the history of ideas. Even when the quality of the observations is excellent, the underlying glide away from older forms and the understanding of older forms points to unfamiliarity and uncertainty about the possible value of the semantic models available.

"Drama", as many writers have said, "is conflict". Normally this is used to say that drama can only be expressed through conflict, but the opposite is also true: as soon as there is a conflict, there is drama. All videogames, no matter how simple they are, have conflict - enemies trying to kill you, a hostile environment, or both - and they therefore have narrative. As soon as you have a goal or a mission, you have a narrative; as soon as you have a stable state that is disrupted, you have a narrative.

Here we are taking a broader - more archetypal - definition of narrative than that used by other writers on interactive fiction, such as Brenda Laurel [1993] and Janet H. Murray [1997]. They are looking for stories like those found in conventional theatre and literature - Shakespeare, Homer, Austen, Bronte, etc. - and this is reflected in the choice of both the products that they analyse and the conclusions that they draw from them.

When we say that videogames should adopt - and adapt - the storytelling techniques of film, it is not because we think that games should be like film - it is because there are clear formal similarities between the two media and this affects both the stories that they tell and the way in which they tell them. (Clarke and Mitchell, 2000)

Everything Old is New Again

The burden of making vivid or explicit parallel languages or data structures from media objects, both new and old in form, has caused and allowed a union between the old and new media aesthetics. The generally facile nature of the existing semantic understandings of new media forms is shown up as soon as serious attempts are made to interpret media forms for the purposes of establishing destructive and constructive analytical tools. The lack of sophistication is revealed as soon as these tools are required to do more than predict the blunt and blatant material changes evident in a work. These tools may be able to mark-up footage for re-editing, cataloguing and retrieval much as can be currently be done by hand. The danger of shifting this function to algorithms is that footage will come to be shot to meet the "aesthetics" of mark-up as has happened in desktop publishing where dominant programmes, such as Quark Express have come to silently impose a mentality of boxes on a generation of graphic designers.

In the case of the generation of new content for new media forms (the purpose of Clarke and Mitchell) the pressure to make forward has led to an urgent repression of the old. An effect logic replaces more sophisticated semantic models that might allow for systematic understandings of affect structures. Effects are conventionalised in all media forms whether they are visual or not. That is, effects are the most obvious material feature of media forms; they vary from form to form and seem to offer working definitions of each. Poetry, for example, uses sound as spoken language to carry much of its effect. In its material form, poetry can then be analysed according to its auditory effects.

The language of film (or any other visual medium, for that matter) is constructed on the basis of an agreed set of conventions between the makers and their audience: the director uses a shot because they know that it conveys a certain meaning; the viewer likewise knows what the shot means and so understands the message. Videogames have not yet developed as rich or as subtle a shared vocabulary of storytelling conventions as film.

. . . When we guide Lara Croft across a narrow bridge *in Tomb Raider*, we get no sense of danger or of nervousness. Now imagine the effect of showing a close-up of her foot stepping onto the bridge, a close-up of one of the ropes holding the bridge stretching and snapping, a shot of some bits of the bridge falling off and into the chasm. (Clarke and Mitchell, 2000)

Aesthetics of Reception

This same effect trap is evident even when deeper structural features are determined. Clarke and Mitchell, for example, outline a very interesting and potentially useful account of time and space differences between film and video

games. They extend this primary analysis into the dimension of the psychology of reception as they establish key distinctions regarding the formal possibilities of immersion in different media. This approach is here termed an "aesthetic of reception".

The sense of wonder and excitement that we experience when we enter a virtual environment and have a sense of "being there" - of immersion - cannot be underestimated. It has great seductive power. Yet we would argue that it is the power of immersion that has lead videogames to adopt conventions which prevent it from maturing as a medium. (Clarke and Mitchell, 2000)

For Clarke and Mitchell immersion is a material effect possible in video games and virtual environments. In the case of film, immersion is restricted as an effect because of the material distance between the audience and the screen. And, one presumes, because time moves on in film and takes the spectacle away from the viewer's delectation or opportunity to repeat. If these material features, as they have come to be conventionalised, were looked at from an affect perspective then the continuities and differences between forms would allow for the determination of genres that were based on reception. Immersion could then be looked at as a possibility of affect relations within a formal and conventionalised continuum of affect distances such that distance and immersion are open to any material form of symbolic mediation.

Poetics of Production

Before looking at a model of affective logic or identity semantics, we need to look at the other strong attraction of effect logic. Not only do all media forms evidence semantic effects in terms of reception, they also evidence the semantic decision of production that, in the case of film, can be attributed to the director. The role of director, when evidenced as material effects can then be analysed to form a poetics or account of the making process. Such accounts are potentially instructive to makers of media objects. In terms of semantic models, poetics would seem to be rather restricted to the reflective understandings of directors, many of whom are notoriously silent if not deceptive about their actual methods of working. While one can readily apply a grammar as rule-set to an existing film, the results would seem to be compromised by the surface nature of the syntax of effects such as those of "colour, motion, editing effects, sound signal level". While each of these effects records decisions on the part of a director/editor, each is also limited, in itself, in terms of the cognitive implications. The phonemes of a poem, in their patterns, always carry high levels of cognitive value for native speakers of the language of the poem. In comparison, the mechanical effects of films are cognitively muted. To transcend this material barrier, Dorai and Venkatesh aim for what they define as "high-order semantic" constructs:

The extraction of increasingly complex features from a hierarchical integration of underlying primitives is a commonly followed approach.

But the key difference is this framework of analysis based on productive knowledge, that is, to both define what to extract, and how to extract these constructs we seek guidance from film grammar. We do so because directors create and manipulate expressive elements related to some aspect of visual or emotional appeal in particular ways to have maximum impact. With movies, for example, we draw attention to the film creation process, and argue that to interpret the data one must see it through the filmmaker's eye. Film grammar is the portal that gives us insight into the film creation process. It can tell us not only what expressive elements a director manipulates, but also how she does it, why, and what the intended impact is. Thus, complex constructs are both defined and extracted only if media production knowledge tells us that it is an element that the director crafts or manipulates intentionally. (Dorai and Venkatesh, 2001)

Intentional Fallacy

One can sympathise with the project and recommend the model as a way towards a poetics of film. However, the presumption of authorial or directorial "intentionality" and the relationship between some account of a maker's intention and a made object is not sustainable. Paradoxically, the kinds of development in textual analysis that allow for this project are based on the determination of a text that is outside of the orbit of any simple or direct authorial intentionality. The so called "Intentional Fallacy" and its partner, the "Affective Fallacy" were the ground of New Criticism that established a method of critical analysis of texts that still underpins all subsequent analysis of literary works (see Warren and Wellek, 1949). Poetics allows for the inspection of the making of objects; it does not do away with the intentional or affective fallacies. Because the entirety of a made object is within the critical determination of a maker in the process of making, this does not lead to the logical outcome that the object received is then the expression of the intention of the maker. In the case of film, because of the technical equipment and high level of artificiality (nothing happens as it happens even when it happens as it happens: a decision was made to film or not to film; to edit or not to edit; to filter or not to filter; to add/subtract audio or not) the position of the maker can be readily elevated as if it were of a higher or more positive value than that of a poet. Effects may work this way such that the director may fairly claim to have set off a bomb to create an effect of a bomb. Beyond such directly mapped claims we enter the world of affects where the director's claims about what affect he aimed to produce requires the agreement of a receiving audience. Unless such claims can be determined in the text (film as text) then any intention on the part of the director is as vain as any claim to affect by the audience that is not also able to be determined in the text. That is, in spite of the claim by the author/director, the evidence is required to be found in the text. This evidence is most readily available in the forms of interpretation made prior to production and after production.

As with the effects of reception (aesthetics) so it is with the effects of production

(poetics). Neither approach gets us beyond the surface semantics of effects. Beyond both of these approaches, both before and subsequent to the production, there is a range of determinations that announce, maintain and develop the conventions of media understood or experienced as affects. The pre-production interpretive approach can be termed as dramaturgics; the parallel reception interpretive approach is here term as hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is quite well known and will be implicated in a model on interpretation in common with dramaturgics. That is, the presumptions of a text to be interpreted are common to both. Because dramaturgics is less well know, this paper will aim to illustrate the potential use of this formal approach to the production and reception of film.

Dramaturgics

The role of the dramaturg is not always explicit or defined as a single function in the production of drama, film and video. The first instance of the formal hiring of a dramaturg was, according to Turvin, that of "Gotthold Lessing by the Hamburg Repertory Company in 1767". Amongst the current duties of a dramaturg, Turvin nominates "Director of the Text" as the defining characteristic:

Simply put, they are the Director of the Text. Where a regular director is charged with making a script a three dimensional picture, the Dramaturg ensures that the words and intentions of the author are being served in the translation." (Turvin, 2001)

This textual function is expanded on by Neutel:

A dramaturg should, above all, understand the play itself. S/he reads and studies it in such a way that s/he come to the production process with an intimate knowledge of the script and its composition, organization and progression of action. This requires a knowledge of the structures of drama and action . . . (Neutel, 1995)

A "knowledge of the structures of drama and action" is here treated as a textual interpretation. That is, the dramaturg has to determine structures of action that are found as structures of the text. Such structures have about them the quality of what might be called "deep structure" in that these structures implicate aspects of cognition and consciousness that are features of all acts of consciousness and cognition. For example, when Clarke and Mitchell outline the time and space features of film and video games, the differences that they explore are surface differences; they are differences that arise through the material features of the media being employed. From the perspective of poetics, or the making of a media object, these surface qualities of time and space may be key to a decision by a producer about what effect to employ. From the deeper structural concerns of a dramaturg, the interpreted models of time and space are what then determine the connections between the parts of the whole.

The use of editing enables time to be discontinuous - for the future, present and past to exist simultaneously e.g. in flashback or flashforward sequences, or parallel action sequences where the viewer is in two places at one moment in time. In film, "time" is never "real time", it is always being compressed and expanded at the service of the story.

The same could be said for the notion of "space" in film. Once again, space is flexible, compressible, expandable through the use of lighting, camera moves and angles, sound and editing. Space and perspective are also always at the service of the narrative, there is no "real" or "true" space in film that exists outside of the drive of the narrative. (Clarke and Mitchell, 2000)

The ability to shift time, in film, is continuous across the entire film. That is, on the surface level, it is possible to produce a film in which time is referred to in a different way in each single frame. Such an object would obviously be all but impossible to follow from a deep structural level where the interpreted understandings of time are formed around conventions or understandings of consciousness that are far less open to material manipulation. Dramaturgics, as the study and formal organising of such determinations, allows us to formalise the deep structural understandings of all acts of consciousness where the mediation process is highlighted.

The determination of such deep structures may be looked at here through a notion of interpretive genres. Rather than explore the grounding of such genres in detail, a simplified account will be given in an effort to focus on the primary purpose of this paper which is to announce the usefulness of interpreted genres for the establishing of a semantic bridge between media as experience and content accounts of media. What follows is a sketch of a fully elaborated theory, "Kenosis, Katharsis, Kairosis: A Theory of Literary Affects" (Russell, 1990).

Three Traditional Genres

The three broad traditional genres that we have inherited are the Epic (Novel), the Dramatic and the Lyric. In the case of more recent media, such as film, each of these traditional genres can be found within individual films such that we can readily recognise a film that is "like" a novel, a film that is "like" a play and a film that is "like" a poem. Equally we can find moments within films that display aspects of each of these traditional genres. The same holds for the traditional genre examples such that a novel may contain lyric and dramatic moments and a drama may contain lyric and epic moments and a lyric may contain dramatic and epic moments. This confusion would seem to make genre constructs all but useless in establish semantic models for actual works. Indeed, there are many examples of accounts of genre that amount to lists of works and their defining elements such that we have cowboy movies and road movies and then we have cowboy road movies. This cataloguing ends up with lists that are longer than the

number of actual films.

Conclusion - the Uses of Affect Logics

The presumption of an interpretive genre is that in the reception of a media object, we, as the receivers, must make certain interpretive decisions about the contents of the object. In forming these decisions of interpretation we are establishing genre aspects. These decisions are formed around identity constructs which are experienced as affects: Kenosis for the Lyric; Katharsis for the Dramatic; and, Kairosis for the Epic or Novel. The reader may have anticipated from this description that what is being looked at here has resonances of Kantian Categories. That is, in determining deep structures of consciousness through interpretation, the determinations will be made known in categorical and predictive forms. These forms, while being based in consciousness, are only argued here as being found in experiences of interpretation. No larger claims are being made. The advantage of these categories for sematic models of media is that they allow for the questioning of media objects via the logics of affect. Works of art exist, in experience, as both effects and affects. The first (effects) may be determined via the poetics of production (Dorai and Venkatesh) and the aesthetics of reception (Clarke and Mitchell). The second (affects) may be determined through the dramaturgics of pre- and post-production.

This use of affect logics is currently being explored jointly with FirePlay (Newcastle, Australia), a company developing media indexing and distribution systems, media generation programs and interactive media domains, and with Janet Aisbett, Professor of Information Technology at the University of Newcastle.

Affective Relations and Literary Genres

The following tables of relations are taken from Russell (1990) and draw on Kant and the work of William E. Rogers (1983).

Kant's Categories as applied to the three genres

	Epic	Dramatic	Lyric
Judgements	Categorical	Hypothetical	Disjunctive
Relations	Inheritance & Subsistence Substance/ Accident	Causality & Dependence Cause/Effect	Community (Commercium) Reciprocity
Temporal Aspect	Duration	Succession	Co-Existence
Metaphysical	Psychology	Cosmology	Theology

Topic

Metaphysical Problem	Immortality	Freedom/ Necessity	God
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Roger's Model

Method of Presentation	Tells	Shows	[Sees]
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Fundamental Aspect	Character	Action	[Theme]
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Literary Technique	Point of View	Structure	Trope
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Central Concern	Whatness	Howness	[Suchness]
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Russell's Extensions

Affective Relations	Kairosis/Kronosis	Katharsis	Kenosis
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Distance	BiFocal	Distance	Identification
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Identity Relations	Character	Causal	Constellated
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Mode of Matter	Substance/ Accident	Form/Content	Unity of Manifold
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Mode of Change	Addition	Alteration	Junction (Dis/Con)
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Discourse	Time/Memory	Space/Body	Self/Other
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Negative Aspect	Simulation	Virtualisation	Realisation
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Approach	Phenomenology	Ontology	Epistemology
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