

Grammar and Gesture

From our earliest entrance into the symbolic order, we are forced to accept that everything we experience is an image, mediated by our understanding of the machinations that govern the relationship between any signifier and its signified. This relationship is simple, even algorithmic; yet when attention is called to the arbitrary nature of many of these systems, ways of escaping their binary logic are revealed, and it becomes possible to access these images in a more experiential way.

Consider the humble conversation, a semiotic superstructure that governs both the form and content of our verbal exchanges. The structure is quickly internalised, and at this point we cease to question its logic. Each utterance is instantly organised into a particular correspondence that is familiar and sensible. Little thought is directed to the structures that govern the exchange of power and ideas.

These points of friction within a conversation are effaced through the particular gestural quality of the system that privileges the ritualistic repetition of its various forms. Inflections, pauses or decrescendos indicate shifts of agency, or movements of energy. If they are resisted, the logic of the

conversation is thrown into chaos; why must every question be expected to have its answer?

In this context, gesture is productive, but exempted from the power economy of language itself. It has the capacity to orientate structures so that they are sensible, while at the same time existing outside of the rigid means/end logic of linguistics. As such, artists may pay close attention to the gestural operations within familiar structures—as Charlie Sofo does—to prompt a reconsideration of the products and processes inherent within these structures, and the possibilities presented by resisting them.

Cinematic grammar acts in a similar way, organising various audiovisual elements into a logical correspondence. Generally, this takes the form of Aristotelian narrative realised through a particular grammar of film that dictates how each individual element relates to those around it. While much of this grammar seems obvious, it is (like conversation) often predicated upon arbitrary structures and patterns. Though it seems instinctive, the structure of narrative cinema is highly artificial.

Sean Grattan's video *Carmen San Diego: Out Of Work And On The Run* (2011) superficially resembles a typical American film; it features distinct, identifiable actors engaging in a

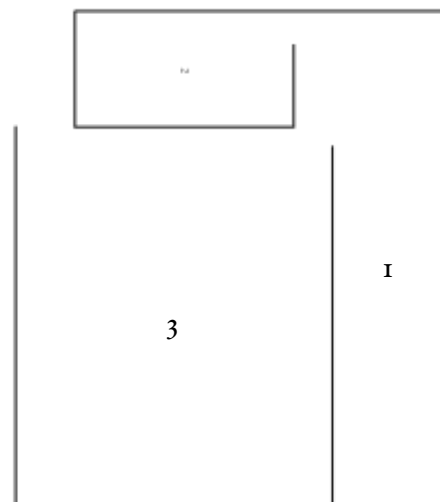
decontextualised yet familiar exchange. This scenario is derived from the relatively stable forms of mainstream genre films, but the expected filmic gestures are substituted for unsettling alternatives—the result may be described as “an action movie [that] sounds like a lecture”, earnest while at the same time trying to distance itself from cinematic convention and the typical machinations of logic that allow viewers to effortlessly navigate the grammar of mainstream film.

Ed Atkins rejects the subtlety of Grattan’s work in favour of a hyper-active, synaesthetic reinterpretation of filmic grammar. Making use of refined digital editing and composition techniques, Atkins’ *Death Mask III* (2011) does away with macro-narratives and explores the productive potential of confronting viewers’ expectations with something entirely outside traditional logic. The most elementary relationships between audiovisual components are challenged and rethought; he emphasises that the video is a construct, and turns to the poetic potential of the medium to offer enjoyment.

Arron Santry

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1 Ed Atkins, *Death Mask III*, 2011.



Courtesy of the artist and Cabinet Gallery, London.

2 Sean Grattan, *Carmen San Diego: Out Of Work And On The Run*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

3 Charlie Sofo

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