

Context, Convention and Complexity in Film Meaning

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ABSTRACT

As Lindley and Srinivasan note regarding film, “Particular cinematic devices can be used to create different connotations or subtextual meanings while dealing with similar diegetic material” [5]. In language, different ‘illocutionary forces’ create different meaning from the same ‘propositional content.’ However, linguistic philosopher J.R. Searle thinks this points not to infinite elasticity of meaning, but rather to five kinds of speech acts that encompass meaning production. Each of these analyses, the cinematically-oriented and the language-focused, holds lessons for a computational semiotics that seeks to richly reflect reality (and imagination) and be usefully human- and machine-manipulable; context and convention are pivotal to both. This paper examines the productive comparisons and contrasts that the disjunctions and intersections of these approaches afford.

Keywords

genre, illocution, semantic, semiotic, syntax

1. INTRODUCTION

The first part of this paper examines a series of projects during the late 1990s that researched modeling of video semantics and generation of video productions from component clips in keeping with that modeling. The projects sought to embrace the diversity of the cultural dimension of film and the multiplicity of meaning that results from it within a framework that would be usable for non-trivial computational creation of films. In other words, that would be pragmatic and systematic. Our examination looks at how the framework dealt with the complexity that such an undertaking inevitably engenders.

The second and final part of the paper examines a linguistic analysis of meaning production, comparing its approach to complexity and its treatment of context and convention (in relation to meaning) with the framework covered in the first part of the paper.

2. REFLECTING REALITY

Throughout the late 1990s, Craig Lindley and a variety of colleagues, including Uma Srinivasan and Anne-Marie Vercoustre, *inter alia*, carried out a practically-oriented analysis of film semiotics [2] [3] [5] [6] [7] [8]. The object and result of this work for Lindley was the implementation and

testing of a research prototype for semantics-driven video synthesis, called FRAMES [4].

In these projects, modeling of video semantics was based on multiple ‘interpretation paradigms’ consisting of five broad levels or types: *perceptual*, *diegetic*, *connotative*, *subtext*, and *cinematic* [3]. An interpretation paradigm is a “set of fundamental assumptions about the world, together with a set of beliefs following from those assumptions (analogous to Kuhn’s (1972) concept of a scientific paradigm)” [2]. The paradigms were derived from corresponding levels of codification outlined by film theorist Christian Metz in his book, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* [2].

The *perceptual* level involves inherent features of moving image such as line, shape, color, texture, and movement [2]. The *diegetic* level involves the spatiotemporal aspects of everything narratively denoted in a video, including fictional time and space and other elements such as agents (e.g., characters), objects (visual and auditory), actions, and events, all within a particular cultural context [2].

The *connotative* level involves all the ‘symbolisms’ and metaphorical, analogical, and associative meanings that attach themselves to events and objects (or to relationships between objects) outside of films, i.e., in culture [2]. The *subtext* level involves hidden and suppressed meanings of symbols and signifiers, framed by one of the “great narrative structures that obtain outside of films”; these framings include Nietzschean, Marxian, Jungian, Freudian, and feminist ways of looking at the world, among others [2].

The *cinematic* level accounts for the use of formal film/video techniques to produce particular artistic/formal/expressive results [2]. Lindley, employing Metz’ analysis, expounds that this constitutes “the set of...cinematographic systems that, in a specific type of discourse, organise the diverse elements furnished...by the four preceding [levels]” [2]. An important reflection of this for Lindley’s position (and for this paper) is that “particular cinematic devices can be used to create different connotations or subtextual meanings while dealing with similar diegetic material” [5].

For film makers and viewers this is an interesting and useful fact, but it also points the way to what seems almost an embarrassment of richness. If part of the power of syntax is that it enables flexibility of meaning for various ‘combinatorial’ circumstances, the other part of its power is in how it constrains that flexibility within tolerable limits. The problem is that film is less systematic than natural language. Lindley agrees with Metz that a unified syntax for film is impossible because of related differences between natural language systems and film.

A language system is a system of signs used for intercommunication. Cinema is not a language system since it lacks important characteristics of the linguistic fact. In particular cinematic language is only partly a system, and it uses few true signs.... The preferred form of signs is arbitrary, conventional, and codified, not a characteristic of an image, since an image is not the indication of something else, but the pseudopresence (or close analogy) of the thing it contains. Hence there is a film language, but not a film language system. As Metz states, "Cinematic image is primarily speech—a rich message with a poor code, or a rich text with a poor system. It is all assertion." The meanings imparted by film are primarily those imparted by its subject. Montage demonstrates the existence of a "logic of implication", thanks to which the image becomes language, and which is inseparable from the film's narrativity. The understanding of a film precedes the conventionalization of specific "syntactic" devices. The plot and subject make syntactic conventions understandable. [2]

But Lindley maintains that while these 'realities' prevent a universal syntax they do not preclude a *comprehensive* one [2]. Very specific syntactic and semantic conventions within film genres and styles—the more stylized, the more identifiable—can constitute genre- and style-specific syntaxes, which in turn can constitute a comprehensive one:

Syntactic conventions that arise within filmic productions interact with the systems of meaning that they are used to codify. These manifestations are recognised in the varieties of type, genre, and style of filmic productions. That is, a partial syntax may emerge within a particular genre executed in a particular style. A comprehensive "syntax of film" must include the full range of such partial syntaxes, and that range and the styles within it are always changing and evolving. [2]

What all this richness means practically is that in order to reduce resulting complexity to manageable levels, a strategy must be adopted of integrating a computer-enabled support environment with human authoring of semiotic data structures [8]; this is what the FRAMES prototype for semantics-driven video synthesis set out to do. Lindley [4] reports that the system handles semantics and syntax for categorical, associational, and abstract film forms well, but that rhetorical and narrative forms require additional models for rhetorical and causal relationships because these "additional 'systems' of meaning...involve specific ways of organising meanings at [the five interpretation paradigm] levels" [5].

FRAMES provides elegantly for a certain level of semantics and syntax such as: identifying and controlling the variable values of semantic model entity (objects and their attributes) and relationship types; incorporating propositional operators of the syntax such as AND, OR, and NOT; and computing termination conditions for a video sequence [6]. It is still challenged, however, by the goal of creating coherent narrative, tending to require restrictive levels of specification in efforts to do so [4]. Lindley and Vercoestre [7] describe research to overcome such problems, including articulation of conceptual and logical models of various types of videos. They state that complex types such as narrative and rhetoric "will require conditional branching within specifications...and extensive rule sets specifying principles

of composition for videos in various genres," as well as "detailed development of causal and rhetorical representations [and] techniques for incorporating causal and rhetorical information into the matching process" [4]. This echoes a need for further research back down the whole semantic modeling chain described; for example, in discussing the connotative interpretation paradigm, Lindley and Srinivasan [5] don't specify how connotative annotations will be expressed, but state that "Ongoing work will provide generic ontologies and lexicons at [this and the other] levels." Though the FRAMES-related projects survey rich potential for annotating aspects of cinematic meaning, they don't formulate a rigorous toolset for doing so.

But the devil is not just in the details of specification; higher-order requirements generate something of an impasse between broad objectives of the overall project. Allowing for the reality that cultural and formal context 'multiplies' meaning makes it a significant challenge to systematize the resulting complexity so that it is both readily computable *and* comprehensible by human users of such an embodied system. In short, the FRAMES approach is hard-pressed to reconcile the contextual with the systematic.

3. CONTROLLING COMPLEXITY

John R. Searle differs from Metz and Lindley that a context-independent code is a necessary condition for a language to be systematic, arguing that although natural language is not the former, it can still be the latter. This difference points up a similarity between their positions, as well as what appears, initially, to be a further difference. For Searle [9], language meaning is no more rigidly rule-based than film meaning is for Lindley; but neither is it infinitely elastic. If the reality of human experience is that we construct such things as economic systems, marital arrangements, and political parties within limited categories, then "why should language be more taxonomically recalcitrant than any other aspect of human social life?" This stance would appear to hold the prospect of reconciling contextual richness with systematic rigor, of being neither straitjacketed by arbitrary, rigidly-codified signage, nor subject to unbridled complexity.

Searle's analysis [9], elaborated over decades of thinking in this area, yields five general ways of producing meaning, which he calls categories of illocutionary acts: "We tell people how things are (Assertives), we try to get them to do things (Directives), we commit ourselves to doing things (Commissives), we express our feelings and attitudes (Expressives), and we bring about changes in the world through our utterances (Declarations)." Given this paper's primary concern with film rather than language as such, it's necessary to deal straight off with how Searle's primarily linguistic bent maps and/or doesn't to film. Searle is a philosopher perhaps known best for his work regarding 'speech acts' [9], which are illocutionary acts carried out by using language. However, his linguistic analysis is embedded in a broader philosophy of relations between minds and the world, and it is certainly not the case that all illocutionary acts are speech acts. Searle [9] gives as an example the act of classifying, which can be accomplished in some cases by the physical act of sorting, rather than by a verbal or written speech act. Lindley [2] provides the cinematic analogy for this in the way shots employ angles, scale, and relative placement of objects to suggest interpretation of relations between them. While all illocutionary acts are not speech acts, all 'utterances'

are (at least potentially) illocutionary acts, and film production consists of cinematic utterance. The conditions for such utterances being illocutionary acts in the most problematical case, fiction film, are covered later in this paper.

It's also necessary to deal straight off with the remarkable conciseness of Searle's illocutionary taxonomy. In language, verbs are vehicles for illocution; of course given the rich reality of language, there are many more illocutionary verbs for creating meaning than the five generalized categories of results they produce. This would be unproblematic as long as there was simply a many-to-one mapping between verbs and any particular illocutionary act, but it turns out that more than a few verbs can map to more than a single act. Thus, language is not perfectly coincident with Searle's illocutionary categories, and the elegance of his system begins to erode here.

A variety of other things also complicate Searle's analysis. Not only do verbs not fit neatly into illocutionary categories, but according to Searle [9] we often do more than one of asserting, directing, committing, expressing, and declaring in the same utterance. As well, meaning can be articulated in a variety of ways that add complexity to the initially simple picture outlined by Searle; interestingly, some of these are nothing if not cinematic in nature. One example is the perlocutionary act—perlocutionary acts manifest as effects (such as convincing, annoying, amusing, or frightening) that go beyond 'understood meaning' and "may or may not be achieved by specifically linguistic means" [10]. Another is how, not unlike the way different cinematic devices create different meaning while dealing with similar diegetic material, different illocutionary 'forces' create different meaning from the same 'propositional content.' For example, the sentence 'You're standing on my foot!' always has the same propositional content (i.e., that you are, in fact, standing on my foot), but under different circumstances the illocutionary act involved might be to merely assert that, or to direct you to get off my foot, or to express my 'stance' toward you standing on my foot (or, indeed, as pointed out at the beginning of this paragraph, some combination of those).

While none of these phenomena breach the boundaries of the analysis as Searle conducts it (they are in fact part and parcel of the overall construct he posits), they inevitably push those boundaries in a variety of directions in order to encompass the resulting complexity. However, even with these elaborations, Searle's concept of a small number of illocutionary categories is unable to capture the real complexity of the world (and the imaginary) without referring to and grounding itself in something larger. For Searle, this is the capital-B 'Background,' and what it amounts to in many ways is an acknowledgment that context is a prime driver in producing meaning, and must be adequately accounted for.

While roughly equivalent to contextual aspects of Lindley's analysis such as some of the interpretation paradigms, the 'Background' deserves brief explication here under Searle's own rubric in order to profitably compare it with Lindley's view. In order to explain the Background, Searle must first explain "Intentionality":

My subjective states relate me to the rest of the world, and the general name of that relationship is "intentionality." These subjective states include beliefs and desires, intentions and perceptions, as well as loves and hates, fears and hopes. "Intentionality," to repeat, is the general form for all the various forms by

which the mind can be directed at, or be about, or of, objects and states of affairs in the world. [11]

[Note that Intentionality is not *merely* the *intention to do*; this fact is indicated by the inclusion of small-i intention in the list of other subjective (capital-I Intentional¹) states.]

Searle [11] further explains that Intentional states do not exist and function in isolation, but within a complex "Network" of other intentional states, such as beliefs, and that in addition to this Network of multiple beliefs and other Intentional states, one has "to have a set of capacities and presuppositions that enable me to cope with the world. It is this set of capacities, abilities, tendencies, habits, dispositions, taken-for-granted presuppositions, and 'know-how' generally" that is the Background—in other words, the context in which we operate to produce meaning.

Just as for Lindley the diegetic, connotative, and subtext interpretation paradigms are conditioned by culture, the Background also has a large cultural component. Searle [11] says "Part of the Background is common to all cultures....Such universal phenomena I call the 'deep Background,' but many other Background presuppositions vary from culture to culture....I call such features of the Background 'local cultural practices.'" Obviously, if the meaning natural language and cinema produce is grounded in local context, contextual richness is served but systematic rigor will suffer; where it seemed hopeful that Searle's approach might 'contain' the contextual, context once more threatens to overwhelm the systematic by the complexity it engenders.

So, Searle's attempt at being systematic doesn't so much reconcile with context as be assimilated by it, and he ends up pretty much on par in this with Lindley's approach. On close analysis, the two approaches are also illuminatingly similar in how they see the role that convention (and especially genre conventions) plays in producing meaning. In order to see this, it's best to look at how Searle couches fiction in terms of his body of theory.

While the subject of a complete chapter by him in his book *Meaning and Expression*, fiction is not central to Searle's thinking about language, persons, and the world. It is an exception, but an important one that Searle treats as essential to demonstrate the robustness of his theories, and thus the chapter-length study of it. Searle is interested in fiction precisely because while his chief analytical concern is how rules correlate words or sentences to the real world [9], fiction is an elaborate pretence. Sophisticated takes on this pretence argue that fiction authors allow fiction readers to be complicit in it by helping them to willingly suspend disbelief; Searle agrees, but is careful in his use of the suspension of disbelief phraseology. His main interest is that just as there are 'procedures' for successfully describing reality, there are other ones for creating unreality in a compelling fashion. They involve "engaging in a...pseudoperformance which constitutes pretending to recount to us a series of events....the author of a work of fiction pretends to perform a series of illocutionary acts, normally of the assertive type" [9]. Searle elaborates that in addition to assertions, assertive illocutions may consist of statements, descriptions, characterizations,

¹ Also note that though in most of his works Searle capitalizes 'Intentionality,' as we do here, to distinguish it from small-i intention, he incongruously does not do so in the work that the preceding quote is taken from.

identifications, and explanations, *inter alia*—all devices of the fiction author.

It is clear from Searle's argument that his analysis of fiction, perhaps unsurprisingly, dovetails with narrative form; the chief example of fiction he examines is a narrative form, and his analysis is clearly situated in that domain. This becomes even more clear as he moves on to explain how conventions underpin production of meaning in fiction, with it becoming apparent that the conventions are in large part those that characterize narrative in general and various genres of narrative in particular. Searle [9] describes *nonfiction* procedures, the "rules correlating words (or sentences) to the world," as "vertical rules that establish connections between language and reality." From there he moves to suggest that fiction is built on

a set of horizontal conventions that break the connections established by the vertical rules. They suspend the normal requirements established by these rules. Such horizontal conventions are not meaning rules; they are not part of the speaker's semantic competence. Accordingly, they do not alter or change the meanings of any of the words or other elements of the language. What they do rather is enable the speaker to use words with their literal meanings without undertaking the commitments that are normally required by those meanings....the pretended illocutions which constitute a work of fiction are made possible by the existence of a set of conventions which suspend the normal operation of the rules relating illocutionary acts and the world. In this sense, to use Wittgenstein's jargon, telling stories really is a separate language game; to be played it requires a separate set of conventions, though these conventions are not meaning rules; and the language game is not on all fours with illocutionary language games, but is parasitic on them. [9]

The degree to which the normal rules are suspended, and readers' disbelief along with them, depends on conventions native to particular narrative genres.

In part, certain fictional genres are defined by the nonfictional commitments involved in the work of fiction. The difference, say, between naturalistic novels, fairy stories, works of science fiction, and surrealistic stories is in part defined by the extent of the author's commitment to represent actual facts, either specific facts about places like London and Dublin and Russia or general facts about what it is possible for people to do and what the world is like. For example, if Billy Pilgrim makes a trip to the invisible planet Tralfamadore in a microsecond, we can accept that because it is consistent with the science fiction element of *Slaughterhouse Five*, but if we find a text where Sherlock Holmes does the same thing,... [9]

In effect, authors both assert and declare ('assertive declarations' are a special category of illocutionary acts that Searle grafts on to his original five [9]) a world or universe, but, importantly, do so within genre and style conventions (note that in this, Searle echoes the claim by Metz, and Lindley, that cinema is 'all assertion'). The correspondence of this created world is most importantly with the genre, rather than the real world. Most importantly—but not exclusively—because created worlds are necessarily partial

worlds. Most importantly, still, because while a partial world must rely on Searle's Background to sustain it, the Background is 'fictionally' conditioned by pertinent genre conventions. This allows created worlds to not be comprehensive in and of themselves, but to nonetheless be coherent, with that coherence depending on the conditioning of the Background by genre.

The author will establish with the reader a set of understandings about how far the horizontal conventions of fiction break the vertical connections of serious speech. To the extent that the author is consistent with the conventions he has invoked or (in the case of revolutionary forms of literature) the conventions he has established, he will remain within the conventions. As far as the *possibility* of the ontology is concerned, anything goes: the author can create any character or event he likes. As far as the *acceptability* of the ontology is concerned, coherence is a crucial consideration. However, there is no universal criterion for coherence: what counts as coherence in a work of science fiction will not count as coherence in a work of naturalism. What counts as coherence will be in part a function of the contract between author and reader about the horizontal conventions. [9]

And coherence is not the only thing that genres and their conventions condition and control. As we have seen in a previous quote from Lindley, "meanings imparted by film are primarily those imparted by its *subject*....The understanding of a film precedes the conventionalization of specific "syntactic" devices. The plot and subject make syntactic conventions understandable." Or in Searle's terms, what film is 'about,' capital-I Intentionally speaking (i.e., its subject), is a prime determiner of what it means. What this amounts to is agreement, on the part of Lindley and Searle, that the important and interesting conventions for producing meaning in fictional narrative are not reductively syntactic. While not as systematic as syntactical convention, generic convention would nonetheless appear to offer a stable foundation for analyzing and describing the production of meaning; however, both Searle and Lindley point out that genres are in fact transitory phenomena. Searle has mentioned in the preceding paragraph that authors feel fairly free to revolutionize literature by establishing new conventions, and Lindley says that regarding the varieties of type, genre, and style of filmic productions, 'that range and the styles within it are always changing and evolving.' In this, they concur with the strongly-held conviction of film theorists David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson [1] that genres are ever evolving.

We will close our analysis of Searle and this paper by highlighting a few points he makes about the pretend illocution of fiction; these provide interesting insights into cinematic production that emerge incidentally out of his thinking about fiction. Searle [9] points out that a common mode of pretending in many circumstances is to "pretend to perform a higher order or complex action by *actually* performing lower order or less complex actions which are constitutive parts of the higher order or complex action." There could hardly be a more succinct expression of how scripting, *mise-en-scene* and framing, and shooting are used (along with editing) to create the impression of a continuous world where only a partial and fragmented one exists. He further elaborates [9] that "in Austin's terminology, the

[fiction] author pretends to perform *illocutionary acts* by way of actually performing *phonetic* and *phatic* acts.” This reminds us that fiction film rarely employs direct statement, relying instead on partial utterances that are often indirect and largely visual in nature to produce its meanings. And meaning *can* be produced (even when as Searle insists the illocution is pretended) because cinematic utterances can be perceived as having illocutionary ‘force’ if the audience so receives them, which it does in significant part thanks to cinematic conventions. Lastly, Searle closes his analysis of fiction by addressing the core question: How exactly, in absence of direct statements, can a film (or other work of fiction) ‘say’ anything? He has no doubt that

serious (i.e. nonfictional) speech acts can be conveyed by fictional texts, even though the conveyed speech act is not represented in the text. Almost any important work of fiction conveys a “message” or “messages” which are conveyed by the text but are not *in* the text. Only in such children’s stories as contain the concluding “and the moral of the story is...” or in tiresomely didactic authors such as Tolstoy do we get an explicit representation of the serious speech acts which it is the point (or the main point) of the fictional text to convey. [9]

But while “literary critics have explained on an ad hoc and particularistic basis how the author conveys a serious speech act through the performance of the pretended speech acts which constitute the work of fiction,...there is as yet no general theory of the mechanisms by which such serious illocutionary intentions are conveyed by pretended illocutions” [9]. Here too it seems we must presently be satisfied with particularistic rather than systematic description.

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