





TOWARDS A SEMIOTIC PRAGMATICS OF TELEVISION

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis addresses itself to a sign-system, or *semiotic*, analysis of televisual communication. The goal is to determine the boundaries and the relevant subject matter of a televisual pragmatics, defined as the relation of signs to interpreters within a symbolic system.

Because televisual communication has not received ample semiotic consideration, the approach uses several analogues instead. Analogous theories include linguistic pragmatics, pragmatics of fiction, film theory, narrative theory, and reader-oriented criticism. Televisual fiction is considered first, then non-fiction (in informational and persuasive forms), and then hybrids and other special cases. Because these approaches relate to the text as a whole, pragmatic analysis is then applied to elements within a televisual text, by studying the implicit semiotic assumptions of a television production textbook.

Major findings are that interpretation is not related to fictive / non-fictive status and that interpretive strategies are not developed *ad hoc* but learned.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Language systems, symbol systems, or *semiotics* are usually thought of as having several branches of inquiry, including syntax, semantics, and *pragmatics*. An initial trichotomy of these terms, suggested by linguists, is that syntax relates signs to each other, semantics relates signs to the things they represent, and that pragmatics relates signs to their interpreters¹. Pragmatics, therefore, implicitly includes the participants in a conversation as part of the system of communication. While this "relation of signs to interpreters" definition of pragmatics is imperfect, it will serve to introduce the concerns of this thesis.

Pragmatics can be described as the study of how meaning is inferred from context. This means that there is more to communication than *what* is communicated, but also how it is communicated, the conditions of communication, the identities of the communicators, and even their purposes in communicating. Furthermore, pragmatics reveals that the means of communication are often crucial to properly understanding the message.

Within the field of linguistics, the sign system of spoken natural language, pragmatics has received ample scholarly consideration. Some rules, such as H.P. Grice's "co-operative principle" have been postulated, and today's student of pragmatics has some general concepts of how to determine how meaning is encoded and inferred pragmatically. While hardly a closed book, the

¹The distinguishing of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics comes from Morris' *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*, as summarized in Levinson's *Pragmatics*, p. 1. Morphology, the study of the make-up and characteristics of signs themselves, can also be seen as a fourth field in the science of semiotics.

study has progressed to a point where it is interested in special cases, such as “speech acts,” in which an utterance actually performs an action².

In newer semiotics, however, this attention seems lacking. In the symbolic system of television, a formal delineation of syntax, semantics and pragmatics does not seem to be available, to say nothing of the actual science of such fields.

For example, there has been an attempt to delineate a semiotics of film³, an attempt which has met with only fitful success. Theorists such as Lotman and Metz succeed in defining the shot as film’s atomic unit of meaning, a cademe whose ability to contain meaning is somewhere between that of the word and the sentence in linguistics. Ultimately though, those who hope for a description of a formal grammar of film with the detail available to users of natural languages are disappointed, as the task seems daunting at least and perhaps impossible. This, quite likely, applies to the similar (but not identical) semiotic of television.

At this point, the less-rigid nature of the study of pragmatics becomes an asset. As stated above, studies in linguistic pragmatics have generated some theoretical laws, but pragmatics is generally more flexible and tentative than syntactic theory might be. This makes it a potentially valuable tool for analyzing meaning construction and inference in other symbol systems, including television. While we may presently have little hope for transforming a television shot, scene or sequence into a grammatical model of a sentence or a Chomsky-an deep structure, there is reason to think that the tools of pragmatics, a reader’s use of his or her knowledge about the context, purpose,

²For example, “I nominate Betty” or “I quit!”

³Film, as will be argued in the next section, being a similar but not equivalent semiotic when compared to television.



and meaning of a message, could help us better understand how the semiotic of television functions.

In this paper, I will be attempting to reveal the nature of the pragmatics of television through two means. The first is to identify issues, concepts, and phenomena that are clearly within the field of televisual pragmatics, showing both their importance to semiotic study and their unique pragmatic nature. The second will be to determine the boundaries of this pragmatics of television — the points at which inquiry becomes semantic, or leaves semiotics altogether and enters other fields of study.

By identifying the nature of a televisual pragmatics, we will not only be exploring one potentially valid field of study, but we will also be developing a better grasp on the general concept of a televisual semiotic. This is of vital importance because many inquiries into television overlook semiotics in favor of the study of form and craft (on the production end), or social effects and other psychological phenomena (on the receiving end). An explicit study of the televisual semiotic can focus on the nature of the communication itself, and implicitly involves both the producer and the viewer of the televisual text.



2. DEFINITIONS AND METHODS

Several definitions are in order, particularly of terms in the introduction. The general *semiotics* is the study of anything that can be used for communication. A particular *semiotic* is a system of signs⁴. Signs, in turn, are defined by Saussure as the smallest unit of a semiotic, and are those elements that can be characterized by what a given element signifies and by the characteristics of that signifier⁵. The fact that these signs are in a *system* implies that the meaning is not completely inherent to the signs themselves, but is rather brought out by the manipulation of signs.

The sign system we are studying is television. This term is meant in its current U.S. usage, as a audio-visual form of communication, sent over air or wire in a one-to-many paradigm⁶. Television can be considered “synchronous” in that the program is capable of reception at the same time for an infinite number of viewers. However, it is also asynchronous because message creation and reception seldom take place at the same time⁷. Messages sent over such a medium will be referred to as “televsual.” This definition is

⁴These definitions are from Ellen Seiter, “Semiotics and Television”, in *Channels of Discourse*, p. 17.

⁵Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, p. 25.

⁶Formally, I am defining it as “broadcasting” as cited in section 305 of the Communications Act of 1934 (revised).

⁷The requirement that viewers get the message at the same time is very tenuous, and very much open to interpretation — for example, different time-zones get network television at different times. Within the area of one broadcaster (antenna, cable head-end, etc.), I believe this requirement holds, and it is necessary to keep us from dragging home-video (such as VHS tapes, cam-corders, etc.) into the discussion.

Also, if you count the time it takes for the signal to travel through the air, or to and from a satellite, all electronic media would be “asynchronous” in my second usage. However, I am more concerned with the deliberate construction and transmission that seems essential to televsual messages.



intended to rule out several related media, such as the “video-phone,” multimedia and other computer-dependent digital video formats⁸, and personal home-video formats such as cam-corders, all of which are generally considered part of the world of telephony.

Television is a complex sign system, combining several other semiotics into a given message. Of five primary varieties of the symbolic experience identified by Gross — lexical, social-gestural, iconic, musical, and logico-mathematical⁹ — television typically combines the first four. Furthermore, a given television message actually consists of two fields, one audible and the other visual. The sound is created by modulated current flowing to a speaker, while the visual consists of an “electron gun” illuminating tiny dots on the screen, drawing horizontal lines to fill the screen once every thirtieth of a second¹⁰. However, such a rate is much too fast to be perceived by the human eye, so I would argue that a televisual sign is not a frame or anything within it, but rather anything that can be perceived by a viewer as something with discrete properties (i.e., can be identified as a signifier) and is perceived as a referent to something (i.e., has a signified).

The use of reader-oriented criticism throughout the following chapters requires that we make a few notes about the conventions of that line of research. For our purposes, a “text” is not only a literary text, such as a novel,

⁸Such as *QuickTime* for the Apple Macintosh, or *Video for Windows* for Intel-based PC's.

⁹Gross, “Modes of Communication and the Acquisition of symbolic Competence,” in *Media and Symbols: The Forms of Expression, Communication, and Education: The Seventy-third Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, pp. 66-74.

¹⁰In the NTSC standard, at any rate. Note also that this “frame,” the complete drawing of the screen that happens every 1/30 of a second, actually consists of two “fields,” one being the even-numbered lines of the screen and the other being the odds. One field is, of course, drawn every 1/60 of a second.



poem, or play, but also a television program, commercial or film¹¹. An “author” or “writer” is understood to be a physical¹² person or group of persons who create such a text. A “reader” or “viewer” is a physical person who processes the signs in the televisual text and performs some sort of processing, decoding, or interpretation on those signs.

Given that we will be comparing linguistic and televisual texts, it is worth noting that a key difference between the sign systems is that televisual signs are *iconic* — televisual signs of things and people tend to resemble physical-world things and people¹³. By contrast, linguistic signs are non-iconic. The word “tree” does not look like or in any other way resemble a tree (or any other physical world object) significantly more than any other word.

Because this meaning is conveyed from and to certain entities, we should also note our definition of definition of “communication,” which for our purposes comes from Worth: “a social process, within a specified context, in which signs are produced and transmitted, perceived, and treated as messages from which meaning can be inferred.”¹⁴

Models for an approach to televisual pragmatics

Since television is a distinct semiotic, it will not do to simply impose linguistic analysis on televisual utterances. Linguistic pragmatics has an appeal in that it is fairly developed, sophisticated, and powerful, but it is

¹¹Since we are proceeding without a televisual equivalent of a “sentence,” it is difficult to determine a point at which a given collection of televisual signs is too small to be a “text.” My criteria for a “text” will require that a given collection of signs be self-contained and applied to some communicative purpose.

¹²“Physical” meaning that a given person or thing exists in what we perceive to be the physical world outside us. Phenomenological concerns prevent us from using the term “real-world” for this purpose.

¹³For reasons that will become clear in chapter 4, I am not asserting that televisual signs must resemble those things that they represent, or that they are necessarily representational at all.

¹⁴Worth, *Studying Visual Communication*, p. 165.

understood to be relevant only to natural language¹⁵. A quick glance at some key issues in linguistic pragmatics shows its inappropriateness for such a cookie-cutter approach. Concepts such as “conversation analysis” and “turn-taking,” vital to the understanding of the rules of face-to-face conversation, are not of much use when the form of communication is not face to face and the reader / viewer / listener has no opportunity to directly respond to the speaker¹⁶.

Our problem stems from the fact that spoken natural language and television are two distinct and different symbol systems, each a semiotic. To impose pragmatics onto television, what we *need* is a pragmatics of general semiotics. What we *have* is a pragmatics of one particular semiotic. Figure 1 illustrates this situation.

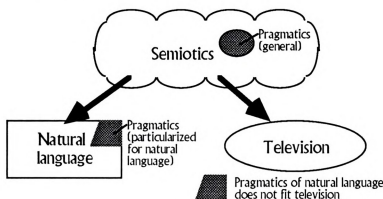


Figure 1. General semiotics as compared to two distinct semiotics

In figure 1, the shaded circle is the science of pragmatics that applies to all symbol systems, and adapts to them (in this case, deforms to the corner in the “Natural Language” box). Unfortunately, the circle doesn’t exist in real life, and all we have is the trapezoid, which will not fit in “Television.”

¹⁵That is to say, verbal speech in a non-synthetic language.

¹⁶Which, in turn, prevents the speaker from getting feed-back from the listener. These concepts are covered thoroughly in Levinson, *Pragmatics*, chapters 2 (deixis), 3 (conversational implicature), and especially 6 (conversational structure).



Still, there are uncanny parallels between existing theories of linguistic pragmatics and the heuristics that guide the creation of television messages. For example, consider Grice's "maxims of conversation":

- Co-operative principle — make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.
- Maxim of quantity — make your contribution as informative as is required for current purposes... do not make your contributions more informative than is required.
- Maxim of quality — try to make your contribution one that is true, specifically: do not say what you know to be false, and do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- Maxim of relevance — Make your contributions relevant.
- Maxim of manner — be perspicuous, avoiding ambiguity and obscurity, being brief and orderly¹⁷.

Keeping in mind these maxims, and the co-operative principle in particular, consider the "contextual media aesthetics" that are the cornerstone of Herbert Zettl's televisual textbook *Sight Sound Motion*:

- Predictable aesthetic response — "we can predict how people will respond to specific aesthetic stimuli and contextual patterns."
- Selective seeing — "we screen out everything that might interfere with our constructs."
- Emotional literacy — "art helps us see events from various points of view and shift from glance to insight"
- Stabilizing the environment — to make "our surroundings... become manageable."¹⁸

The comparison of certain elements of these theories, Grice's "Maxim of Quantity" and Zettl's "Selective seeing" for example, suggests a relationship. Taken as a whole, both of these theories seem to be describing similar phenomena, whether as the pragmatics of natural language or the aesthetics of television:

¹⁷Grice's own work is "only partially published," according to Levinson. This summary is quoted from Levinson, pp. 101-2.

¹⁸Zettl, *Sight Sound Motion*, pp. 5-10.



- Both are concerned with making messages clear, concise, and purposeful.
- Both call for the participants to monitor the communicational needs of the other.
- In fact, both make the matter of monitoring the other's communication and adapting to their strategies somewhat a matter of *prediction*¹⁹.

Grice's principles, taken literally, do *not* work for televisual communication — the one-way communication of television makes the co-operative principle unworkable as a dynamic strategy. At the same time, it certainly seems that similar purposes are at work in televisual communication. So, while we may not be able to use natural language pragmatics as a tool to apply to televisual messages, we can use it as a model for what televisual pragmatics might be.

In fact, we will not jettison natural language pragmatics entirely, because one of its topics of interest is of potential use to us: the pragmatics of fiction. Fiction, like television and unlike conversation, is asynchronous (message sending and receiving occur at different times), is a one-to-many communication, and does not easily invite feedback from the receiver to the speaker. As we will see, it has even more in common with television than these givens.

Another approach would be to apply the work done by Metz, Lotman, et al. in the study of the semiotics of cinema or film. This has a clear appeal because film, like television, is a one-to-many and asynchronous medium. Like television, it is predominantly a iconic form of communication, but also combines lexical, socio-gestural, and musical modes of communication.

While filmic and televisual sign systems share these similarities, there exist several sharp contrasts. Each consists of some number of frames per

¹⁹These bullets can furthermore be distinguished as emphasizing (respectively): source clarity, duty/responsibility concept from social contexts and "inherent feedback" of a system. (Thanks to Dr. Thomas Muth for this point.)

second being displayed to the viewer, 24 in film and 30 in television, but film's frames are static images while television's frames are created by a constantly-moving electron beam. Film and television also have radically different aspect ratios, lighting and color characteristics, and sound reproduction properties. We also have different expectations for each medium, based on our knowledge of the production techniques, abilities, and shortcomings of each. For example there is no such thing as "live" film, yet we can and do expect television to offer up-to-the-second news from the other side of the world.

This concern, combined with the fact that the work done so far in the semiotics of film has tended towards an interest in syntactic and semantic concerns, will restrain our enthusiasm for applying this line of research to our current purposes. When an analogy is appropriate, this emerging semiotics of cinema will be cited as a similar model for televisual semiotics, but because the rules and purposes of cinematic and televisual communication are distinct and different, we will have to use particular care.

Another line of research we can call upon is that of reader-oriented criticism, a collection of theories whose common thread is the proposal that meaning is not solely encoded by the author as a single immutable "thing" to be pulled out of the text by the reader, but rather that meaning is *created* by each reader in the process of reading. While some reader-oriented criticism leads to dubious conclusions outside of our current field of interest²⁰, the basic concept is ideally suitable for the purposes of seeking a televisual pragmatic. Reader-oriented criticism studies *how* a reader interprets meaning in a text, by analyzing what goals and methods a reader assumes in the process of reading. Given our interest in a science that studies televisual meaning acquisition

²⁰For example the idea that *all* literature is *intertextual* and is merely about the concept or craft of writing.



through means other than semantic ones, that is to say “the relation of signs to their interpreters,” these reader-oriented theories seem appropriate for this study.

A final line of research we will synthesize into our search for a visual pragmatics is that of narrative theory²¹. Narrative, as defined by Seymour Chatman, is one of three basic text-types (argument and description are the others), and is characterized by its “chrono-logic,” i.e. its time-based progression, as well as its need to be explicitly *told by someone*²². Television, as we will see, is an inherently narrative medium. Things are told to us by a mediator, which is to say a narrator. Perhaps this narrator is an overt on-screen presence or some hardly-perceived consciousness guiding the presentation. It doesn’t matter which — we know that images and sounds are being offered to us in a deliberate fashion. And the fact that we *know* there to be a narrator affects our reading of the text. Again, the utility for a study of televisual pragmatics should be clear, as narrative theory provides us with more clues as to the rules and purposes of creating and reading televisual messages.

Strategy

All of these theories — linguistic pragmatics, pragmatics of fiction, semiotics of cinema, reader-oriented criticism and narrative theory — have “something to do with” televisual pragmatics. By using them as analogues, we should be able to discover the boundaries of televisual pragmatics.

The general approach will be to analyze the two mutually-exclusive purposes of televisual texts: fiction and non-fiction. In Chapter Three’s consideration of the fictive televisual, I will analyze contexts (within and

²¹Or “narratology,” preferred by Chatman, et. al.

²²Chatman, *Coming to Terms*, chapter 1 and p. 114.

without the text), narrative, reading strategies employed by readers of fiction, the purposes behind those reading strategies, and the purposes behind the writing of a televisual text.

In Chapter Four, our attention will turn to non-fiction. I will use televisual news reporting to explore the relation of description and narrative, persuasive televisual discourse, and several kinds of hybrids that assume the formats of other programs for various effects.

A hypothesis that will be explored at the end of Chapter Four is that the nature of televisual signs makes questions of fiction and non-fiction somewhat irrelevant — because these signs are their own evidence for existence and because the discourse of fictive and non-fictive television is so similar, the difference between the two, as reckoned by the reader's ability determine a difference, is all but nonexistent.

Chapters Three and Four will address issues relevant to a televisual pragmatics, but will implicitly indicate the existence of borders to this study. Non-semiotic issues are not relevant to pragmatics, and those issues include (in most cases) craft, business, social effects, and policy.

Chapter Five will address the other borders to our study of televisual pragmatics, the delineation between pragmatics and the other fields of semiotics: syntax and semantics. To do this, I will examine the pragmatics implicit in Zettl's *Sight Sound Motion*, an aesthetically-oriented televisual textbook with many adherents. Zettl's work is something of a "style guide" — much like Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* is for English-language writers — with syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic issues all implicit in this guide to effective communication in television. Contrast of pragmatic and semantic issues will help to show the distinction between the two. Analysis of Zettl's

work will also allow us to analyze smaller televisual units²³ instead of the pragmatic approach to texts-as-a-whole in the preceding chapters.

Finally, in our conclusion, I will make some tentative conclusions about the field of televisual pragmatics and propose some courses that future research may follow.

²³An analogy to sentences is appealing here.



3. PRAGMATICS AND TELEVISUAL FICTION

Introduction

This chapter will consider the pragmatic nature of television texts that are fictive, i.e. are meant as artistic works and are not necessarily amenable to semantic verification relative to the truth-conditions of the physical world. I will begin with a consideration of the pragmatics of fiction in written literature, adapt this through analogy to television, and consider the concept of relative “contexts” to texts within a given fiction.

I will then move on to the issue of narrative, the preferred discourse of fiction, and consider the issue of the identity of the narrator in televisual fiction. Following this, a consideration of the nature of signs will lead to an analysis of reading “strategies” for televisual fiction and how such strategies are trained and employed.

Pragmatics of fiction in literature and television

There are powerful reasons to think that a pragmatics of television should start with an analogy to linguistic fiction. Perhaps the most compelling of these is the fact that linguistic fiction forces pragmatic analysis to look beyond truth-conditions as its primary focus for analysis and deduction. Reducing speech to sentences of sentential logic risks irrelevance when the speech is fictive. As Jon-K Adams reminds us in *Pragmatics and Fiction*, one can make various statements about Sherlock Holmes that defy semantic and pragmatic analysis unless one considers the purpose of fiction. For example, the statement “Sherlock Holmes wore a deerstalker hat” is false, because it requires two presuppositions:

$\exists(x)$: x is a person named "Sherlock Holmes"

i.e. Sherlock Holmes exists or existed

$\forall(x)$: if x is Sherlock Holmes then x wore a deerstalker hat

*i.e. If a given person is Sherlock Holmes, then that person wore a deerstalker hat*²⁴

An initial reaction to this analysis is to say that it misses the point of fiction, and that fiction's purpose is more an artistic and aesthetic than blandly informational. Actually, the analysis of truth-conditions will be more useful than I am currently giving it credit for, but let us say for now that a pragmatics of fiction must realize that fiction is quite unlike traditional face-to-face speech, in which an analysis of information exchange and purpose seems far more germane.

The differences between fiction and speech are plentiful. Fiction is usually delivered in a one-to-many paradigm, from an author to potentially many readers. Fiction is seldom face-to-face, meaning that direct feedback from the reader to the writer is limited or non-existent²⁵. Similarly, fiction is

²⁴For those unfamiliar with sentential logic (or at least my use of it here), " $\exists(x)$:" should be read as *there exists an x such that...* while " $\forall(x)$:" should be *for all x, it is the case that...* The example, originally from Searle, is discussed in Adams, *Pragmatics and Fiction*, pp. 2-7.

²⁵I noticed a significant exception these first two criteria the other day in a restaurant when I saw a parent reading to his young children. Not only were the "readers" present, but they were capable of providing feed-back, occasionally asking questions or screaming out for clarification. For the most part, though, the children were largely willing to listen to the story and not intervene. This seems to me a gray area — if authors and readers are present, then the situation may become more like a conversation, in proportion to the ability of the readers to respond to the author and affect the telling of a story. For example, if a literary author goes to a bookstore and reads his or her work aloud, uninterrupted, the text itself does not change significantly. Some opportunity for the reader to respond, react, or interfere is like the case above — long passages may be like one-to-many fiction, but the reader has an opportunity to alter the narrative through interruption. The author then adapts to this interruption, although it might be said that the reader has become something of an author as well. As more interruption is permitted, the give-and-take increases until the control over the text is equal, resulting in a conversation, in which both participants are authors and readers. Thus, our use of "fiction" should be taken to infer situations where one participant has primary, and perhaps total, control over the discourse.

seldom synchronous — the message is created at one time and received at another, or at many others when we consider the possibility of multiple receivers. Fiction is often carefully designed and conspicuously plotted, as opposed to conversational speech in which the formation of a message, its utterance, and its reception often occur simultaneously and instantly, in a continuously shifting and adapting dialogue of short bursts, sentences instead of chapters.

Of course, most of the above can be said about television. Televisual messages allow one speaker to address many viewers, are not physically face-to-face (i.e., television does not facilitate direct feedback from viewer to speaker), are asynchronous²⁶, and require a deliberate design (as will be argued shortly). The most significant distinction is that while fiction is by definition “not true,” that is to say not a referent to a physical reality and therefore not amenable to semantic assignment of truth-conditions, television may or may not be “true” in this sense. Aside from this, however, the two are remarkably similar. It will also help us to note that the first four points are pragmatic concerns relating to the *context* of the message, while only the fifth is a semantic point about the message *content*. The distinction, more finely, is one of reference, and we will see later that reference is an even murkier matter for television than it is for fiction.

With these defining characteristics of fiction, Adams dismisses the idea that fiction consists of “pretended speech acts,” by which he means statements that would in themselves constitute actions if they weren’t meant untruthfully. In its place, he elaborates a more promising model, starting with the basic pragmatic structure of communication for a given text:

²⁶Live television being a notable exception of debatable significance.

Pragmatic structure of *text* = $W (text_1) R$

were W is the writer, R is the reader, and $text_1$ is the text between them, whether a novel, poem, or (by extension) a television program. Importantly, this process always occurs within a context, a state which includes specific purposes, beliefs, assumptions, societal norms and prejudices, etc. In fiction, this structure is developed further by having another communication act occur *within* the text:

$W (S [text_3] H) R$

Here S and H are the “speaker” and “hearer,” and $text_3$ is the text between them²⁷, such as dialogue or letters between characters. The speaker and are entities within the fictive text who carry out communication. Note that in this structure, that instead of a $text_1$ between author and reader, we now have a $text_3$ between speaker and hearer. This latter structure is what happens in a work of fiction: someone *within the fictive world* says something to someone else. According to Adams’ argument, the speaker is always fictional, as is the case when a character writes or says something. The fictional speaker might well be a narrator, a speaker who is not an active participant in the story, one who perhaps was not even an eye-witness, but yet exists solely as a communicator within the fictive world.

The hearer is fictional, if one is around to hear or read the speech, as is the case in dialogue, or when a character reads something written by another character. Adams extends this argument to include whomever the narrator speaks to, because he argues it cannot be the reader:

“When the narrator in *Moby Dick*, for example, begins the first chapter of the novel with ‘Call me Ishamel,’ he is not speaking to us, for the implied ‘you’ of his request does not refer to a real person. We cannot speak to Ishamel (or to any fictional figure);

²⁷The jump from $text_1$ to $text_3$ is intentional. $text_2$ will be introduced shortly.

we cannot, for example, ask Ishamel for his second name, and in turn, he cannot address us. This is not a simple difference of historical time, but of context... we, as readers of fiction, are as distinct from the fictional hearer as the writer is from the fictional speaker."²⁸

Thus, somebody within the fiction takes on the part of the hearer (*H* in our diagram above), whether that character is explicitly named, described, addressed or not.

Looking at the text within the fiction, the *text*₃ that is communicated by the fictive speaker to the fictive hearer, semantic analysis of this speech takes as its truth-conditions the world *within* the fiction, and it is to this world that the speech refers. Pragmatic analysis relates not only to the speaker's and hearer's purposes within this world, but can also relate to the purposes of the writer and reader in our "real world." If the writer employs irony, for example, the *text*₃ may have one meaning when communicated as (*S* [*text*₃] *H*), but be meant and interpreted completely differently by the real-world writer and reader. This is because pragmatics studies text as it relates to context, and fiction has two contexts — the one within the fiction and the real-world beyond. Semantics analysis is irrelevant in the real-world context, given fiction's definition as being un-"real", and instead is only meaningful within the fictional world.

Narrative theory

Given a narrator and one to whom he or she narrates, a "narratee," we find ourselves drifting into the field of "narrative theory." Narrative theory, largely an outgrowth of the Russian structuralist movement of the 1920's, concerns itself with the structure of narrated stories and with the means of telling them.

²⁸Adams, p. 23.

Applying this to fiction, we recall the pragmatic structure of fiction described above:

$$W (S [text_3] H) R$$

One factor this model does not account for is the fact that the reader is more distant from the writer than this model would suggest. The reader cannot determine the entire identity or character of the writer from the text²⁹, but instead can only make out a projection of that text, a vague concept of values and ideas realized as an “implied author.” Narrative theory also makes a case for an “implied reader,” the person the writer thinks he or she is addressing, but obviously cannot do in fiction since the writer is addressing a potentially infinite number of individual readers across a potentially infinite stretch of time. This state of affairs requires a new diagram:

$$W (IA \{ S [text_3] H \} IR) R$$

Clinging to the pragmatic structure of $W (text) R$, we could assume that $text_2$ is the text between implied reader and implied author, making $text_1$ equivalent to $IA (text_2) IR$. This is not exactly the case. The implied reader is a set of assumptions and values the physical author, W in our above diagram, ascribes to his or her intended readers when creating a text. The implied author, on the other hand, is a similar abstraction formed by the reader from the clues in the text. Therefore, instead of connecting implied author to implied reader, $text_2$ connects one physical-world participant to one implied participant.

So far, our focus has been linguistic fiction as an analogy for televisual fiction, and I have noted some significant correlations. However, the introduction of narrative theory brings up some important differences that distinguish televisual fiction.

²⁹The text between author and reader, i.e. $text_1$, i.e. $(S [text_3] H)$

A narrator in linguistic fiction must be human or at least have enough of a human-like consciousness to narrate the story. Chatman implicitly makes this point in discussing narrative: "Narrative is the text-type distinguished from others by a double 'chrono-logic' — a logic of event sequence, performed by characters, in a setting... plus the diegetic condition: that is that the text must be *told* by a human narrator."³⁰ In the case of a first-person narration, where the narrator is a participant in the story events, this is easy enough to understand, but even a third-person narrator must be human enough to *tell* the story, to narrate the text. Sometimes this is true in televisual fiction — Sarah Ruth Kozloff describes such narrators as Jon-Boy Walton of *The Waltons* who tells us stories of his youth in voice-over narration from some future; Edward Everett Horton and William Conrad, the voices who performed point-by-point narration of the stories as they unfolded on *Fractured Fairy Tales* and *Bullwinkle*; Rod Serling and Alfred Hitchcock, who performed on-camera introductions of stories on *Night Gallery* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*; and Captain Kirk, the character on *Star Trek* whose "Captain's Log" voice-over narrates the story in the form of a message to "StarFleet Command."³¹

Despite the fact that some of these narrators are within the stories they narrate (Jon-Boy Walton, Captain Kirk) while others are distanced from it, the one commonality is that they are all tangible people. This is just like the case in linguistic fiction, in which a first-person narrator is a narrator who is also a character in the fiction, while the third-person narrator is a person who narrates the story but is not intimately involved with the story events themselves. In either case, we are capable of saying that the narrator is a

³⁰Chatman, p. 114.

³¹Kozloff, "Narrative Theory", in *Channels of Discourse*, edited by Robert C. Allen, pp. 60-62.

person, simply because of the fact that the narrator speaks our language and seems like a genuine consciousness.

This is not always the case in television. Narrators like Rod Serling and Captain Kirk are the exception, not the rule. Much of fictive television does not have an on-screen or voiced-over human presence as the narrator. That is, the person telling us the story is not always readily identifiable. Says Kozloff, “we know that someone/something is presenting these images in just this way — someone/something has chosen just these camera set-ups and arranged them in just this fashion with just this lighting.” She continues with the observation that when this narrator is not a tangible person, “the most common solution is just to use ‘camera’ as a shorthand referring not only to the machine itself, but to all the makers of narration; thus, one will often hear phrases like ‘the *camera* then cuts to another scene.’”³²

This concept of the camera as narrator does allow us to shoe-horn televisual narrative into Chatman’s definition of narrative as the “chronological” text-type that must be explicitly told. On the other hand, there are perfectly good reasons to reject this concept of the “camera.” On a very literal level, one might ask that if this “camera” is the narrator of television, why is the “typewriter” not the narrator of written fiction? To me, this seems to take things too literally — perhaps the term “camera-narrator” would be an appropriate way to stress Kozloff’s use of abstraction.

Another reply would be that the camera is not the narrator, but that the director and/or cameraperson are the narrators. This conflicts with the idea that the narrator is, whether an identified character or not, part of the world of the text, i.e. the narrator exists *only* within *text*₁. The director and

³²Kozloff, pp. 56-7

cameraperson, as well as all other physical-world authors, are part of *W*, the flesh-and-bone writer, and not participants within the text they create. If one accepts the idea that these persons provide the text to us, deciding what to cut to and when, then they are in much more direct contact with us — (*S text*₁ *H*) exists only between characters and all other communication is from author to implied reader or implied author to reader.

Chatman is acutely aware of this proposal in his discussion of film, because it implicitly claims that filmic narrative does not require a narrator *within* the text, which would mean that “film narratives are intrinsically different, with respect to a fundamental component, from those actualized in other media.”³³ In this case, I believe the filmic conundrum is equivalent to the televisual, as each has directors, camerapersons, and a seemingly-narrated text, so Chatman’s wrestling with this issue is relevant to our purposes.

Chatman says that we would do well in all these media “to distinguish between a *presenter* of the story, the narrator (who is a component of the discourse), and the *inventor* of both the story and the discourse (including the narrator).”³⁴ Chatman cites as an example the Hitchcock film *Stage Fright*, in which the first half of the film is a “lying flashback,” in that a false version of a murder is related by one of the characters and the viewer is shown that version. This has become an increasingly popular technique on television, as sitcoms and cartoons use plots that revolve around the narration of different “false” versions³⁵ of an accident or some catastrophe. An episode of *Tiny Toon Adventures*, for example, narrates such a lying flashback when two characters try to improvise an excuse for their parents after a wild party results in the

³³Chatman, p. 133.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵“False” having an interesting semantic meaning here, namely that what it is false is relative only to the truth-conditions in the world of the text.

complete destruction of their house. Their tall tale unfolds on the screen as if it had really happened. In this case, as well as in *Stage Fright*, the viewer sees what the narrator wants him or her to see — a presented text that is false relative to facts within the text itself³⁶. If these cases are the director and cameraperson speaking directly to us, shouldn't we be upset that we have been deceived? The answer is no, and not just because fiction is "untrue" to begin with. The author³⁷ creates the entire discourse — story and story-teller — and a lying narrator is just one part of that text, i.e. *text*₁.

Televisual texts do indeed have a narrator, a story-telling construct within the text created by the author or authors. Kozloff's use of "camera" may lead to some confusion, and rather than use the awkward "televisual narrative agent," I will use "camera-narrator" instead. This, hopefully, will stress the point that televisual texts are narrated by an agent within the text itself.

Signs and strategies

Of course, the various speakers and hearers within a text need some sort of signs to communicate, so it is worth considering the actual symbolic content of texts. Sol Worth raises the issue of signs by offering three situations that might convey meaning through signs.

Worth's first example:

"You are walking along a street, and from a distance you notice a man lying on the sidewalk. As you draw closer, you notice that he appears to be injured. In assessing this situation, if you assume

³⁶In a typically-clever episode, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* takes this a step further. A character is accused of an adulterous affair and murder, and the two sides use the "holodeck" — a virtual-reality room that effectively provides a televisual *text*₄ within the text — to tell their versions of the story.

³⁷Note that the "author" can be a group of physical-world authors, as is almost always the case for televisual texts.

this to be a natural event, you will most likely ask yourself, ‘What happened?’ or ‘What should I (or can I) do?’”³⁸

The key phrase here is “if you assume this to be a natural event,” as we see when Worth elaborates this as his second example:

“However, if you notice a sign pinned to his shirt which reads, ‘sic semper tyrannis,’ you might make a further and more complex assessment. Suppose you remember, at that point, either that a guerrilla theatre group³⁹ has been performing in your neighborhood or that you read about guerrilla theatre in a book. Your assessment of the situation might be now be quite different.”⁴⁰

Worth’s third example is to take this example and phrase it as something seen in a movie, one which “you call a ‘fiction’ or ‘feature’ film.” Worth concludes “There is no question that in our culture, a moviegoer, assuming communicative intent, would not ask, ‘Is it real?’ or ‘What should I do?’ but rather ‘What does it mean?’”⁴¹

In all three of these examples, the primary signs are the same: the image of a man lying on the street, incapacitated, with the second and third examples introducing the note pinned on his chest. Yet the analysis is quite different in each case. The meaning of these utterances are not in their (identical) signs, but can only be gleaned by resorting to pragmatics, i.e. to context and purpose (or assumption of purpose).

Worth’s analysis creates a hierarchy, in which the “situation” directly drives the process of meaning inference. The first distinction made is between

³⁸Worth, p. 135.

³⁹From what little I know of guerrilla theatre, I’m taking this to refer to a theatrical aesthetic that is played out in public places with little or no notification that the action is meant as fiction, perhaps meant to shock everyday people out of their commonplace assumptions (see my reference to Hawkes and Jakobsen, later).

⁴⁰Worth, *op. cit.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*

non-sign-events and sign-events, the former being the everyday occurrences that are not assumed to be meaningful and are therefore not processed.

With a sign-event, however, some sort of meaning is assumed. If the meaning is assumed to be natural, then the inference is an existential one — the viewer infers that *this thing exists*. In the examples above, this is the case of the man lying in the street as a result of a presumably genuine injury. If the meaning is clearly meant symbolically, then the viewer infers that the sign was shown intentionally and has purpose, and so infers that *this thing means something*, and that this “something” is more than just existence. If the viewer cannot determine whether a sign-event is existential or symbolic, then either process of inference could ensue, depending on what other information is available to the viewer about the context.

This process, Worth’s “context of interpretation” is summarized graphically in figure 2:

<i>SITUATIONS</i>		<i>ASSESSMENT</i>		<i>STATUS</i>		<i>STRATEGY</i>
I. Non-sign events		(not assessed)		(transparent)		(not interpreted)
II. Sign events						
Existential meaning	→	Existence	→	Natural	→	Attribution
Ambiguous meaning	→	↓↑				
Symbolic meaning	→	Intention	→	Symbolic	→	Communicational Inference

Figure 2. Worth’s “context of interpretation”

One of the various definitions of linguistic pragmatics has a special appeal when applied to Worth’s system. The “felicity condition” definition calls pragmatics “the study of the ability of language users to pair sentences with the contexts in which they would be appropriate.”⁴² While this definition is

⁴²Levinson, pp. 24-5.



imperfect for linguistics,⁴³ the concept of dynamically pairing sentences with appropriate contexts seems very much like the “ambiguous meaning” case above. Once the viewer has seen the man laying on the street with the note pinned to his chest, he or she then seeks a better grasp of the context to interpret the sign-event: “is this some very bizarre thing that has actually happened (existential meaning) or is it somehow intended as a symbolic event... oh wait, hasn’t there been a guerrilla theatre group operating in these parts?” Because of the ambiguity of the sign-event, the interpreter looks to context to determine how meaning should be inferred. Television may make this ambiguity particularly confounding, because of its iconic signs and vivid descriptive powers⁴⁴.

Reading strategies as pragmatics

Yurij Lotman reverses Worth’s methodology and achieves the same results:

“No one of us, looking at a stone or a pine tree in a natural landscape, would ask: ‘What does it mean, what did they intend to say?’... But as soon as such a landscape is portrayed in a painting this question becomes not only possible, but entirely natural.”⁴⁵

The first case is ridiculous because it attempts to apply an inferential strategy to an existential meaning, when reckoned by Worth’s context of interpretation⁴⁶.

In each of Worth’s man-in-the-street examples, a particular strategy was employed to interpret the meaning of a sign-event, whether that meaning

⁴³It is imperfect because it ultimately requires an over-homogenization of communities or sub-communities to allow the linguist to make reasonable statements about “appropriateness.” See Levinson, pp. 25-7 for discussion.

⁴⁴As will be noted further in the next chapter’s opening discussion of Chatman.

⁴⁵Lotman, *Semiotics of Cinema*, p. 14.

⁴⁶But note that some people can and do look at a pine tree in a natural landscape and interpret it as a natural sign, one created by a superior cosmic power (Nature, God, etc.).

was existential or symbolic. Worth describes the strategy of interpreting an existential event as having the following structure: an object, person, or event is recognized, treated as or assumed to be a natural occurrence, and is analyzed in terms of its real-world attributes.

Symbolic meaning, on the other hand, is characterized by its *intention*. As Worth points out, “a tic of the eye cannot be taken as an offense; a wink may be so taken in certain circumstances, even though the physical event may be exactly the same.” In a given situation, we “determine the intentionality of the behavior, and hence the nature and extent of accountability,” based on our knowledge of social conventions, particularly those relating to communication⁴⁷.

In Worth’s film example, it is fairly clear that a symbolic strategy is appropriate — the act of deliberately putting a particular scene on film and showing it to an audience clearly states intention. The same can be said of television, as the process of sending a message over the airwaves is such a complex and expensive task that it cannot take place by accident.

Television messages are inherently intentional, because they are *articulated*; Worth defines an “articulated event” as one which is “produced by a person’s musculature, or by his [or her] use of tools, or by both.”⁴⁸ Articulation implies intent, so a reader must assume that any text seen in this medium is meant intentionally. Therefore, *the most appropriate reading strategy for television is to assume symbolic meaning*.

It is possible, of course, to come up with cases that would seem to be televisual examples of existential meaning. For example, someone could place a camera on a street corner and start broadcasting that signal. The natural

⁴⁷Worth, p. 137-8.

⁴⁸Worth, p. 137.

events that unfolded would be available to anyone tuned in. But even in this case, the viewer can be expected to ascertain the intentionality of the situation, if only by asking “why am I being shown this?”⁴⁹

The fictive strategy

Given that a televisual text is to be understood as symbolic, we find ourselves returning to the analogy to fiction discussed earlier. The articulation of a linguistic and televisual fiction is similar here, because although one is electronic, the other print, they are still created or written in a pragmatic structure that isolates the real-world reader and writer, still use narrators and tell stories, and are delivered as an asynchronous text (rather than exist as a give-and-take conversation).

But what is it that causes a reader to employ an appropriate reading strategy when he or she is confronted with a work of fiction? Adams says the writer can use “external conventions, such as having ‘a novel’ printed on the title page, or internal conventions, such as writing in language that is overtly marked as fictional.”⁵⁰

What would mark language as overtly fictional? Adams does not say. Some ideas can immediately come to mind — impossible situations (fantasy), historical situations narrated with a modern language, a third-person narrator’s omniscience — but it seems that this “overtly fictional” language may evade a proper abstract definition and instead rely on a compendium of possible special cases.

⁴⁹Some of Warhol’s films, such as *Sleep* and *Skyscraper*, exist right on this extreme of intentionality. The same could be said of the made-for-home-video products that feature an hour of a fireplace or an aquarium. I argue the approach to the text as a whole must still be symbolic, if only because I don’t think a viewer could see past the 3-by-4 aspect ratio or overlook the phosphor-glow color and ascribe an existential meaning to the fire, i.e. to say “that is a [physical-world] fireplace”.

⁵⁰Adams, p. 25.

And more importantly to our purposes, do such conventions exist in television? Our dramas and situation comedies do not have anything analogous to “a novel” connected to their titles. Does television have at its disposal a language that is “overtly marked as fictional?”

Worth has identified a potentially useful concept here, namely that the identification of fiction can be found in the reader’s awareness of the synthetic nature of the text. We not only assume that a text is symbolic, but also that we can expect a certain presentation of its elements that will reveal its nature to us.

To illustrate this, Worth cites a line of research and experimentation that uses photographs of a doctor, easily recognized by his lab coat and stethoscope, treating patients at a hospital, changing into an overcoat, leaving the hospital, and walking down the street. The next photo in the series is of the aftermath of a car accident, with the obviously injured driver hanging part-way out the door — the doctor is clearly visible in the background of this photo. The next photo has the doctor in the foreground looking at the wreck, now in the background. The rest of the series shows the doctor walking further down the street, entering an apartment, opening a door, and having a drink while smiling at a woman. There is no shot showing the doctor helping the accident victim.

The pictures were shown to young children and college students. The children insisted that the doctor had helped the man in the car, because as one put it “that’s what doctors are for.” Worth hypothesizes that the children treated this as an existential meaning situation, employed an attributional strategy, and related this doctor to their stereotype of doctors. Older subjects, however, were certain that the doctor did *not* help the accident victim, and based their reasoning on what they know about story-telling. Said one: “If they had wanted me to think he helped him, they would have had a shot of him



with a stethoscope or something, bending over to the guy in the car. They would have shown him helping somehow.”⁵¹

The same pictures produce different interpretation, this time because of the reading strategy employed. Older readers have sufficient familiarity or *competence* with reading texts that they can use a knowledge of the structure and their sense of intention to derive meaning.

The college-age respondent pointed out an interesting observation that may show how readers distinguish fictional texts. According to Worth, “they [older readers] recognized that it is highly improbable that such a complex sequence could be captured in pictures unless it had been staged.” One respondent said: “a guy’s going to think something’s wrong when every minute a guy pops up in front of him and takes a picture.”⁵²

What helps identify a televisual text as fictional? Certainly, the too-convenient camera angles identified by the above respondent could be one factor, but this wouldn’t apply to such examples as dramas which were all shown from one character’s point-of-view (i.e., all the camera angles are as the character would see the world) or one in which all the action was restricted to one place.

The answer, again, is in the reader. Stanley Fish, for example, makes some interesting demands of his “ideal reader.”⁵³ According to Fish, this reader:

- 1.) is a “competent speaker of the language out of which the text is built up.”
- 2.) is “in full possession of semantic knowledge that a mature... listener brings to the task of comprehension,” including idioms, lexical sets, professional and other dialects.

⁵¹Worth, pp. 144-5. Note that this is from a “composite interview,” and may not therefore be the exact response of one particular subject.

⁵²Worth, p. 144.

⁵³In his earlier work, quoted in Iser, this term is “informed reader.”

3.) has “literary competence,” i.e. is familiar with literary conventions, has internalized entire literary discourses, can identify genres, norms, and styles⁵⁴.

The concept of a reader with “literary competence” is particularly interesting, because it requires the viewer of a televisual text to bring knowledge of previous viewing experience to a given text.

If this viewer, for example, chooses to watch what he or she calls a “situation comedy,” then an awareness of genre and style has already preceded the interpretation of the text. The term “situation comedy” conveys much more meaning than “humorous story based in an established situation” A reader of a situation comedy relies to some degree on what he or she has seen in other programs of that genre. Aside from assumptions about subject matter and potential for entertainment, the reader must most importantly assume intention and adopt an inferential strategy, possibly based on the fact that there is no such thing as an existential-meaning (i.e. non-symbolic) situation comedy, nor a non-fictional sitcom.

Other clues for which might lead the reader to adopt a fictive symbolic strategy might include the camera angles (for reasons discussed above), other production elements (lighting, set design), unrealistic events (from fantastic elements to all-too-concise dialogue), commercial interruptions, music, and self-reflexivity⁵⁵. In fact, the title and title-sequence of a program might be a clue to the reader to adopt the appropriate strategy, in the same way that “a novel” cues a literary reader to use a fictive strategy.

The title sequence and credits of television programs act much like frames, delineating the beginning and end of a program, and thereby separating

⁵⁴Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class*, pp. 48-9. Also as quoted in Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 31.

⁵⁵Self-reflexivity being a text’s commenting on, reflecting on, or otherwise revealing the fact that it is a text.

it from adjacent material in time, such as the next program⁵⁶. It is also worth noting that fictive television programs usually have titles that employ metaphor or artistry, and are in fact part of the art, instead of exacting descriptions of the program content — *Star Trek* instead of *Hour-long Science-Fiction Program Set Aboard a Star-Ship*, or *All in the Family* instead of *Thirty-Minute Political Domestic Comedy Featuring Obnoxious Bigot as Ironic Main Character*. When one sees such a title or its associated visual sequence, adopting a fictive symbolic strategy is probably the most appropriate approach⁵⁷.

There is also reason to think that the use of a inferential strategy is *learned* in a culture, and is not sufficiently motivated by “cues” within the text itself. Interesting anecdotal evidence for this proposition can be had from the reactions to the first use of techniques we now consider common-place. Lotman tells a story about a well-educated farm cousin who was invited to Moscow to see her first motion picture, a burlesque. She came home from the film “pale and grim” and when asked said “it was horrible, horrible,” explaining that what she had seen was “human beings... torn to pieces and the heads thrown one way and the bodies the other and the hands somewhere else again.” Of course, what she was failing to understand was that she had been seeing close-ups of various body parts instead of long-shots of the whole person. Lotman also mentions that when Griffith first showed a screen-filling close-up, a gigantic head grinning at the audience, “there was a panic in the cinema.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶One might recall Frank Zappa’s definition of “the frame” as a device without which “you can’t know where The Art *stops* and The Real World *begins*.” *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, p. 140.

⁵⁷Gretchen Barbatsis, in “Pictorial Encoding: Storytelling Themes in Television Program Logos,” has gone into great detail analyzing how the construction of the title sequence reflects the program content, through editing, music, and various levels of iconography (such as logo type-face and screen balance)

⁵⁸Lotman, p. 29.

These are intelligent people, but they were not yet competent to read the text presented, because they had not yet learned to use a knowledge of the movie language to *infer* meaning. Instead, they used an inappropriate attributional strategy to read the text.

The purpose of the reader's and writer's fictive strategies

Adams says that pragmatics comes out of the text and that reading strategies come from the reader, thereby implying that the study of strategies is not necessarily germane to the study of pragmatics. However, it is a central tenet of reader-oriented criticism that meaning is created by the reader in the act of reading. I disagree with Adams here because the reader's strategy helps create that meaning, and given our definition of pragmatics as a relation of signs to interpreters, the strategies that a reader uses to interpret those signs is vital.

So, if we assume that televisual communication is purposeful, knowing what a reader's purpose is should lead us to a pragmatics of televisual fiction, i.e. how meaning is inferred from the communicative context. I have already covered how meaning is inferred from a strategy, and why that strategy is employed, but why is this communication entered into in the first place, and does that have an effect?

It is not enough that we read an event symbolically — for fiction, there must be something more. Fictive television is not “real,” in that it is not meant as a record of physical-world events, but as something different. One could read a fictive televisual text as existential meaning, seeing a group of actors on a set performing a memorized reading of a script, but this completely misses the point.

One possible analysis is to consider the communicative purposes behind televisual fiction. Roman Jakobson said that speech focuses on any of six

basic components of the communicational event⁵⁹. These components each relate to a different purpose of communication. The *referential* component references physical-world objects, people, events and phenomena. The *emotive* component focuses on the speaker's emotional state. The *conative* component communicates the speaker's wish that the addressee do or think something. Two components relate to the code: the *metalinguistic*, which references to the symbol system itself, and the *phatic*, which establishes and maintains contact and communication. Finally, there is the *poetic* component, which focuses on the way in which the message is encoded⁶⁰.

Some of these components provide fairly obvious televisual examples. Commercials, appeals for charity, and election-time political advertisements presumably have a strong conative element, while a fine arts piece might be either predominantly emotive (if the emphasis was on conveying an artist's feeling or state of mind) or referential (if the emphasis was instead on showing the artist him- or herself). The recent introduction of network logos at the bottom right of the screen could be called a phatic phenomenon, given the networks' rationale that the logos visually inform viewers what channel they are watching, allowing viewers to more easily initiate the connection.

Presumably, a fictive televisual text will be most primarily concerned with the emotive and poetic concerns, while a non-fictive one should presumably be more concerned with its referential aspects⁶¹. As we will see in the next section, this is not necessarily the case.

⁵⁹From Hawkes, pp. 83-4; also Levinson, p. 41. Note that these definitions seem to be from the speaker's point-of-view.

⁶⁰Note that this does not literally mean poetry, i.e. literary verse.

⁶¹Cynical readers will note that both also have a conative element that relates to the sender's business — commercial broadcasters want viewers to watch the commercials and patronize advertisers, while public broadcasters would hope to get the viewer to send in a donation.

A reader of a poetic text should be more interested in the telling than the story itself, and empirical evidence bears this assumption out. Just as V. I. Propp found a staggering self-sameness in Russian fairy tales, Kozloff finds the same phenomenon in television, that “certain motifs, situations, and stock characters may have a nearly universal psychological / mythological / sociological appeal” and that “such predictability had led scholars to remark on television’s deficiencies in terms of one of the major engines driving narrative — suspense.”⁶² Kozloff’s examples are all of dramas, citing the viewer’s expectation that on *Perry Mason*, for example, Perry will take on a seemingly impossible case, his helpers will discover crucial evidence, Perry will make a witness crack on the stand and finger the real killer, etc. An even stronger example might well be *Columbo*, in which the viewer learns the identity and *modus operandi* of the killer in the first scene, then watches as Lt. Columbo investigates and ultimately cracks the case. Furthermore, there is the even more limited variety on situation comedies, which often use stock devices like “The Bet,” and “Mistaken Identity” to set up comic situations⁶³.

However, this self-sameness may exist because the *telling* of the story is more important than the story itself. If fictive television is most closely related to the poetic component in Jakobsen’s paradigm above, then the style may be more important to the viewers than the actual functions of the plot. For example, a 22-minute sitcom could easily spend most of its time moving the story along. Instead of this, however, viewers might well be more interested in jokes, put-downs, word-play, and one-liners than in a unique story. There is a certain pleasure in the “repeated path,” one that is walked in a

⁶²Kozloff, pp. 49 - 51.

⁶³*Esquire*, March 1993, in “Sitcoms, Seriously!” by T. Friend has a humorous sidebar that acts out what it claims to be *the* ten archetypal sitcom plots with Barbie and Ken dolls.

different way each time. *Columbo* lets the viewer know “who done it” up front; the pleasure comes from seeing just *how* the hero manages to find out what the viewer has known all along.

What this says in terms of pragmatics, in terms of the viewer’s interpretation of the text, may be that readers allow the text more leeway in terms of the plot’s believability or structure. Some slack is granted by the viewer in these areas because those elements of the text are of less importance than the style or telling of the story. We also noted that the emotive function is strongly identified with fiction, and if we extend this analogy to fictive television, then we expect the audience to want to relate emotionally to the program. By being predisposed to an emotional relationship to the text, the viewer is probably more easily amused, saddened, or otherwise compelled than he or she would be by everyday speech.

This latter use of the medium brings up a final interesting parallel with Adams’ analysis of linguistic fiction. Adams notes a paradox for the writer, who creates in a fiction a world in which the speaker (i.e. the narrator) produces a biography or history or some other non-fiction. “What the writer gives up in abandoning the communicative context to the speaker, he attempts to win back through the reader’s recognition of the text as fiction.”⁶⁴ Adams means that the writer may create a despicable world with a despicable speaker, for example the first-person narrators of some of Edgar Allen Poe’s short stories, and yet the writer will receive applause from and achieve an emotional connection with the reader. This effect is achieved through a pragmatic effect, namely that the reader *knows* he or she is reading a work of fiction, and that those things in the text that offend him or her are probably

⁶⁴Adams, p. 72.

meant to offend, and in achieving this reaction, the reader's sensibilities have been subtly altered, attention drawn away from the commonplace. As Terence Hawkes describes poetry:

"The essential function of poetic art is to counteract the process of habituation encouraged by routine every-day modes of perception. We very readily cease to 'see' the world we live in, and become anaesthetized to its distinctive features. The aim of poetry is to reverse that process, to *defamiliarize* that with which we are overly familiar, to 'creatively deform' the usual, the normal and so to inculcate a new, childlike, non-jaded vision in us. The poet thus aims to disrupt 'stock responses,' and to generate a heightened awareness: to restructure our ordinary perception of 'reality,' so that we end by *seeing* the world instead of numbly recognizing it."⁶⁵

Hawkes' argues that the reading of a poetic text disrupts everyday "seeing" by presenting an unfamiliar version of the world. In televisual fiction, with its marked poetic component, the same concept applies: by encountering the fictive world, the reader can experience a wide range of emotional reactions, all guided by the knowledge that the scenes he or she is seeing are being displayed purposefully, for aesthetic effect. Rather than dulling our senses, televisual fiction can serve to raise our awareness above day-to-day tedium.

Summary

In this chapter, I have considered the pragmatics of fictive television by beginning with an analogy to literary fiction. Here and in the discussion of narrative theory, I considered the question of the texts within a televisual text, their participants, narrators, and contexts. I then moved on to consider the concept of reading strategies and explored the difference between the processing of existential-meaning signs and symbolic-meaning signs. I argued that fictive televisual texts always call for a symbolic-meaning assessment, and therefore an inferential reading strategy. Finally, I considered the

⁶⁵Hawkes, p. 62. Emphasis Hawkes'.

purposes behind these strategies, from emotional contact to cognitive defamiliarization.



4. PRAGMATICS AND TELEVISUAL NON-FICTION

Introduction

This chapter will counterpoint the previous chapter by considering the pragmatics of televisual texts which are non-fiction, i.e. are amenable to semantic analysis by physical-world truth conditions and which purport a reference to that world.

I will begin this analysis with the seemingly obvious first case of television news reporting. I will examine the use of description, argument, and the surprising recurrence of narrative, which was such a cornerstone of our examination of televisual fiction. I will also consider the issue of the narrator for televisual texts.

I will then consider other distinctive elements of televisual non-fiction discourse, including variant positionings of physical-world authors and speakers and textual speakers and hearers. This is a noteworthy factor in persuasive televisual discourse, the non-fiction forms of televangelism and commercials, which must go to significant pragmatic lengths to achieve their intended effect.

Finally, I will consider the nature of pictorial televisual signs and consider their ability — or inability — to adequately relate to real-world referents. The discussion of this will lead to problems for reading strategies of certain non-fiction texts that deliberately or unintentionally spur existential-meaning strategies. From here, I will generalize and consider whether *any* non-fiction text can be read with such a strategy.

The descriptive text-type

Chatman, in *Coming to Terms*, describes three primary “text-types”: narrative, argument, and description. Further, he claims that while all three are easily within the grasp of the linguistic text, “each medium privileges certain ways of doing so,”⁶⁶ and that the visual specificity of film inclines it towards description. However, this description is very different from its linguistic counterpart, and that film’s description gives us “plenitude without specificity.”⁶⁷ By this, he means that a filmic image is filled with detail, that it in fact “exhausts the total potential of visible descriptive details,”⁶⁸ and yet lacks a certain precision. In comparing a scene from *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* in both its book and film formats, he notes that while the film version contains a shot showing the character Charles Smithson in full photographic detail, only the book can tell us about his “dundrearies,” long-flowing side whiskers that are named after a character in the play *Our American Cousin*.

One might be tempted to think that this inclination towards description, towards the reproduction of physical objects in detail inclines television (which, I have argued, is a close analogue of film) towards a representational mode of communication. If this were true, then the fictive television discussed in the previous chapter would seem something of a difficult aberration — television’s ability to capture and relay detail should provide a daunting task for authors of fiction, who would have to go to extremes to create unreal worlds. As we shall see, the opposite may in fact be true: non-fictive television is the aberration, and is structurally and stylistically derived from fictive television.

⁶⁶Chatman, p. 38.

⁶⁷Chatman, p. 39.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

The reason for this is the dominance of one of the main features of fiction — narrative.

Narrative non-fiction

Narrative is crucially important in television, as one might expect from the fact that time in television proceeds at a prescribed pace in a linear direction. Unlike literature, the pace can neither be accelerated nor decelerated by the reader. Unlike books or hypermedia, the text can not be skipped around, accessed at different points, or run backwards.

When a book adopts a narrative strategy, a linear-time-based means of conveying a meaningful sequence of events, it has yet another significant difference from television, the difference of *diegesis* versus *mimesis*, or between “telling” and “showing.” This difference parallels the difference between the forms of description that Chatman describes in the different versions of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* above.

Chatman argues that film⁶⁹ could employ other text-types, such as argument. “*Explicit* argumentation, however, is not an easy or usual property of commercial films.”⁷⁰ While film and television can utilize argument, they often do so in the guise of narrative fiction, which Chatman offers as allegories to literature’s “fables, allegories, *romans à clef*, and heavily moralizing novels.”⁷¹ Television viewers have obvious parallels in programs like *All in the Family*, which argues for tolerance through the narrative negative example of Archie Bunker, in countless pro-social cartoons like *Captain Planet*, which teaches children through allegory and brief direct appeal to save the environment, and science-fiction programs like *The Twilight Zone* and the

⁶⁹Therefore, by aforementioned extension, television.

⁷⁰Chatman, p. 56.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

various *Star Trek* series, which adapt contemporary social issues to a futuristic or fantastic context. Explicit argumentation seems to yield to narrative when the message is televisual.

Kozloff describes this effect by showing how a non-fiction program, *60 Minutes*, may describe or even argue, but is primarily a narrative. In fact, the story she analyzes is a narrative consisting of several narratives — while “one would expect that the thrust of the piece would be descriptive (*this* is what San Diego does for its homeless’) and comparative (*this* is how New York City handles its homeless’)”⁷² what one gets instead is a inter-related group of six narratives, which Kozloff titles “History of *60 Minutes* Treatment of Homelessness,” “The Education of Harry Reasoner,” and “Case History: Denis Alexander.”⁷³

The use of television in this manner makes sense. If mimetic⁷⁴ narration is the ideal format for television, based on its ability to show reality with photographic detail and its inclination for linear-time-based presentation, then presenting news as a narrative should accommodate this preferred mode of presentation while *representing* reality in great detail.

As it will turn out, television may *not* be a genuine representation of reality. Nevertheless, that may be the reading strategy that a viewer tends to employ. We know that as a message with intention, we should adopt a strategy that looks for symbolic meaning and infers deliberately communicated messages. Yet there is a paradox with non-fiction television, because the subjects, the things we are seeing, are assumed to be real. Do readers of televisual non-fiction texts employ a strategy that is similar to the

⁷²Kozloff, p. 44.

⁷³*Ibid.*

⁷⁴i.e., “showing” as opposed to “telling.”

reading of televisual fiction and yet expect to be able to make *referential* inferences?

An interesting example of this paradox comes in Kozloff's work when she discusses television news. "When Dan Rather (who functions both as supervising editor and anchor of the *CBS Evening News*) faces the camera and relates the evening news, he simultaneously figures as real author, implied author, and on-screen narrator"⁷⁵ This is a rather extreme claim, because Kozloff claims that by employing direct address, Rather compresses the previous narrative diagram (or "pragmatic structure," to Adams) from:

$$W (IA \{ S [text_3] H \} IR) R$$

to:

$$W (text_1) R$$

that is to say, direct address achieves the equivalent of a one-way face-to-face communication.

Has this actually been achieved? No, because narrative is still at work. Kozloff may have been biased by the fact that Rather is the only one in the screen-space, and also because he is known to write some of his own material. But if another person is added into the shot, for example co-anchor Connie Chung, then there is a distinct problem: which one is the author? It can't be just Rather as the narrator now, not even if he writes all of Chung's material. If the answer is suddenly "neither" of them, then we should rightly suspect the power of Kozloff's initial claim.

If the answer is that both of them are the narrator, then there is a problem describing what happens when the camera is on a two-shot of Rather and Chung, and then zooms in on one of them for a direct address, eliminating

⁷⁵Kozloff, p. 59.

the other from the screen-space entirely. Whose choice would it be to do so?

The answer is that it is the “camera-narrator” described in the previous chapter. Of course, this has really always been the case. The *CBS Evening News* uses Rather as an anchor to introduce the video-tape pieces or live interviews, which become the text when they are cut to. Rather was not the force that cut to or from these elements; it was the work of the real author of the program⁷⁶. This author, of course, is whatever we can make out CBS to be from the clues we are given in the text — the background filled with computers and phones and white-collared journalists, combined with the actual content of the pieces, leads us to imagine a large news consortium or corporation, with certain resources and attitudes... and hence our conception of “CBS News” as *an implied author*. The author controls the narrator, that is to say camera-narrator, and has it take us wherever CBS News chooses to send the narrative, from the anchor desk to the other side of the world.

Where does this leave Dan Rather and Connie Chung? If they are entities within the text, shown or ignored at the whim of the narrator, then they function largely as *characters*. They have no narrative control whatsoever, and are instead players on a stage⁷⁷. In this case, non-fictive television is much like fictive television, in that both are narratives with the “camera,” an abstraction for the story-teller invoked by the director and camera-person, as the narrator.

⁷⁶I suppose a case could be made that someone ignorant of television production might think that Rather called these pieces into being through a sort of magical speech act — i.e. Rather says “let’s go to Eric Engberg at the White House” and (*kerpowie!*) we’re there! I don’t think this is reasonable — given the savvy of media readers demonstrated by Worth in the previous chapter, this seems *extremely* unlikely.

⁷⁷If they do write any of their own material, then they are also *part* of the “CBS News” author. This would also be the case in other situations in which they affected content, by walking out or ad libbing, for example.

A different kind of non-fictional narrative

Robert C. Allen⁷⁸ makes a similar case for the “collapsing” of narrative roles into each other in his discussion of such non-fiction forms as the talk show and the game show. He notes that each provides “model readers” who behave the way that the home viewer is supposed to — applauding and laughing at appropriate times, calling out advice to game-show contestants, etc. Furthermore, he notes that in these formats as well as some news broadcasts, the term “we” is used to respond to both sides of the communicative process. For example, a news report on a hostage rescue operation was described as “well, we did our best; but we didn’t make it.”⁷⁹ The use of “we” in this case is interesting, because it does *not* include most viewers, since they were neither participants nor even informed in advance of the operation.

What may be happening instead is that this kind of television narrative works better when the viewer involvement is intensified, in this case by giving the viewer a feeling of tacit responsibility and power. In a game show or talk show, the viewer is made to more closely relate to the “hearer,” the studio audience or contestant or whatever character *within* the text is being addressed.

Ultimately, the reason that television does this is found in its conative element — viewers who stay tuned in will see commercials, and these viewers can therefore be sold in lots of one thousand to advertisers. This effect is even more pronounced when the conative mode, the desire to make a reader think or do something, is prevalent. An example of this is in a direct appeal for money,

⁷⁸In “Reader Oriented Criticism and Television,” in *Channels of Discourse*, edited by Robert C. Allen, pp. 74-112.

⁷⁹Allen, p. 94.

in which the conative desire is not just for viewership but in fact for monetary contribution to the televisual message sender.

Persuasive non-fiction

Allen calls this condition the “ultimate expression of television’s rhetorical mode”⁸⁰ and notes how the ringing telephones of the “phone-a-thon” provide an indexical sign of model readers, showing how they should act. In fact, television goes farther than the use of “we” and the model viewer. At the extreme, some messages sent closely correspond to linguistic forms of persuasive discourse, from suggestion to lobbying to the forms of presupposition and implication used in clinical hypnosis.

Persuasive discourse, that is to say communication intended to alter belief or motivate action in the viewer, is problematic for television. It is easy for a reader to break off the communication, by simply turning the channel or switching the television off. As Chatman noted, argument is the one text-type least common in film. As R. T. Lakoff notes in her analysis of television advertising, “persuasive discourse wears out; ordinary conversation does not.”⁸¹ Thus, persuasive television has to do *something* just to keep the channel open, to say nothing of fulfilling its conative purpose.

Linguistic novelty is one approach a persuasive text could attempt to use, and Lakoff found quite a bit of novelty employed in television advertising, including:

1. lexical novelty or neologism (e.g. *devilicious*)
2. morphological or syntactic novelty (e.g. *the soup that eats like a meal*)
3. syntactic innovation (e.g. absence of subjects and verbs: *Tastes great! Less filling!* odd uses of definite article: *Next time I’ll buy the Tylenol*)

⁸⁰Allen, p. 96.

⁸¹Lakoff, quoted in Schmidt and Kess, *Television Advertising and Televangelism*, p. 30.

4. semantic anomaly (e.g., *Cleans better than another leading oven cleaner*)
5. pragmatic novelty (e.g., conversation in mini-dramas: "*Fill it to the rim.*" "*With Brim!*")⁸²

M. L. Geis' study found an equally wide variety of linguistic techniques used over television for advertising purposes:

1. Use of imperative structures to make suggestions (e.g., *Try Ex-Lax pills, the overnight wonder*)
2. Use of adjectivalization process (e.g., *buttery, creamy, crispy*)
3. Rhetorical questions (e.g., *Why hasn't someone invented a better toothbrush?*)
4. Elliptical comparatives (e.g., *the new Chevette has more head room, more seat and legroom, more trunk room*)
5. The use of count nouns as mass nouns (e.g., *a lot more Chevette for a lot less money*)
6. The terms *introducing* and *announcing* to attract viewer attention.
7. Product names which constitute mini-advertisements for the product itself (e.g. *Soft & Dri deodorant*)⁸³

Rosemarie Schmidt and Joseph F. Kess looked for these characteristics in televangelistic programming, religious broadcasts that support themselves through a direct appeal to viewers' charity. Their research found that most of the advertising techniques listed above are actually present in the direct-appeal segments of televangelistic programming.

In general, the televangelists exploited the pragmatic concept of *presupposition* and *implication*, which is the logical or pseudo-logical entailments of sentences as they are interpreted by hearers. For example, one might hear the sentence *the novice skater tripped on the ice* and assume the proposition *the skater fell*, despite the fact that this is neither stated nor necessarily true. A variant of this is used in clinical hypnosis to induce a mild,

⁸²Lakoff, quoted in Schmidt and Kess, pp. 30-1. I believe that case #4 may actually relate to a reading strategy — expert readers may have chunked *another leading <product>* into a meaningful unit, with the pragmatic footnote that the advertiser has for legal or other reasons declined to name the competing product.

⁸³Geis, quoted in Schmidt and Kess, pp. 31-2.

common trance state, with such implied causality statements as *As you sit all the way down in the chair you will go into a deep trance*,⁸⁴ combining the two unrelated events into an implicitly causal relationship. In televangelism, various permutations of these concepts are employed.

- *Father, help each one here and millions watching by television to prepare to meet God.* (Jerry Falwell) Implication: millions are watching.

- *Something good is going to happen to you.* (Oral Roberts) Implies as much as it says, but “something good” is such a huge gap that viewers will fill it with their own projections. There is no way to empirically validate the truth or falsity of this proposition.

- *Neighbor, some day we'll stand before the Lord. And the Lord is either going to say well done, or he's going to look at us and say you haven't done a good job. I want to send you my fiftieth anniversary that I've been in God's work medallion.* (Rex Humbard) Implication (through Grice's Maxim of Relation): to avoid wrath of God (described in final phrase of first sentence), viewers should purchase medallion⁸⁵.

This final quote relates back to Allen and Kozloff's game shows and talk shows in its intriguing placement of the viewer. The viewer is addressed directly, but the use of “we” is interesting — first Rex says “*we'll* stand before the Lord” and that God will “look at *us*,” (emphasis mine), but then suddenly the Supreme Being will say that “*you* haven't done a good job.” The partial collapse of the distance between writer and reader, through the use of a direct address which suggests *W (text₁) R*, brings the viewer closer to the text and into a personal rapport with Rex. Suddenly, though, the viewer is pushed away to become a “you” who may not be looked upon favorably by the Deity. In an instant, the compression of hearer – implied reader – reader has been replaced by the situation that Kozloff called a compression of writer – implied author –

⁸⁴Schmidt and Kess, p. 25.

⁸⁵Schmidt and Kess, 52-3, 55. Note that the third quotation is cited exactly as in Schmidt and Kess.

speaker. I believe the purpose here is a use of pragmatics to increase the effect of the implied causality — not only will non-charitable viewers be smitten by Jehovah, but they will lose their rapport with Rex⁸⁶.

Cues for reading strategies

As noted in the section on fictive television, one important cue for adopting an appropriate reading strategy was the title of a program. In fictive television, these titles were largely aesthetic. In persuasive television, we note that they are again largely aesthetic, though rife with real-world implications of the power of their contents: *You Are Loved* and *Hour of Power* are but two examples. Interestingly, these also function as mini-advertisements for themselves, as do the products sold by the televangelists: “The World Outreach Partners,” “The Possibility Thinkers Club,” and “The New Hope Telephone Counseling Service.”

It is also worth noting that Schmidt and Kess’ research only covered those elements of the televangelists’ programs that consisted of a direct appeal for funding from the audience, and that they only transcribed the audio portion of the broadcast. What they omitted were segments that are much more obviously narrative: pre-recorded segments with personal stories of redemption, sermons told by the televangelist, and readings from the Bible. All are clearly narratives,. In the latter two cases, they are told by an on-screen narrator who functions as a character (for the benefit of the real narrator, the camera) in much the same fashion as a news-reader like Dan Rather.

So again, the cues in the text, from the obvious narrative of the sermon to the metaphoric title seems to indicate that the viewer is intended to assume a reading strategy appropriate for a narrative. Because of the obviously

⁸⁶A valid, but cynical, reading of Humbard’s use of “we” and “you” would be something like “I’m going to be saved and you’re not.”



symbolic nature of the text, a strategy of communicational inference is appropriate. And yet, as non-fiction, we expect that this text should be representational somehow. The conative function of the text has some effect on the presentation of elements, and most particularly in the relationship with the audience, but this attempt to bring the viewer into the text does not change the fact that the text is narrative. The viewer should adopt an inferential strategy, just as he or she would with fictive television, game shows, talk shows, or the news, to comprehend the meaning, i.e. the *intention*, behind the utterance.

Variant non-fictive televisual texts

In the example of televangelism, metaphoric titles, in this case mini-advertisements for their programs, provide an appropriate cue to readers to employ an inferential strategy. One might well ask at this point: are there any non-metaphoric titles on television?

As we've mentioned, it is appropriate and common for fictive television to use such titles to cue their audience. Strangely, this seems common for many news programs: *60 Minutes*, *20/20*, *NightSide*, *Day One*, *Street Stories*, etc. Similarly, documentary series are prone to "artsy" titles, such as *P.O.V.*, *FrontLine*, and *Nova*.

It is something of a stretch to find a title that purports to describe its contents without employing metaphor. Clearly *CBS Evening News* fits our requirement, but perhaps more interesting are the half-hour program-length commercials or "info-mercials" that have become increasingly popular of late. Consider titles like *Secrets of Success* (a financial investment scheme) or *Incredible Inventions* (featuring Ron Popeil's food dehydrator). Clearly, these titles employ the pragmatic concept of the title-as-mini-advertisement described by Geis. But on the other hand, the titles seem to be a direct

statement of their content, if perhaps somewhat inflated — Mr. Lee does promise to show you the “secrets” of a real-estate system that will make anyone rich, i.e. “success”-ful. Popeil’s food dehydrator is an invention, and the use of the adjective “incredible” is perhaps just a matter of perspective.

These programs, couched in direct-address but still camera-narrated and therefore narrative, provide strong cues that they are to be read with an attributive strategy. Indeed, that is presumably what such programs want you to think: that what you are watching *is* real, that the products and services shown are genuinely incredible.

It is no small irony that these non-fictional programs with a strong conative purpose should put such an effort into seeming representational, while ostensibly objective “news” and informational programming should try to assume a more constructed and symbolic approach⁸⁷.

Pictorial semiotics and the “real” world

But to what degree can any televisual non-fiction claim to be representative of the physical world? As Worth argues, the controlled and deliberate nature of television production makes any televisual message inherently symbolic. Worth goes on to claim that, in the title of one of his essays, “pictures can’t say ain’t.”

Worth makes the case that pictures⁸⁸ are incapable of dealing in terms of truth-conditions in the way that language is. Pictures cannot claim that a

⁸⁷Another possibility is that even if viewers understand the symbolic intention, they might overlook the attempt to sell them the product. Assumption of an inferential strategy means that the viewer understands that he or she is being *shown* this wonderful product, but does not require that the viewer ask *why*. In such a case, viewers might see this as merely a demonstration of a product, symbolic but not necessarily persuasive.

⁸⁸And by this he means any pictorial means of communication, thereby including the pictorial text (and presumably the socio-gestural text) within the televisual text.

thing does not exist, because to do so, it must represent or portray the non-existent thing, thereby giving it some degree of existence. Pictures are also incapable of depicting “conditionals, counterfactuals, negatives, or past-future tenses.”⁸⁹

Instead, Worth argues that pictures are best understood as having a function similar to the verb *to be*; pictures’ basic capability is the ability to say “this thing exists.” Extrapolating this to television, a series of images⁹⁰, television’s visual text would then be a series of existential affirmations: “these things exist.”

Now, it could immediately be argued that if pictures show the existence of things, then it is much more a tool for representing reality than we have hitherto given it credit for being. However, this argument is foiled by the consideration of Nelson Goodman’s “unicorn-Pictures” and “Pickwick-Pictures,” that is to say, pictures of things that do not exist outside of the text. Goodman calls these “representations with null denotations,”⁹¹ meaning that while they are representations, they do not point to, represent, indicate or identify anything in the physical world.

If a picture is a statement of existence, but states the existence of something that does not exist, what are we to do? Is the picture a “lie”? Worth argues vigorously that this is not the case. Worth identifies two purposes for creating non-representational pictures, an assumption of “intention to portray and depict a scene that corresponds to that at which the camera was pointed”⁹² versus “art”. In a rough sense, these correspond to “non-fiction” and

⁸⁹Worth, p. 178.

⁹⁰“Series of images” either being the series perceived by the viewer, the 30 frames a second that whiz by, or something in-between.

⁹¹Goodman, *Languages of Art*, pp. 25-6.

⁹²i.e., where the director and cameraperson pointed the camera.

“fiction.” Pragmatically, we will give much more leeway in the latter case, since a defining purpose of fiction is to represent that which does not exist.

But in the non-fictional case, we are stuck with a deeper problem. At first glance, according to Worth, “assumptions of existence are more reasonable with pictures, and therefore attribution naturally follows.”⁹³ So if a picture is representational, particularly a machine-made⁹⁴ picture like a photograph or television picture, then viewers should accept it as an infallible representation of reality. Of course, this is entirely *not* the case. Worth’s anecdotal evidence is compelling: when we see an unflattering photo of a friend, we may claim that he or she “doesn’t look good in that light” or that “that’s not his/her good profile,” or we may even blame “that stupid exposure meter” and “these lousy cameras.”⁹⁵ What Worth ultimately argues for is that “the real world is symbolically inviolate,” and that when an ostensibly representational picture conflicts with our concept of reality, then the picture is dismissed as a “mistake, lie, or false statement,” and furthermore “we would rather change our concept of the ‘real’ to match our images or myths, if need be, but... we rarely allow a conflict between a pictorial symbol and ‘reality’ to go on for long.”⁹⁶

There’s a paradox here: how can the picture be a statement of existence and yet not necessarily relate to anything existent, or worse yet, threaten our perception of the physical world? Worth’s answer is that pictures “depict

⁹³Worth, p. 170.

⁹⁴Worth defines this as “photography and film” on p. 175. The term is somewhat lacking, because there are plenty of “machines,” from air-brushes to lasers, that are not themselves particularly inclined towards the creation of representational pictures. A better definition might include a sense of such tools’ ability to “capture” a complete image quickly and easily. This definition would also extend to television cameras, crucial for our current purposes.

⁹⁵Worth, p. 176.

⁹⁶Worth, pp. 176-7.

events for whose existence they are the sole evidence,” and furthermore “they constitute a ‘reality’ of their own.”⁹⁷

Even though pictures may draw from what we perceive as reality, they are, as a deliberate symbolic communication, “a way that we structure the world around us... [and] are not a picture of it.”⁹⁸ Instead, pictures are a world unto themselves, and must be interpreted as self-contained symbolic entities. Indeed, the analysis of pictures, films, and television is rarely performed in terms of how closely the images correspond to the world outside — it is unlikely anyone could stand to see an 18-hour long movie that captured every instant of a day from one person’s perspective, despite the fact that this is how we experience reality. Instead, pictorial communications are processed and evaluated *relative to each other*. Larry Gross hypothesizes that forms such as pictures, stories, poetry and the sonata “communicate the competence and skill with which their structures have been manipulated”⁹⁹ Correspondence in pictures is not to anything in the physical world, but to “conventions, rules, forms, and structures for structuring the world around us. What we use as a standard for correspondence is our knowledge of *how people make pictures*.”¹⁰⁰

Pictorial problems for televisual non-fiction pragmatics

The problem, of crucial import for reading strategies of non-fiction television is what can be inferred from a given televisual text. Non-fiction is narrative, and as readers we must know on some level that televisual texts are deliberate symbolic constructs. Nevertheless, there is endless confusion when what we are seeing purports to be real.

⁹⁷Worth, p. 179.

⁹⁸Worth, p. 182.

⁹⁹Gross, quoted in Worth, p. 181.

¹⁰⁰Worth, p. 181. Emphasis Worth’s.

This paradox can be seen in two similar kinds of news stories. The first is a story about some yet-to-be-built NASA project, for example a space station or the “Star Wars” strategic defense initiative program. Many news stories will use computer animation to show the proposed project orbiting the earth, shooting down missiles, etc. This visual text is like the unicorn-picture — it asserts the existence of the space station, but no such thing exists outside of this pictorial representation. Consider the second example: the recent fiasco at NBC News when their *DateLine* program chose to show a pickup truck exploding from a side impact. Their “demonstration” of a car ramming the truck from the side was assisted by the use of two model rocket engines strapped to the gas tanks that were ignited just an instant before the car hit the truck. This picture is ostensibly of “real life,” but its interpretation depends somewhat on the viewer’s knowledge: either it is a display of a dangerous truck, or of a truck being blown up under carefully controlled and deliberately telegenic conditions.

A major ethical debate ensued when it was revealed that NBC had placed the igniters on the truck, leading to on-air apologies and firings. But an interesting question that could be asked is: how is the space station story any better? Both are news stories, ostensibly representations of physical-world events, and yet the animation of the space station is even more a fiction than the exploding truck¹⁰¹.

¹⁰¹Zappa, in his autobiography, goes so far as to claim this technique (when used in the “Star Wars” story) constitutes duplicity on the part of broadcasters and the Defense Department. According to Zappa, “the words ‘Star Wars’ or ‘Strategic Defense Initiative’ are seldom uttered on CNN without the viewer being subjected to a rerun of an animated clip showing nuclear missiles from The Evil Empire with big red stars on them being vaporized by what appears to be a Saturday morning cartoon ray gun. Clever subtext: ‘Who could argue with deployment of this wonderful family-saving defense system? Why, of course it works! See there! Just blew up another one!’”. Zappa, p. 349.

But is it? As Worth has argued, anything we see pictorially is a world unto itself, a statement of existence for which it is the only evidence. By shooting something with a television camera, we create televisual signs with these properties. Non-fictional television is, as far as the viewer can ascertain, essentially fictional, because televisual signs exist in this extant-unto-themselves form and only in that form. Television is not, and in fact *cannot* be representational, and therefore both of these cases are equivalent. Representation of reality is a dubious conceit for such a densely symbolic medium, in which the pictorial detail yields seeming “realism” for fiction, and ample ability to fabricate a televisual reality for non-fiction.

Surely, though, we know there is a difference. I believe the best case to make here is for a pragmatic middle ground that returns to a reader-oriented view. What is the difference between the cues in these two texts? It may be the difference between the use of portable cameras versus animation. Animation, if it can be realized as such, sends a strong cue that it is its own reality, either drawn on cels or by computer. Even if we sometimes see television as a representation of “reality,” we do not do so when we see animation, because it sends an even stronger cue to employ a symbolic strategy than do other televisual techniques..

This does not, however, account for the fact that animation could eventually become so good that these cues disappear, i.e. that we cannot distinguish animation from conventional videography. In this case, perhaps some other cue could keep a reader from employing an attributional strategy — for example, his or her knowledge that such space stations do not currently exist — but then again, perhaps not.

What happens when a viewer uses an improperly seeks attributional inference, that is to say, what happens when they treat fictional televisual

signs as if they were statements of physical-world existence? The anecdote that springs to mind is the urban legend of mass hysteria following Orson Welles' 1939 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*.

For those who would employ pragmatic principles in the service of art, this confusion of strategies has the potential of being a powerful tool: the 1983 made-for-TV movie *Special Bulletin* portrayed a hostage drama about nuclear terrorists in Charleston, South Carolina as if it were a live newscast¹⁰². The first scenes are game-show and soap opera commercials interrupted by the "special bulletin" screen, and a cut to the (fictional) network's anchor desk. Discourse time and story time are kept in exact sync, as the story shifts from anchor desk to the on-scene reporter, to interviews with esteemed psychoanalysts and nuclear physicists. The program is shot on videotape and produced very much a genuine news broadcast, even including packaged tape roll-ins, stammering "experts" to fill time, high gain¹⁰³ used in dimly-lit scenes, and abrupt camera-work and loss of signal during intense moments.

Only a very few cues exist to tell viewers to shift to a symbolic strategy: during the broadcast, the real-world network briefly placed a "you are watching a dramatization" warning on the screen several times during the movie; commercial interruptions take place periodically¹⁰⁴; ellipses (time-lapse) occur during the commercials; the time in the story at certain points does not match real-time (it starts in the morning, but was broadcast at night); and the story includes shocking events the reader might not easily accept¹⁰⁵. Aside from

¹⁰²Astute scholars of pragmatics will correctly assume that quite a bit is lost in the transition to home video.

¹⁰³An electronic effect that boosts the ability to shoot in low light, at the expense of picture graininess and color quality.

¹⁰⁴But even the commercials are co-opted into the fictional text by preceding them with dialogue like "coverage of the situation in Charleston will continue."

¹⁰⁵Namely that the bomb actually goes off.

this, though, the movie achieves a remarkable aesthetic effect through the use of televisual conventions and a knowledge of our improperly attributional reading strategies.

Conclusions about non-fictional television

As I have argued, non-fictional television is more like than unlike fictional television. Both are inclined towards narrative, and when we accept Worth's arguments that television images are pictorial affirmations of existence that create a world of their own (with complete and verifiable representation of the physical world an irrelevant impossibility), then we find that television is... televisual. Reference to the outside world in television is unnecessary and frequently inappropriate — television is its own world. Thus, a strategy of communicational inference instead of attribution is *always* more appropriate. Television is forever concerned with the quality of its structure and its artifice and not with reference outside itself.

What happens when we see a friend or a familiar place on television, one to which we have been acclimated to in non-televisual life? It seems to me that there is a sense of alienation and of profound difference. If a campus building I go to every day is used in a television news report, I sense it as being very different. Perhaps this has something to do with the limited sensory data television can provide — being there provides me with finer sound, a wider field of vision, smell, feeling (of wind, stagnancy, or the building itself), etc. But perhaps there is more than that in this case: I am unaccustomed to dealing with that thing or that person in the video-space. It has different qualities than those I experience in my perception of the physical world. It has become a televisual sign, a symbolic image, and I can no longer just have a sense of "it exists." It exists as something different on television, and furthermore has



been put there for a reason... this time, someone is *showing it to me*. It therefore has been embodied with inferential significance.

To a televisual reader, fictive and non-fictive signs are extraordinarily similar. They are captured with photographic precision, yielding abundantly-detailed description. These signs are usually presented in a narrative and are always sent intentionally, compelling the reader to seek communicational inference. Even if a televisual author creates an explicitly referential work, how can the reader be expected to figure this out, when all televisual messages arrive as detailed narratives sent with deliberate communicational intent. The conclusion seems to be that not only can the reader not be expected to determine the referentiality of a televisual text, but that the very act of sending a message through this medium creates some level of communicative intent on the part of the author.

Summary

This chapter has considered various types of non-fictive texts. The analysis of news programs discussed the inherent narrative that typifies all televisual texts. Further analysis discussed the concept of the televisual narrator and the positioning of a reader within the pragmatic structure. The next non-fiction considered was the persuasive text, which was noted for its linguistic novelty, its use of logical presupposition and implication, and its self-positioning as a straining-to-be-referential text. The visual text was emphasized next, as Worth's concept of pictorial signs and their properties were expounded upon. The conclusion that visual text signs exist in their own televisual reality was applied to ambiguous reading cases, such as the exploding truck and the made-for-TV-movie *Special Bulletin*. Finally, the hypothesis that televisual non-fictive and fictive texts are essentially

equivalent from the reader's point of view was affirmed, based on the similarity of their signs, their discourse, and their perceived intention.

5. PRAGMATICS WITHIN A TELEVISUAL TEXT

Introduction

This chapter will take a slightly different approach to the pragmatics of the televisual semiotic. Instead of analyzing pragmatic approaches to unspecified texts, I will consider how pragmatics operates within a text at distinct levels within the text.

To do this, we will analyze Zettl's *Sight Sound Motion*, a comprehensive view of creating televisual texts. First, I will examine the televisual utterance, a in-context element within the text, and note how Zettl implicitly delineates a syntax and semantics. I will then examine the pragmatic basis for many of these syntactic and semantic rules. Finally, I will move to a more extensive level within the text and analyze how Zettl's "ways of seeing" provide televisual authors with a rhetoric of the televisual.

Semiotics of the televisual utterance

Thus far, I have been interested primarily in pragmatics as they relate to the text as a whole, from assumptions of intention to reading strategy to modes of discourse. To begin this chapter, I will consider the pragmatic concepts that guide the creation of individual utterances within that text. By doing this, I will be careful to mark the distinction between televisual pragmatics and semantics or syntax.

Herbert Zettl's *Sight Sound Motion* is a unique book both in its range and its approach to the subject matter. By dividing his approach among the multiple fields created in a televisual text, he implicitly recognizes that several texts are at work together within one larger text. Furthermore, his approach of "applied media aesthetics" implies the artistic style that the previous chapters

exist in all television. This approach also distinguishes his work from other textbooks that emphasize “television production,” possibly biasing them towards issues of *process* or *craft*.

As discussed in Chapter Two, *Sight Sound Motion* can be seen as television’s equivalent of Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* — it is a style guide, grounded in syntactic principles but also advocating a particular means of effectively communicating.

Many of the individual chapters are largely about the syntax of televisual communication, within five aesthetic fields that Zettl identifies: light and color, two-dimensional space, three-dimensional space, time-motion, and sound¹⁰⁶.

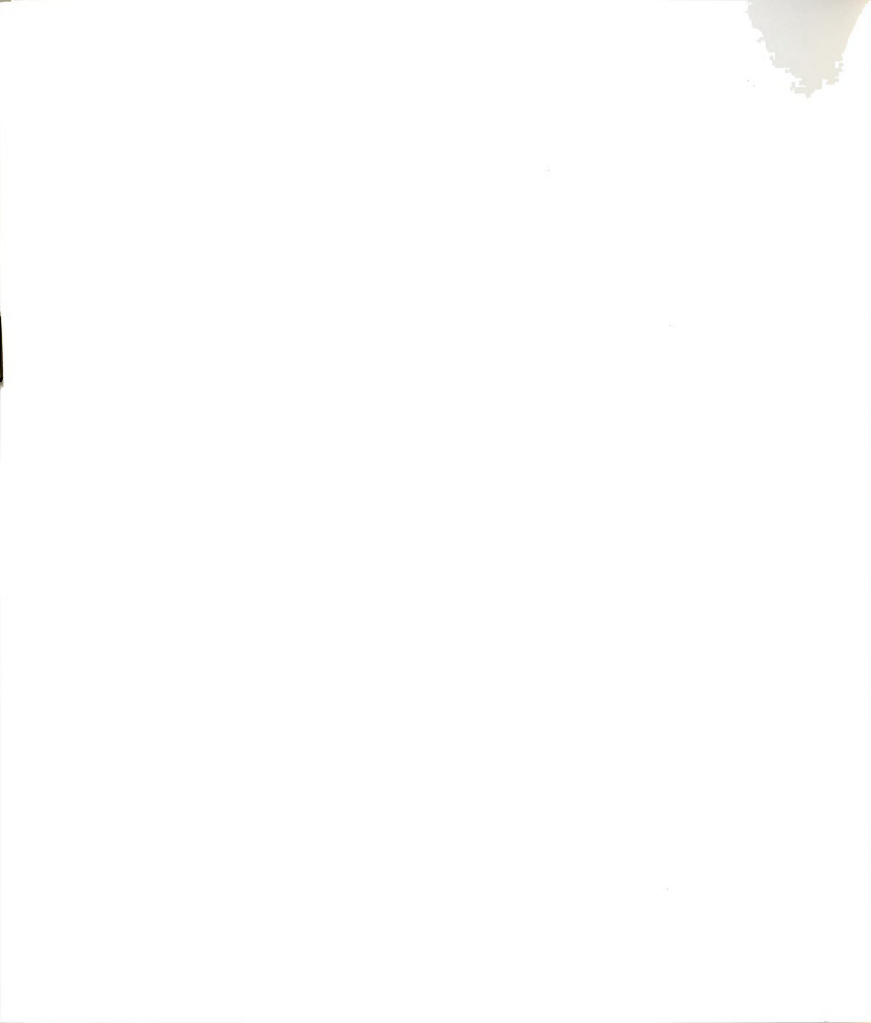
This makes for an interesting connection with Gross, who, as outlined in Chapter Two, claims that there are five varieties of the symbolic experience: lexical (verbal language), socio-gestural (a verbal, culture-specific mode that communicates “the stable characteristics and situational intentions of the actor”), iconic (relating to visual depiction), logico-mathematical (a non-verbal, “complex and specific code”), and musical¹⁰⁷. All of these except the logico-mathematical mode are present in television’s sign system.

But *where* are they present? Consider Zettl’s aesthetic fields — four of them are visual. This means that the musical and verbal texts must be in the sound field, because to convert them to the picture field would translate them into images¹⁰⁸. Consequently, that leaves 4/5 of the aesthetic fields (or 14 of

¹⁰⁶Zettl, p. viii

¹⁰⁷Gross, pp. 66-71.

¹⁰⁸Note that these images would be non-iconic, because (as stated before) the printed word “tree” does not resemble a tree, and the score to a piece of music does not visually resemble anything.



16 “aesthetic field” chapters by my count¹⁰⁹), creating a powerful bias in televisual texts towards the iconic (or pictorial) and the socio-gestural.

This creates another clash with our perception of the physical world. As Gross notes, “this lexical mode is so dominant an element of our consciousness that we have tended to see it as *the* embodiment of thought and intelligence.”¹¹⁰ Yet, in a televisual text, speech is one-half of one-fifth of the available aesthetic fields. Instead of being dominated by speech, televisual texts tend towards domination by the visual fields, which communicate pictorial and socio-gestural texts.

Within these aesthetic field chapters, Zettl’s attention tends not towards the text as a whole but individual elements of it, such as shots, sequences, and even still images, which are analyzed in terms of their graphic make-up. The emphasis is on the utterance, the small packet of communication considered in its context¹¹¹.

While a televisual pragmatics would be useful for understanding the interpretation of utterances, most of the material covered in *Sight Sound Motion* is syntax, with some semantics. The syntax uses concepts from graphic arts, common-sense reading, and the power of psychological closure to develop a system of proper manipulation of televisual signs. Closure, a guiding principle of the syntactic rules, is defined by Zettl as “taking a minimum amount of clues and mentally filling in nonexistent information in order to arrive at stable, easily manageable patterns.”¹¹² This is similar to Iser’s concept of gap-filling, in which readers “project” their own constantly-adapted

¹⁰⁹12 of 16 if the chapters on time are considered as relating to speech or music.

¹¹⁰Gross, p. 66.

¹¹¹As opposed to the linguistic concept of the sentence, which is considered without regard for its context.

¹¹²Zettl, p. 391.

beliefs and assumptions into what a text leaves unsaid, resulting in a “dynamic happening.”¹¹³ It is interesting to note that a guiding principle of this televisual syntax is motivated by the needs and purposes of the participants, i.e. by pragmatics.

It should also be noted that Zettl does not explicitly state when his material is covering syntax, semantics, or pragmatics. For example, a picture on p. 145 shows a woman with what appears to be a fountain coming out of her head (see Figure 3):



Figure 3. “Illogical Closure”¹¹⁴

The explanation is that because of “the smooth continuity of vectors, we tend to group objects together into stable perceptual patterns regardless of whether they belong together or not.”¹¹⁵ The use of “belong together” is unexplained but clearly a semantic concern — continuous vectors in the picture are an example of perfectly good syntax. The only problem is that the various signs in the picture cannot be combined in this way and be meaningful. Linguistically, this would be like saying *the cat rained*, in that syntactic rules¹¹⁶ are adhered to, but an appeal to semantic knowledge reveals implausibility.

¹¹³Iser, p. 22, 165-9.

¹¹⁴Zettl, p. 145.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹¹⁶For example, sentences must have a subject and a verb, verbs must agree in number with their subject, words must be spelled correctly, etc.

Zettl's semantics seldom delve into what is to be said in a televisual text (issues of content are presumably left to the reader of the book), but instead emphasize means of expression that achieve specific aesthetic effects. For example, chapter 10, "Building Screen Volume," applies a concept of volume articulation to show how effects of vastness, isolation, or confinement can be achieved by purposeful manipulation, through lenses, angle, staging or architecture. Description of Z-axis¹¹⁷ articulation yields effects such as proximity, distance, power, and relevance. Semantically, these elements of Zettl's text provide the graphic equivalent of adverbs and adjectives, intensifiers and modifiers for arbitrary content. This provides us some knowledge about the boundary for pragmatic analysis in a televisual text, in that we can see semantic principles at work.

Pragmatics and the aesthetic elements

Zettl's overall concepts are not explicitly pragmatic, but some are based on similar needs for understanding. Pragmatics relates signs to interpreters, and early, Zettl does describe a concept of the "contextualistic media aesthetics" that guide much of his thinking.

Zettl knows that signs do not exist meaningfully in a vacuum, but rather require a context for their interpretation:

"We perceive our world not in terms of absolutes but rather as changing contextual relationships. When we look at an event, for example, we are constantly engaged in judging one aspect of it against another aspect or another event."¹¹⁸

Zettl's contextual media aesthetics consists of four broad concepts:

- Stabilizing our environment — the clustering of "event details into patterns and simple configurations"

¹¹⁷The axis of the screen-space that can be seen as running towards or away from the viewer.

¹¹⁸Zettl, p. 5.

- Selective seeing — the noticing of “only those events, or details of events, that we want to see or are used to seeing”
- Predictable aesthetic response — the ability to “predict how people will respond to specific aesthetic stimuli and contextual patterns with reasonable accuracy”
- Emotional literacy — Art helps the viewer “shift from glance to insight”¹¹⁹

The first two concepts here relate to the process by which readers create a text, through clustering of details into configurations and not even working with some other signs. The fact that Zettl says that readers notice only those signs they are used to seeing seems to clash sharply with Hawkes' claims¹²⁰ about art as a defamiliarizer that shocks the reader out of anesthetized every-day assumptions. Then again, Hawkes describes the “aim” of art, and not the actual processing of symbolic data. A reasonable synthesis is that authors may create signs with the hope of slipping them past the low-level screening that Zettl describes.

But perhaps more interesting from a pragmatic point of view is the idea of predicted response. This implies that an author takes it upon him- or herself to know how a text will be interpreted. If the audience is expected to be reading the text with an inferential strategy — and I have argued that this is the only possibility with a televisual text — then this recalls Grice's claim that “the utterer must have intended an ‘audience’ to recognize the intention behind the utterance.”¹²¹

But what can be predicted about any particular utterance? Zettl offers chapter after chapter of predictable, reproducible means of creating an utterance that will have a distinct effect. As exemplified in the quotes on

¹¹⁹Zettl, p. 6.

¹²⁰Quoted at the end of Chapter Three, above.

¹²¹Grice, quoted in Worth, p. 168.

three-dimensional space above, Zettl's text provides for generating all manner of emotional and intellectual effects.

Some other examples of Zettl's predictable responses include a tilted horizon line to indicate "a relatively unstable event,"¹²² deep reds and other "warm" colors that "produce more excitement than cold blue or other cold colors,"¹²³ and a car climbing easily up a left-to-right diagonal because "we usually start at the left side of the screen and finish at the right."¹²⁴

When illustrated in the book, all these effects seem perfectly natural — you see a car going up from left to right on an up-diagonal and it looks much easier than the right-to-left climb. But the description of the predicted response reveals why this is so: "we usually start at the left side"... why? Because our culture reads left to right? Because water spins down the drain that way in our hemisphere? If the direction of scanning were an arbitrary choice made on each viewing, one could hardly assume *every* viewer would proceed to read the screen from left-to-right.

It seems much more credible to hypothesize that reading left to right is a *learned* televisual strategy. Similarly, is red naturally warm and blue naturally cold just because of common real-world experiences, or have they been made this way to some degree with experiences from previous texts?

More likely, what Zettl is recalling is an analogue of Fish's demand for an ideal reader, one who was aware of literary criticism, style, genre, and other discourse that continued outside the text. The difference in this case is that if we accept the premise that these predicted responses are learned, then we have Fish's "literary competence" operating not at the level of the text, but in

¹²²Zettl, p. 7.

¹²³Zettl, p. 67.

¹²⁴Zettl, p. 111.

smaller elements within the text, namely utterances. This reader brings not only knowledge of other texts to the reading of this text, but also knowledge of other utterances to each utterance within the text. Just as I argued that a reader who seeks out a “situation comedy” brings certain assumptions about the genre to each text, so does he or she bring assumptions about the meaning of light, color, graphic space, and volume... meanings learned primarily from other media experiences.

Three styles of televisual rhetoric

Zettl also covers some concepts which relate to the text as a whole. One which is clearly within the realm of pragmatics is the idea of “ways of looking.” By this concept, Zettl means to distinguish between three means of conceiving and developing a televisual message:

Looking at an event: Use of “an approach that comes as close as possible to the point of view of an observer.” “Microphones and cameras are used simply to report what is going on.”

Looking into an event: An approach which “scrutiniz[es] the event... to look beyond its obvious structure, and if possible into its very essence... to provide insight into the true nature of the event”

Creating an event: Use of “technical devices and potentials of the medium to build a unique *screen event* that depends entirely upon the medium.” (emphasis mine)

This is a pragmatic issue because this constitutes Zettl’s concept of the *rhetoric* of video. These three means of address are as different as the sonnet and the phone call, and their purposes can be just as different.

The concept of “creating an event” could lead to improper equivocation if we don’t clarify Zettl’s usage versus the concept of the extant-onto-itself pictorial semiotic argued in the last two chapter. Any televisual message is deliberately created and exists unto itself. I believe Zettl’s conception of the

event is key here — events which are not television-dependent can be “looking at” or “looking into”, depending on the level of involvement and insight provided by the “camera.” When a televisual author employs the “creating an event” approach, he or she creates an event that can *only* exist on television — nothing like it can exist in another form.

With that issue resolved, this concept of a rhetoric of television opens some interesting avenues of inquiry — what form (or forms) of rhetoric is appropriate in a given context? An off-the-cuff or common-sensical answer might relegate “creating an event” approaches to fiction and “looking at an event” approaches to live events such as sports or current history, but such a cut-and-dry trichotomy risks oversimplification. In linguistic usage, adopting a non-standard rhetoric can have profound use in experimentation or for comic effect, and there is little reason to think the same is not possible for the televisual.

For example, political events such as conventions and elections are usually shown with a “looking into” approach, rejecting the simple counting of ballots (“looking at” approach) and constructing instead an seemingly endless parade of commentators and statistics to reveal the “inside story.” As this process of intensification continues, it is not unrealistic to think that news coverage of such events could ultimately adopt a “creating an event” style of delivery¹²⁵. Similarly, a dramatic text rendered in a “looking at” style could have a profound alienating effect, pushing viewers away from the characters and action, or reminding them that they are watching an unfolding artifice¹²⁶.

¹²⁵With all the graphics, split-screens, computerized 3-d maps and other effects in use, it might be argued that this has already happened.

¹²⁶For example, comedy programs like *SCTV*, *The Edge*, and *Beavis and Butt-Head* all use a screen-filling burst of static as a transition, in lieu of the more common cut or dissolve. This is an aggressive reminder that the viewer is looking *at* a constructed television text.

Summary

In this chapter, I have considered the pragmatics at work within a given text, by identifying the implicit syntax and semantics in Zettl's work. I have also noted that it is a pragmatic "literary competence," a knowledge of other texts previously read, at work when a reader feels warm when seeing deep reds, or senses instability when the horizon line is tilted. Finally, I considered the ability of Zettl's "ways of seeing" to offer a "rhetoric," or a style of discourse appropriate to the goals of a text. In summary, I have identified both a televisual syntax and semantics that is distinct from pragmatics, as well as a pragmatics operating within the text to parallel the pragmatics operating in parallel to the approach to the text as a whole.



6. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this thesis has been to begin the search for the nature of the semiotic theory of pragmatics as it can be applied to televisual texts. To accomplish this, I have synthesized various lines of research and inquiry to reach various conclusions and hypotheses, which now deserve restatement and codification.

Television texts are like books, paintings, and several other communicative forms in that they exist largely as unified wholes (as opposed to conversations), permit minimal direct from the reader to the writer, and may successfully operate in an asynchronous environment.

Televisual texts seem to be firmly rooted in aesthetic grounds for two reasons. First, their analogues are all art forms, such as pictures, books, etc. Even the most blandly descriptive television text has more in common structurally with a novel than with a discussion. Second, they rely heavily on narrative, and are statements of existential assertion for which they are their only evidence, making fictive and non-fictive content virtually equivalent in form.

Reading strategies for televisual texts should *always* assume communicative intent because any televisual event is a sign event and is constructed with symbolic meaning. It is impossible for television to only reference physical reality — through its choice of shots, sounds, and style, television always conveys meaning about what it presents. In television, *how* something is presented is a crucial element in understanding *what* is presented.

Cues within televisual texts may be outweighed by a learned televisual language. Individual texts are like Propp's myths: story-lines often come from

pre-existing archetypes, and viewers may be more interested in the details and the performances¹²⁷ than in the progression of events.

These facts reiterate that we have identified important topics within the range of televisual pragmatics. However, our purposes also called for identifying the borders of televisual pragmatics. In our consideration of Zettl, we verified the existence of a televisual semantics and syntax, and found a distinct pragmatics operating at several levels. What remains unstated is where the boundaries of televisual semiotics lie. It would be too easy to say that it relates only to signs and systems, ignoring the fact that pragmatics relates those signs and systems to interpreters, which brings the psychology¹²⁸ of readers into valid consideration for semiotics. Instead, we must realize that readers bring a host of outside influences and literary experiences to a reading of a televisual text, and the fact that these influences affect the reading means that a televisual pragmatics must be careful not to be overly narrow in its focus on the televisual text.

¹²⁷By the actors or in the Chomsky-an sense.

¹²⁸And perhaps the philosophy, physiology, etc.

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