

Multimodality, Style and the Aesthetic: the case of the digital werewolf.

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Semiotics has traditionally been preoccupied with the process of signification: how meaning is made through the creation and interpretation of signs. In that tradition, the function of form is to be carrier of meaning. It has concerned itself rather less with the question of aesthetics in its conventional sense, which, at least in western culture since the Enlightenment, has emphasised form independent of meaning, with the representation and apprehension of beauty as its ideal.

However, in this chapter we will argue that the aesthetic is inseparable from the semiotic, and that the question of aesthetics needs to be explored from certain principles of Social Semiotics, including in its relation to the domain of multimodality. Since we both work in the fields of media and education, we draw our examples from a film-making project with school students. We are confident that the principles we derive from this case study are generally applicable.

To prepare the ground, some preliminary remarks about the complex of ideas which feature in aesthetic theories past and present may help. No sooner made, our opening remarks require qualification. Aesthetics as the philosophy of the encounter with the beautiful in art has never been the whole story. In the philosophy of Aristotle, still influential in the western tradition, at least three senses of what we now think of as the aesthetic emerge across his works: *aisthesis* as sense perception; the aesthetic forms of the dramatic arts and their emotional effects; and the rhetorical shaping of oral performance. All of these remain significant in contemporary debates, including our discussion; though they have been transformed by successive commentaries, at very different times, and in very different social and historical environments.

Of these, one of the most important in the modern era in western culture is Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790/1952), which proposes a disinterested 'pure gaze', capable of the appreciation of the beautiful in art and nature, an appreciation consistent with the principle of

reason. Kant recognised, however, that the category of beauty did not exhaust the aesthetic sense, and, like other philosophers of his time, proposed a complementary theory of the sublime to account for experiences which might inspire awe, even terror. In nature, these might be oceans or mighty mountains; in art, they might be figures like Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*.

We will return to the notion of the sublime, which for us continues to be a useful complement to a limiting emphasis on the beautiful. It allows us to explore how images and narratives of monstrosity, dread and terror can constitute part of the aesthetic experience: for example, how Francis Bacon's *Screaming Popes*, or the images of body horror in the films of David Cronenberg, are images from which we derive a kind of pleasure.

Kant's account of aesthetic judgment is challenged by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Bourdieu critiques the 'pure gaze', arguing that it is not a universal, disinterested faculty, but rather the effect of the taste regime of a particular class fraction: not innate, but acquired as cultural capital through family and education. As such, it is socially constructed in the interests of this class, excluding other classes, and providing forms of distinction affecting social status and life chances.

Bourdieu goes on to propose an aesthetic sensibility exemplified in popular culture. Where the Kantian ideal is distanced and remote, he argues, the pleasures of the popular aesthetic are intimate and engaged; where the 'pure gaze' is meant to be difficult to acquire and apply, the popular aesthetic is accessible and 'easy' (Bourdieu notes drily how 'facile', the French word for 'easy', becomes a derogatory term in English). He invests popular cultural experience with a sense of visceral energy: we might say he restores the sensory quality which Aristotle proposed but which was refined almost out of existence in Kant's model. Bourdieu associates this gleeful, energetic popular culture with Bakhtin's idea of carnival, a rebellious (if temporary) inversion of social hierarchy, a pleasurable engagement with images and figures of monstrosity and excess; a defiant laughter in the face of death (Bakhtin, 1968).

The idea of pleasure in these critiques and counter-critiques is notoriously contradictory. For Bourdieu, the aesthetic pleasure envisaged by Kant is so refined as to be ascetic, while the vision he proposes of the popular aesthetic is closer to the pleasure Barthes described as 'jouissance' (1975). Nevertheless, this opposition cannot be easily reconciled with polarities of a cultural politics, in which Kant (or more properly his latter-day followers, such as the philosopher Roger Scruton) appear as the right-wing, while Barthes and Bourdieu constitute

the fun-loving left. Such easy distinctions cannot explain the refusal of certain kinds of pleasure advocated by Laura Mulvey in her account of the male gaze in cinema (1975). An instability between hedonic and ascetic pleasures, then, is related to but cannot be aligned with the politics of taste.

Meanwhile, Bourdieu's efforts to accommodate contemporary popular culture is also the aim of the cultural studies movement in the late twentieth century. In particular, Hebdige's *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (1979) helps us to consider the relationship between aesthetics, semiotics and the politics of the popular. A memorable example is his consideration of the safety-pin in punk style, which tears this object from its former meanings of nurseries and maternity, that is, from the banal pragmatism of everyday usefulness, and reassigns it to meanings of violent subversion. Hebdige theorises this as an example of the 'floating signifier' (cf Levi-Strauss, 1950; Barthes, 1977a), whose unstable relationship with its 'signified' leads to ambiguity, uncertainty and change. Like Hebdige, we see style and meaning as indivisible, with semiotic resources as the tools constructing them. However, Hebdige's idea of *style* is difficult to distinguish conceptually from the category of the *aesthetic*. This distinction is critical for us.

The work of Hebdige and his contemporaries is followed by later scholars who question these subcultural formations, suggesting that contemporary youth culture is more fluid, less easily identifiable, conceivable as mobile 'neo-tribal' or lifestyle choices (eg Bennett, 2017). Here too, we would wish to point to enormous and increasingly rapid social changes over the last three or four decades, as one strand at least in accounting for such cultural transformations. *Style*, as a theoretical category, and the broad principles it rests on, continues to be the semiotic category through which the politics of identity is expressed, even if its repertoires are increasingly fluid and mobile.

Where does all this leave us, and how might a new connection between aesthetic theory, social semiotics and multimodality help?

Style as the politics of choice: Aesthetics as the politics of style

To establish our position in this long history - already hinted at in the comments above - we briefly introduce an indicative Social Semiotic approach to meaning and meaning-making. Its origins include Halliday's assumption that language is as it is because of the function it serves in society (1978). A second assumption of Halliday's is that meaning is choice in context, using the resources available – in his case, those of language.

We can describe this as a sequence (not necessarily in real time): someone has made a choice; that choice is shaped by the specifics of a social situation in which the maker of the sign happens to be, with a specific matter in focus. She or he makes a series of choices - this signifier/form as most apt for that signified/meaning – to make a sign. The sum total of the choices expresses, on the one hand, (traces of) meanings of the context in which the sign was made; while on the other hand the text expresses the sign-maker's "position" on the issue in focus: material realizations of that individual's "interest". The meanings are expressed in the manner in which she or he wished to express them and did. The totality of choices made, both in (multimodal) complexes of signs and in the totality of the sign-complex of a particular composition, express how he or she wanted to express the matter. It is an expression not just of "a content", but a specific way of shaping and expressing that content: the individual's *style*, a means to express identity and lay claim to identity with, or difference from, other styles and the social contexts from which they emerge. Within this claim, the individual judges those other styles as valuable (or not); and claims a related value for his or her own style. This is the discursive realm of aesthetics.

All social actions take place in fields of power: *choice* being no exception. "Style is the politics of choice", we might say. It makes "style" always, inevitably social; it also makes style, unremarkable, banal, "everyday". How any one style is regarded and evaluated in its larger social context is, similarly, a matter of power. We might say that if "Style is the politics of choice", then "Aesthetics is the politics of style". Style is the semiotic toolkit of identity; Aesthetics is the discursive taste regime surrounding it. In the first case, the choices made are always political; in the second, the evaluation is always political.

This puts the different positions on Aesthetics into their essential historical social perspective. That applies as much to Aristotle in his adopted city of Athens, to Kant in his far northeast European Koenigsberg, to Bourdieu in Paris, or Hebdige in Birmingham and London. Sid Vicious' act of using a safety pin not to hold two bits of material in place, but seemingly to join what was separate, is readily accommodated within this set of Social Semiotic principles. Both Style and Aesthetics are readily understandable in their social and historical environment.

So much for core principles of Halliday's *linguistic* theory. He is clear however that his *linguistic* theory has a *semiotic* foundation: as indicated in the title of his "Language as social semiotic" (1978). In Social Semiotic theorizing (eg Kress & Hodge, 1988; Kress & van

Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; Kress, 1996, 2009; van Leeuwen, 2005) it is Halliday *as semiotician* who is in focus; the semiotic foundations of his theory are taken as foundational for Social Semiotics. The *semiotic* aspects of Halliday's theory are taken as features pertaining to all human semiotic systems.

Modes

The step from a linguistic to a semiotic approach to meaning brings all the resources for making meaning within the one theoretical frame. Attention to meaning applies to *gesture* as much as to *dance*, to *writing* as much as to *moving image*, to *music* as much as to *interior design*. In societies in which these means for making meaning have been articulated to a certain extent, there are material semiotic features which satisfy the functional requirements, as do *speech* and *writing*. This happens in the material form available in any one *mode*. As an example, 'intensity' can be indicated by the extent of the sweep of a *gesture*, and/or by its speed; in *music* (as in *speech*) by loudness; in *colour* by the degree of saturation; and so on. *Frames*, a crucial semiotic feature, can be indicated by empty space before and after an entity; by punctuation marks as in *writing*; by changes in lighting in filmic representations; by the positionings of objects in space.

In a Social Semiotic approach to meaning, the potentials for making meaning are vastly multiplied in comparison to those of *speech* and *writing*. The principles remain constant: whether for the (semiotic) mode of *writing* or the mode of *sound-track*. So while the potentials for making meaning are expanded the principles of the constitution of signs via the use of cultural/semiotic resources remain constant. Style, as an aspect of this meaning-making expressing the sign-maker's identity, is by the same token expanded across the range of resources deployed.

In relation to aesthetics, in *writing* it is possible to transgress "convention" as much as rules of "good taste" by inserting just one lexical item, one element of syntax which "does not fit", or by choosing "an inappropriate genre", such as the use of the casual informal genre of conversation among friends in a formal spoken 'presentation'. It is possible to do any and all of these with any and all of the modes chosen. That factor makes the facility of *design* essential.

An account of semiotics and style, aesthetics and discourse, across all art forms and lifestyle manifestations is a much larger project than a single chapter can manage. We will explore the

question of design across modes, in relation to aesthetics and style, through one example, which has specific implications for media and for education, a field in which we both work.

YEAR 7 MACHINIMA: THE AESTHETICS OF DIGITAL DESIGN

These examples are drawn from a research project in which 30 11 year-old students made an animated film¹ in the relatively new genre of *machinima*, a portmanteau of machine-cinema, a form of animation derived from videogames and virtual worlds (Lowood, 2014). While machinima constructs a style derived from its related media forms of videogames and animation, it also invokes the older styles and aesthetics of cinema, as debates between machinima artists demonstrate (Burn, 2009).

The film, “The Moonstone”, was organised around a narrative written by one of the girls in the class. It tells of a teenage girl, Lily, whose parents are lost in a plane crash, and her journey to find them with the help of her grandmother and a mysterious Indian tracker, Laughing Shadow, who turns out to be a benign werewolf. He does battle with a malignant werewolf, White Owl, in order to help Lily find her parents and release himself from a curse.

The students volunteered for four different groups: set design, character design, voice acting, and music. The resources produced by the groups were made available on the computer network for the next phase. Finally, the members of the class worked in pairs, each pair taking responsibility for a short section of the film. Using the shared designs and a 3D animation software, Moviestorm, they animated the characters using action menus, attached dialogue, and constructed shots through the use of a virtual camera and an editing timeline.

We will focus on the digital designs of character, voice and music, to show how the aesthetic strategies of the students were distributed across a variety of modes, later integrated in the film-making process.

Provenance: Designing the werewolves

The two werewolf characters, Laughing Shadow and White Owl, were designed by two boys, Jamaye and Kai, while two other boys, Aaron and Ute, performed and recorded the voices of the werewolves.

A central principle of social semiotics is the idea that signifiers, in whatever mode, are never neutral: they always bring meanings from their history of previous uses. This *provenance*

¹ ‘Montage, Mashup, Machinima’, 2012, funded by First Light, UK. UCL Institute of Education, British Film Institute, University of Leeds.

(Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) is both opportunity – the signifiers are in certain ways already well-suited to the intentions of the sign-maker; and constraint – they may circumscribe what the new sign is able to ‘say’. In the same way, they also come with echoes of particular styles, and it was important for the students in our case study for the images and sounds they create to look and sound good, to adequately invoke the genre to which they are contributing. While their designs say something about their identities, they do so in part by claiming kinship with the styles of existing genres, and in part by transforming them. This is the work of aesthetics: we borrow what we find valuable, and create something new which also claims value.

In the students’ work, the complex of signifiers which makes up the werewolves, in modes of visual design, virtual dramatic action, spoken language and music, imports certain kinds of significance, as well as certain shapes, textures, movements. These are partly drawn from the cultural experience of the children, partly from the material assets provided by the technology, and partly from the physical resources of their own bodies.

Their cultural experiences are, as might be expected, quite diverse. For example, three of the four boys who made the digital figures of the werewolves and performed the voice acting for them, were unable name a particular werewolf movie. Jamaye described a film he had seen but could not name, in which “the werewolves all kill everyone”; Aaron said he had seen one with his older brother; Ute said he had read a review of a TV series featuring werewolves. Kai said his sister liked the *Twilight* series (eg Hardwicke, 2008), and that he had watched with her, which suggested an interest in the film but distanced him from the gendered taste regime surrounding it.

When asked how they could know what a werewolf was like, the boys performing the voiceovers, said:

A: Well there are these things that everyone knows, that they get told when they’re little. About all the mystical creatures.

U: Like Bigfoot and that. Loch Ness monster. Like myths, passed down by parents or something.

A: When I was little, my dad used to say, if you don’t go to sleep on time, the boogie-monster will come and have a talking with you.

By contrast, one of the girls sitting next to the boys making the digital figures, and joining in the conversation, described the werewolves in *Twilight* in some detail: how they became werewolves through a kind of “imprinting through their genes”, and how they were protective towards their families.

The aesthetic shaping of their designs, then, are informed by a variety of cultural experiences. In this case, these are clearly gendered: *Twilight* was named as a favourite movies by a number of girls in the group, and by the girl who wrote the story for the film; but by none of the boys. Kai feels obliged to distance himself from the movie as his sister’s choice; and yet he has watched it and it has become part of the cultural repertoire on which he draws.

Meanwhile, the boys have a sense of horror movies of this kind as more adult fare to which they have restricted access; while at the same time associating werewolves with the cultural memory of folktale and early childhood. So the provenance is mixed: it allows for meanings which recall both childhood monsters and aspirational horror figures, both ‘boyish’ and ‘girlish’ figures, and provides resources for the students to construct a style which is true to these. This kind of cultural interest, positioned between childhood and adolescence, is characteristic of the so-called ‘tween’ cultural group, as others have noted (cf Willett, 2005). At the same time, forms of playful creativity in childhood can also draw on a mixture of folkloric influences and contemporary media experiences (Willett, 2014). If this is a feature of children’s designs of monsters, however, it is also a feature of adult designs. The cinematic werewolf has always been indebted both to folkloric traditions and to filmic tropes (Sherman, 2005; Beresford, 2013).

Another source of the signifiers the students work with is the palette provided by the software, Moviestorm. This resource offers a range of human body types, adaptable through the selection of physical features such as hair, eyes, clothing, and by the application of filters providing dynamic ranges for qualities such as shape, size and colour. Such tools provide both opportunity and constraint, as we shall see in the next section. Software and the platforms in which it is embedded becomes semiotic resources in their own right, stylistic instruments which leave their marks as paintbrush and chisel once did (cf Manovich, 2013).

Taken together, then, the cultural histories of the signifiers chosen by the students and the physical media they have available, both shape and are shaped by the style they strive to achieve, the interest and identities it expresses, and the aesthetic value they claim for it.

Multimodal design: choice, style, truth-to-genre

The figure of the werewolf makes the question of genre dramatically visible. Its diversity in the age of cinema ranges from the largely masculine imagery of the Universal horror films of the 1930s and the Hammer films of the 1960s, centring on the metaphor of the beast within, to more recent extensions of the metaphor of transformation to represent female adolescence and menstruation (Miller, 2005).

Twitchell (1985) argues that the werewolf is one of a class of monstrous images of the divided self, which undergo a series of changes from the Romantic to the late Victorian period. In that history it is viewed sympathetically (as in Mary Shelley's creature) and enthused over as a dynamic natural energy in the Romantic sublime); repressed (as in mid-Victorian realism, in the novels of the Brontës and Dickens); and delighted in (as in the fin-de-siècle 'decadence' of Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*).

Although our group of 11 year-olds seem a long way from these histories of aesthetic change, they are heirs to such sensibilities, which form part of the resource they draw on in their own historical moment. The processes of semiotic choice and cultural evaluation reveal the constant semiotic principles realizing their present social position. These processes are no different from those their predecessors grappled with.

Images of liminality

To craft a convincing werewolf is to construct a two-part syntagm, signalled by the name: *were/wolf*, man-wolf. The history of filmic representations preceding the students' project is full of attempts to build this image. An early effort is the transformation from Jekyll to Hyde in Rouben Mamoulian's 1932 film. Tom Milne (1969) records how Mamoulian refused to reveal how parts of the transformation of Fredric March appeared to happen before our eyes:

To this day he has refused to reveal the secret of how the transformations were achieved in front of the camera, but it is not difficult to guess that they were done with coloured filters, changed to reveal different layers of makeup, and given a hallucinatory sense of actually happening before our eyes by the extraordinary soundtrack. (p 49)

The two boys making the werewolf figures in our project are working with digital filters and digital bodies, but the semiotic construct, conjoining man and beast, is similar. As we will see, the soundtrack here also contributes here to meaning and style.

However, the boys make very different choices for their characters. Jamaye, making the Laughing Shadow model, explains:

He likes to hide his face ... 'cos he's got lots of scars. He's got a secret ... no-one knows his secret ... he's a werewolf. ... His eyes are black.

I: Did you make the eyes black or were they already black.

J: Yeah, I made the eyes black. [demonstrates use of colour palette to change eye colour].

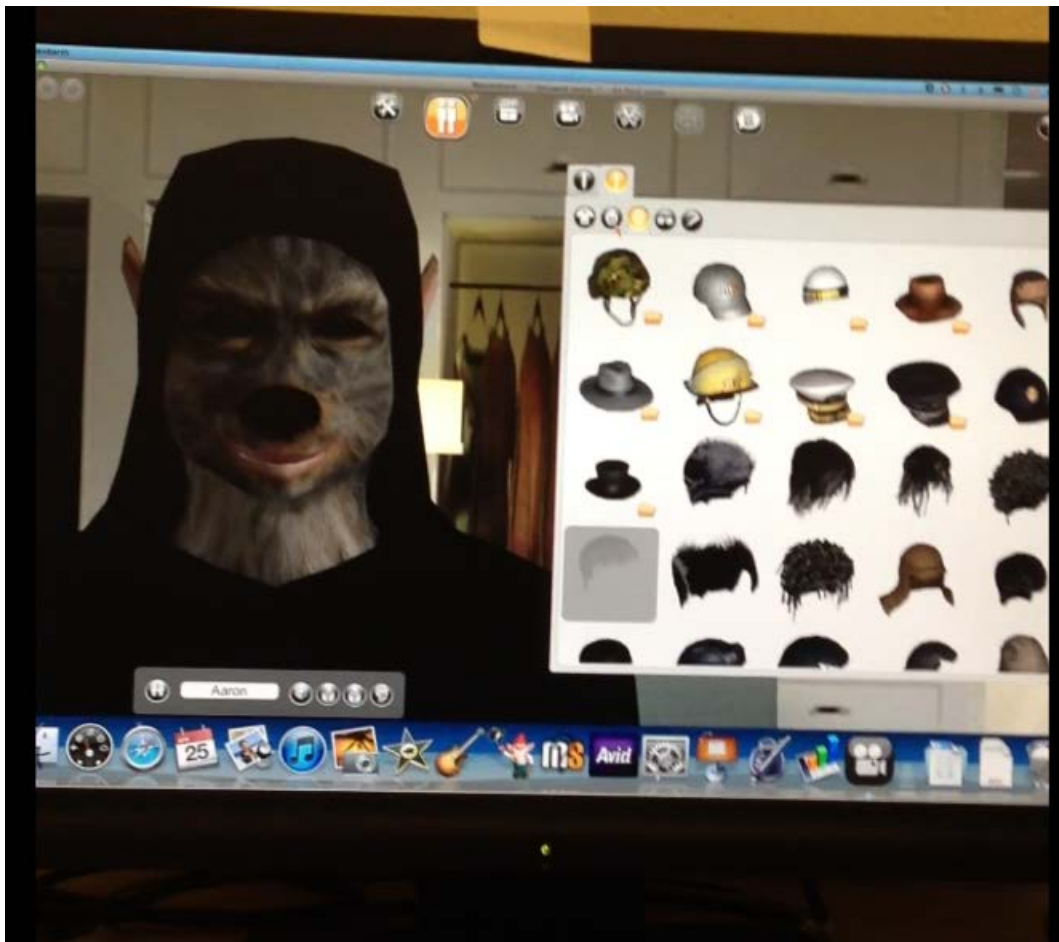


Figure 1: Jamaye's design of Laughing Shadow's werewolf head

In terms of the basic mechanics of semiotics, this kind of digital composition displays the choices made in the paradigm and syntagm very clearly. The key features are the selection of the wolf head, of the black eyes, and of the concealing hood (Figure 1). He also emphasises the scars he has placed on the human head. His interest in his design is to represent mystery and moral ambivalence (he describes in interview Laughing Shadow's mixture of self-interest

and good intentions), using signifiers of darkness, concealment and damage convey these ideas.

Meanwhile Kai has made quite different choices (Figure 2).

He's called White Owl, so I put quite lightish hair, and I made the eyes red to match, like, werewolf, since it's the chief of the tribe, I gave it like a - ... since werewolves don't really wear clothes, but there's not really a setting for fur, I had to make it like a, sort of nudy person. ... And then, my person, since it's a werewolf and it's been in a lot of fights ... I've given it a scar and like an Indian sort of printing ... and since it's a werewolf I've changed the colour of its eyes.

I: Oh – you've given it straight pupils as well!

K: Yeah.

I: Cat's eyes.

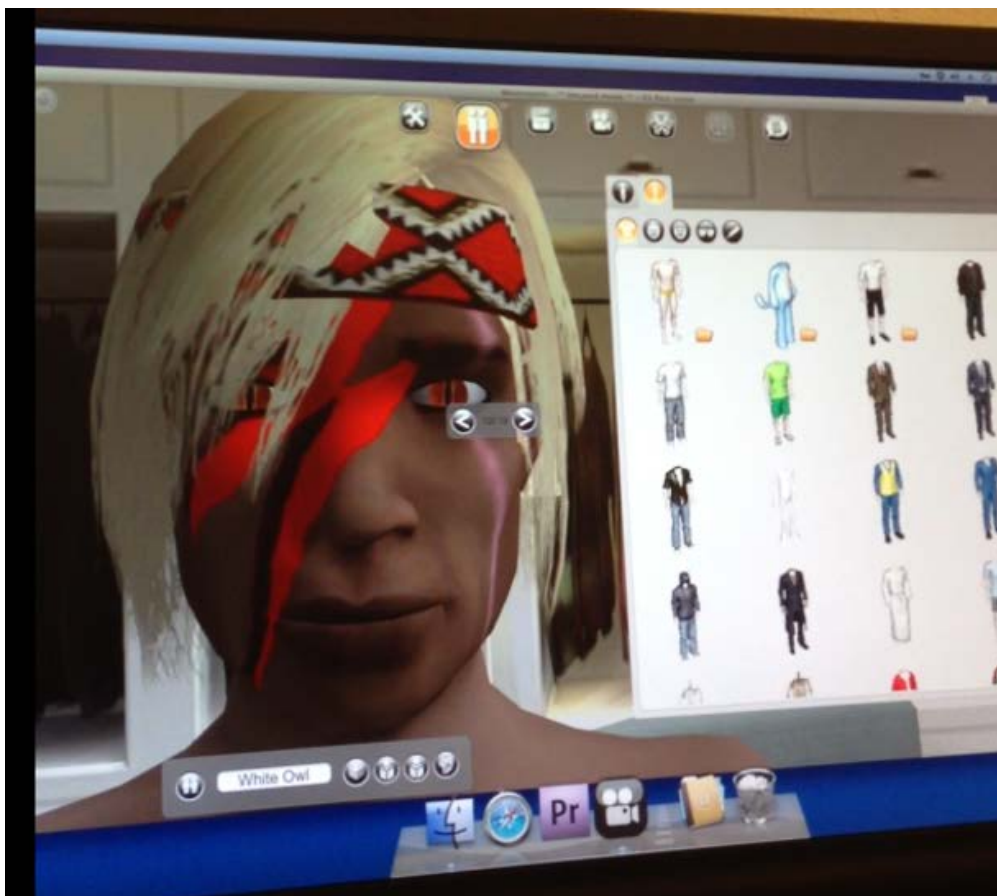


Figure 2: Kai's design of White Owl's human head

He describes the difficulty of constructing the man-beast syntagm, wanting a naked body, since “werewolves don’t wear clothes”, but lacking a fur texture for the body to match the texture of the wolf-head, so settling for “a nudy person”.

These concerns about dress – to clothe and conceal, or to construct a white nakedness - echo the stylistic choices made by many werewolf films. The semiotics of clothing here construct the liminality of the werewolf figure: dark clothing to suggest secrets within; or nakedness suggesting the dividing line between human and beast. Other commentators (eg Donald, 1992) have developed the idea of a sublime aesthetic in contemporary popular culture determined by liminality: etymologically, the sublime refers to the lintel (limen), beyond which we strive to see, know; yet which simultaneously inhibits our view. It is, thus, likely to be brought into play to represent the unknown - either repressed past knowledge, or new possibilities, as yet unexplored. The boys designing Laughing Shadow and White Owl want to construct this kind of liminal figure. We can see the inventiveness with which they work around the constraints of the software, one by the device of clothing and hood suggesting hidden secrets; the other by the conjuncture of fur and naked skin.

The grain of the (werewolf) voice

The voices of the two werewolves were performed by two more boys, Aaron and Ute. They describe the choices they made:

AARON

I was doing Laughing Shadow, and he’s a werewolf, so I had to use quite a husky voice.

I: So what kind of things did you have to say?

A: *I am Laughing shadow* (in deep husky voice).

I: So why do werewolves speak like that?

A: I just thought they’d be irritated with their skin, so the mean voice is huskier than other people.

UTE

I had to make my voice faster and like more agitated, more angry type of ... like when I'm fighting Laughing Shadow ... I have to get angry and worked up. More into werewolf instinct rather than human.

The most important aspect of their performance seems to be the husky voice they adopt. Again, this represents the liminality of the werewolf figure. For Ute, it means a shift from the 'human instinct' to the 'werewolf instinct'. For Aaron, it indicates the werewolf's irritation with his skin. While it's not entirely clear what he means by this, it does suggest a liminal creature torn between two shapes; and recalls the agony of transformation in earlier werewolf films, in which the transformation process involves the splitting of the human skin and the painful emergence of the werewolf fur, claws and muzzle (An American Werewolf in London, Landis, 1981; Company of Wolves, Jordan, 1984).

Furthermore, the husky voice here, with its suggestions of sublime monstrosity and its connection to the skin of the werewolf, performs a function related to that of Kai's 'nudy person', and his desire to produce the man-beast composite. This multimodal connection between the 'grain of the voice' (Barthes, 1977) and the texture of the digital body is a relation of complementarity, which we can imagine as one end of *a continuum of modal conjunction*. The opposite end would be a relation of inter-modal contradiction, in which aesthetic structures of disharmony, tension, divergence might be the aims – or might be the consequence of conflicting choices in a multiply-authored text.

These two syntagmatic bundles – the visual and the auditory – are brought together in the wider syntagm of the film narrative by the two girls animating this sequence. They add dramatic action, in the form of the battle between the two werewolves, where again they have to make do with what is to hand, using the closest approximation to werewolf combat offered by the software, which is a boxing animation. Aware that this doesn't match the ideal they have in mind, they add a leap of one werewolf over the head of the other. The style of the sequence – its use of shot-reverse-shot alternation, its use of close-up, its pace – has a particular intention to involve the viewer, the students' aspirations exceeding the technical limits of the software:

... We tried to make it a bit 3D-ish, so like it feels like the audience is actually in the movie, like they can see all the punches close up, like it's coming out to them.

This awareness of the audience's experience recalls the rhetorical function elaborated by Aristotle: the shaping of the text (logos) to provoke the audience's affective engagement

(pathos), which we consider in the next section. In social semiotic terms, this desire to bring the viewer into the film realises the *interpersonal metafunction*, constructing the relationship between author, text and audience.

The final edit also adds the music composed by yet another pair of students, a synthesised keyboard piece of two repeating sequences of notes which might represent the two werewolves. Again, this is a relation of complementarity, the music articulated with the blows of the fight sequence, as the next section will show. Here we can note that the repetitive nature of the music – an ostinato, or repeating melodic and rhythmic structure – has two particular functions. One is to complement the dynamic combat sequence of the visual track. The other is to recall the loop effect of videogame music, designed to cater for play events of indeterminate length. The first function resembles the aesthetic role of music in cinema: complementing action, mood and narrative, and supplying character motifs. The second invokes the different, though related genre of digital games. Similarly, the students' character designs borrow stylistically from their experiences of play and of digital games. One describes how creating Sims families resembled designing characters in *Moviestorm*:

I played one Sims game and it's when you're a vet, and it's not like this but it's the same sort of basis, like you've got a character and you dress them up and you make them do stuff and make them go places.

While these examples of play, culture and design seem particular to the digital age, they belong in a broader sense to age-old histories of role-play, costume drama and dressing-up, and to the mimicry which Caillois adopts as one of his four categories of play (Caillois, 1961; Burn, 2014).

In general terms, then, as well as in certain detailed choices, the students have worked to produce a style suited to a credible werewolf narrative. This credibility is rooted in a 'truth-to-genre', termed by van Leeuwen 'presentational modality' (1999), an aesthetic which claims kin with group of sub-genres ranging from childhood folktale to recent teenage horror franchises and to the aesthetics of videogames. It is important to the students to make their designs look and sound good, not least because they know that the claims to credibility they make will be judged by others. As Ute says of their film and the work they have described:

You have to try to remember to do all these things, and, like, perfect it.

The transformations we see in the students' digital designs are true of the semiotic toolkits, newly available stylistic choices, and related aesthetic values of film more generally in the digital age: and they are aware of this, having taken part in stop-frame 'claymation' projects in primary school. Stop frame animation has yielded (some) space to 3D computer animation, while CGI (computer-generated imagery) routinely complements so-called live action.

Although the highly developed technologies of the special effects industries might seem qualitatively different from the work of these 11-year-olds, **the basic principles are very similar**. In both cases, furthermore, the stylistic tools of the digital age subsume those of the moving image established at its birth: the organising principles of filming and editing.

There are implications here, for educational work in 'media literacy' as for the study of cinema more broadly, in terms of the historical persistence of the basic principles of "film art" (eg Arnheim, 1957; Bordwell & Thompson, 2016), and how these relate to the interpenetrating landscapes of digital culture of the twenty-first century. For the students in our study, these grand, global shifts in society and technology are localised by their stylistic choices and aesthetic affiliations, in their own cultural moment, caught between the oral narratives of childhood and the screen narratives of film and videogame.

Multimodal aesthetics and affect

In the western tradition of aesthetics in literature and drama, Aristotle's *Poetics* describes the function of tragedy to arouse pity and fear, and the pleasure and cathartic consequences of these. The subsequent modifications to the affective dimension of the aesthetic have become associated with distinctions between different social regimes of cultural taste, a prominent argument being Bourdieu's critique of the coldness of Kant's 'pure gaze', and his own assertion of the vitality of the popular aesthetic. While we agree with this, we have no intention to constitute affect as a separate dimension of the aesthetic, but to show how it is inseparable from the sensory, from meaning, and from the social contexts and histories in which texts are designed.

"A good shock": multimodal realisation of werewolf combat

The effort in the werewolf designs is to produce the sense of fear characteristic of the werewolf sub-genre, of horror films in general, and more broadly, of the experience of the sublime. Kai, who designed White Owl, explains that werewolf films need to inspire fear, to

give viewers “a good shock”, an experience he clearly regards as pleasurable. The children are less direct, understandably, about what commentators on the liminality of horror monsters describe, borrowing Freud’s term, as “the uncanny” – *unheimlich* (Freud, 1919). However, their efforts to construct the liminal figures which are neither man nor beast, whose skin is troublingly ambiguous, whose clothes and scars betray dangerous secrets, are indeed evocations of the uncanny, as are Aaron and Ute’s voices, midway between human and animal sounds. The uncanny is associated in Freud’s account with the ‘return of the repressed’ (Twitchell, 1985): of primitive fears, of the dark, of the unknown, of imaginary monsters. It is not the role of social semiotics to engage in psychoanalytic speculation: but its role *is* to connect social meanings with semiosis. In this respect, the mixture of half-remembered folktale monsters and tropes from popular cinema which the children draw on to shape their images and sounds moves us from the territory of psychoanalysis into the dialogic chain of signifier material in different modes, which can help explain how the style, and from that, the aesthetic function of this text is produced.

The girls producing the animated sequence construct the mode of action, adding movements from the software’s repertoire to represent gestures of violent argument (Figure 3); the howling of the werewolves (Figure 4); and the combat actions (Figure 5).



Figure 3: The beginning of the werewolf combat sequence



Figure 4: The werewolf transformation



Figure 5: The exchange of blows

As in the designs of the character models, the style here, and the process of creating it through the manipulation of digital bodies, recalls virtual worlds and digital games rather than cinema. However, the virtual filming and editing processes, which constructs low angle shots and shot-reverse-shot sequences, invoke the stylistic structures of the moving image as they have been since their inception.

The actional mode in the combat sequence conveys fear, both of the monstrous combatants and on behalf of the sympathetic one, and the sublime thrill of the human-beast figures. It is integrated with a music sequence composed, performed and recorded by a different group of students (Figure 6). This consists of a ground – an ostinato composed of a two note bass unit followed by a four-note unit, suggesting urgency and danger. After four repetitions, a new motif appears, made up again of two units of descending notes. The second pattern includes two notes which resolve the whole piece into a minor key. The initial ground ostinato conveys suspense, while the upper line conveys urgency:

We were on this, like Loops on the Macs, and we played about with it. We made some music for the fighting. Kind of like, like anticipation – it built up.

The two units may correspond to the two characters, and the turn-taking of the blows on the combat sequence. The emphatic double note at the end of each unit suggests the blows themselves – the “one-two” of the boxing animation. The minor key, of course, can signify darkness or tragedy.



Figure 6: the music for the werewolf combat (author’s transcription from original soundtrack)

The combined affective charge of the designs of actions and music, then, revolve around the stylistic pattern of turn-taking: the alternating blows of the combat, the alternating motifs of the music, the alternating shot-structure of the visual sequence. Turn-taking (as well as the loop structure the girls refer to) recalls the structure of combat sequences in some genres of videogame (especially Japanese role-playing games), where turn-based units, as opposed to real-time, are one way to manage the exchange of action in fighting. In tandem with the imagery of liminality, the narrative suspense, the melodic patterns of the music, the sequence also evokes the characteristic emotion of the horror genre: the pleasurable thrill, (sublime) fear, Aristotelian catharsis, or the “good shock” that Kai is aiming for. But we insist on the inseparability of this from the other aspects of the aesthetic which we have reviewed. It is inseparable from the meanings constructed here: of childhood fears and cultural aspirations, of narrative function and shape. It is inseparable from the “truth-to-genre” claims of this complex, multiply-authored text, its ambition to be credible as myth, horror and game.

To summarise, then, the aesthetic strategies of the children are not so different from those of the films they have watched, the videogames they have played. The evocation of the curious emotions which are a kind of pity and fear, as Aristotle proposed, but which nevertheless produce pleasure, are clearly part of their intention. We also see clearly how these strategies are distributed across all the modes, from the visual design of the characters, through the vocal performances and the musical composition, to the marshalling of these syntagmatic segments in the orchestrating modes of the moving image, (virtual) filming and editing.

It is also clear how these aesthetic strategies are always entirely integral to, one and the same as the narrative which celebrates the agency of a teenage girl, her eventual triumph rendered more potent by the threat posed by the werewolves. We can echo Halliday's account of the part affect plays in the making of meaning:

... one cannot draw a sharp line between the expression of meanings on the one hand and the expression of attitudes and emotions on the other.

It is more helpful to think of attitudes and emotions as part of meaning. (Halliday, 1989: 80)

We can add that style incorporates both, carrying over into the discursive domain of the aesthetic.

CONCLUSION: SEVEN PROPOSALS

We have argued that style is the politics of choice, and the semiotic toolkit of identity. In the work of these young film-makers, the semiotics of visual, actional, musical and filmic design have created a hybrid style which builds bridges between the worlds of childhood and adolescence, between different gendered interests in images of fantasy monsters and heroic teenagers, between the technologies of the analogue and digital moving image.

We have also argued that aesthetics is the politics of style, the discursive regime in which stylistic choice is embedded. One example of this lies behind the girls' interest in the *Twilight* series of films, based on the novels of Stephanie Meyer. Feminist scholars have criticised the lack of agency in the heroine, Bella Swann; and the emphasis in the books and films on virginity and sexual abstinence (eg Santos, 2016). However, it seems likely that the pleasure of the girls in our sample group does not reflect these interests; rather, they attribute agency

to their own heroine, Lily; while the only expression of (pre) sexual interest lies in their design of a physically mature figure for Lily, and their choice of her age, two years ahead of their own. Meanwhile, the disengagement of the boys from these films, and the surreptitious interest of Kai in his sister's viewing, suggests a politics of gender which in certain ways the making of their film negotiates, the style representing the nurturing as well as the agonistic aspects of the werewolf figure through its combination of visual and musical motifs.

Our analysis of the semiotics of style has attended to the multimodal nature of the students' work, and the discursive context in which aesthetic evaluation develops. We want to conclude our account by proposing seven insights which social semiotics and its relation to multimodality can offer to the theory of aesthetics.

1. Semiotic choice depends on the *interest* of the sign-maker. The composition of a text chooses signifiers to convey this interest in the *style* of the text: patterns which are pleasing, satisfying, well-crafted; and which thus lay claim to cultural value in the domain of aesthetic discourse.
2. The shaping of patterns (style) and the shaping of meaning are one and the same. The visual syntagm which connects red eyes, scars, and a wolf's muzzle produces a satisfyingly thrilling artefact; but also meanings related to the narrative function of the werewolf and its social meanings, which in our example is a combination of childhood fears and the attraction of teenage transgression.
3. These stylistic articulations both borrow from and transform elements of earlier texts, in a dialogic relation. The signifiers deployed, however innovatively they may be transformed, come with meanings and aesthetic shapings from earlier use. The social semiotic principle of *provenance* (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001) provides the sign-maker with resources laden with potential, and always re-made as new signs. In this case, as we have seen, the signifiers which the children use to make satisfying werewolves derive both from contemporary film culture and from childhood folktale.
4. The stylistic shaping of a text is a claim to truth-to-genre - though genres are always both conserved and transformed - and in this sense an aspect of the social semiotic principle of *modality*. Modality is located by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) in the interpersonal metafunction, the relationship between producer, text and audience. In this respect, aesthetic value and the pleasures associated with it are socially produced, claimed and negotiated. If

the audience has no experience of the genre in question, or has decided it's not for them, then the effort to produce pleasure and the claim to cultural value associated with it will fail.

5. The stylistic organisation of a text, like all other aspects, is multimodal: it is distributed across the range of modes it deploys. Across a *continuum of modal conjunction*, this may involve complementarity or contradiction, in which harmonious parallels or discordant clashes represent the social interests of the sign-makers, or the world they represent. In Laurence Olivier's film of *Hamlet* (1948), for example, the Nordic style of the makeup and set design clash with the orientalism of certain motifs of William Walton's music, reflecting the uncertainty of multiple authorial voices (Burn, 2014). In our case study of the students' werewolf film, the uncanniness required of the sublime aesthetic characteristic of narratives of monstrosity is constructed by the visual and auditory syntagms together. In relation to film aesthetics, it is also produced by the orchestrating functions of filming and editing, the characteristic organisational mechanisms of the moving image, or *kineikonic mode* (Burn, 2014).

6. The production of pleasure inevitably involves affect. In the case of werewolf films, this requires the pity and fear of Aristotle's tragic drama, the awe and terror of the (popular) sublime, though in the service of the local interests of the particular film-makers. In the children's film this is produced multimodally through visual signifiers (human-wolf syntagms), the timbre of speech, combative action, and the agitated rhythm and alternating motifs of the musical sequence. But, just as the aesthetic cannot be divorced from meaning, so affect also is inseparable from signification. And if meaning represents particular social interests and histories, then so too does its affective charge.

7. Social semiotic theory argues that, while the Saussurean tradition of semiotics has attended to linguistic and other systems of communication at the expense of the material substance of the signifier, the different materiality of all modes also contributes to the meaning of the sign (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). The same is true of its aesthetic function; and the material signifier engages directly with the senses, with different sensory modalities in different modes. Pleasure and cultural value can both be claimed by the use of polished marble, or conversely by rusted steel; by oil paint or industrial spray-can. In the case of our example, the visual textures are digital, the auditory textures digital recordings of voice and instrument. But the textures of fur and skin, of the grain of the voice, of the tone of the violin, are inseparable from the choices of colour, shape, actional contour, lexicogrammatical choice in

the dialogue, or the melodic and rhythmic choices of the music. The style (form, meaning, rhetoric, the sensory, the affective) and hence the aesthetic claim, runs across modes *and* media.

Finally, to echo Walter Benjamin's argument for the politicization of the aesthetic (1938), we want to emphasise again that the social contexts in which the experience of pleasure and the negotiation of cultural judgment are located mean that the function of the aesthetic is never (and never has been) disinterested or neutral in the way we sometimes imagine; and claims to "disinterest" are themselves profoundly political. While the contexts we have considered here may not be so immediately visible as the extreme political struggle against fascism from which Benjamin's argument emerges, relations of power, constraints on the freedom of individuals and groups, and the perennial contests of cultural politics are ever-present. In this case, the engagement with the popular aesthetics of werewolf narratives and teenage horror films chosen by the students is a rare example of curricular time spent on such matter, and a challenge to the heavy emphasis on canonical culture in literature, art and music enshrined in the English National Curriculum of the UK.

The value of social semiotic analysis, with its attention to multimodal resources of various socially produced kinds, is to challenge the fragmentation of aesthetic functions which has bedevilled approaches to the aesthetic in philosophy and the arts. It follows the examples of Barthes and Bourdieu, resisting the cultural politics of distinction, and finding aesthetic value in every aspect of cultural practice. It restores the absolute connections between form, meaning and affect. It counters the specialisation of aesthetic theory and analysis in the various domains of the arts. In the case of film, it attends to the rapid succession of new practices, genres and stylistic dispositions, in which forms such as machinima remind us of the history of film aesthetics, but also disturb its apparently settled patterns. The stylistic repertoires of the moving image have always been a mash-up of theatre, magic, sound, music, language and light, as well as its distinctive semiotics of filming and editing. Now, in the age of new media, its styles lend to and borrow from videogames, television advertising and virtual reality, while its aesthetic judgments are newly conducted by the display and commentariat of youtube, by the trailers and interactive design interfaces of film-on-demand, and by the mobile transformations of smart-phones. Social Semiotics, with its resources of multimodality offers a way to read across these phenomena of contemporary communication. It insists on the importance of context and history: of the provenance of the signifier material in question, the story of changing and contested meanings implicated in it, the dialogic

threads linking today's sign-makers with those of the past and future, those of other places and cultures, those of the analogue and digital ages, those of the adult world and those of childhood.

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