

Analyzing the 'Abominable': Style, aesthetics, and narrative complexity in TV's Sherlock

Sherlock Holmes introduced himself to literature – and the world soon after – in *A Study in Scarlet*, a detective story written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and published in the 1887 *Beeton's Christmas Annual* ("Scarlet," 2018). In this story, the London-based "consulting detective" and his companion, Dr. John Watson, help identify and capture a murderous cabbie, and since then things have not quite been the same for the detective genre. The heroic, yet vulnerable sleuth's cultural influence has seen considerable integration through various adaptations. Broadcast television in particular has produced numerous texts; CBS's *Elementary* (2012-present) and BBC's *Sherlock* (2010-present), a limited series, are both only very modern examples. The latter series, a contemporary retelling of Doyle's classic Sherlock Holmes stories, is the focus of this essay. More specifically, this essay will analyze *Sherlock's* reliance on stylistic techniques to negotiate the text's intended meanings – which are often enigmatic and complex – by foregrounding key elements of style from "The Abominable Bride," a special *Sherlock* episode that aired on New Year's Day in 2016 ("Abominable," 2018). Furthermore, this essay will attempt to demonstrate how these stylistic techniques conform to the program's realism which, combined with operational aesthetics, work to produce a complex narrative.

The Abominable Bride Special (2016)

According to Wikipedia, "The Abominable Bride" (Vertue, 2016) combines several other Sherlock Holmes stories ("Abominable," 2018) to produce a narrative that "fills in the gap" preceding Season Three's cliffhanger ending. The setting of "Bride" tells the knowledgeable viewer this program is not a conventional *Sherlock* episode. For example, two excerpts from the synopsis provided on the BBC website's (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/>) program profile include "what

if this wasn't the modern day..." and, more tellingly, "Welcome to Sherlock in 1895!" (BBC, 2018). What distinguishes this episode from the series' overall continuity is the setting of the storyworld, or the time within the narrative universe where all the show's story elements unfold (Mittell, 2010). All the *Sherlock* characters are now in Victorian London for no immediate reason in particular – at first. To negotiate this discrepancy with the viewer, elements of style are used to help the program juxtapose the narrative between what is real within the show and what isn't, techniques that soon reveal the answers to the viewer's two-fold question: "how will the sleuth and his doctor companion unravel this twisted scheme?" and, more subtly, "how did the makers of the show manage this storytelling trick?" The program's content, after all, is as compelling as its mystery.

Elements of Style

By observing key elements of style, defined by Mittell (2010) as "formal characteristics that help express meaning independently of a text's content" (p. 176), a *Sherlock* viewer can unravel these schemes through the program's content, defined as meaning offered by the text (Mittell, 2010). One way a viewer might negotiate meaning and construct realism – the expected, relatable reality with any specific storyworld (Mittell, 2010) – is by observing the program's camerawork. According to Mittell (2010), camerawork is a technique used to capture an image in order to create tone, character relationship, and space. In "Bride," the viewer is introduced to Sherlock Holmes as he beats a corpse with a switch to study postmortem bruising (Vertue, 2016), a scene lifted directly from *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). Holmes is framed dramatically, a tall shadowy man calmly striking the morgue-corpse with a baton as Drs. Watson and Stamford (and the viewer) stand helpless by and witness this awkward first impression. A slow extreme closeup zoom on Holmes' face, cut by shadows cast by the morgue's gas lamps, accompanies his

brilliant on-the-spot deduction of Dr. Watson's military history. Via these techniques, the viewer finds that (s)he is in the presence of an exceptional human being, that this man beating a corpse in a dungeon-like morgue in gaslight Victorian London is just like the present-day Holmes. Another good example of framing is Holmes' flat at 221B Baker Street, both Victorian and present-day versions are almost entirely similar. Together, this camerawork effectively frames the action performed in front of the camera to stage, or convey, the camera image's content (Mittell, 2010). Tracking shots, or camera movement tracked in a specific direction (Mittell, 2010), are also commonly used in *Sherlock* to both heighten intensity and allow the viewer to "keep up" with the program's action and characters. Cinematographer Suzie Levelle's work has been recognized; she was nominated for a primetime Emmy award for her camerawork on "Bride," according to the program's Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) profile.

Editing also helps the viewer negotiate meaning from "Bride," primarily due to the program's narrative shifts between Victorian and present-day London. *Sherlock's* clever use of continuity editing, a basic editing system present in nearly every television program or film (Mittell, 2010), is exceptional in "Bride" due to so many plots – or on-screen events (Mittell, 2010) – occurring. A viewer must deal with the Abominable Bride case, Holmes' present-day drug-induced meditation, Moriarty's resurrection, Mrs. Hudson and Mary Watson's resentment, and other subplots, all occurring from past to present to past again.

These three elements of style help convey the program's realism; in other words, the viewer is given a clearly defined boundary as to what is relatable to the show's content. However, graphics and sound are two other key elements worth noting, as its uses in *Sherlock* are particularly effective in negotiating meaning. Graphics, by which is meant on-screen images manipulated by non-photogenic techniques (Mittell, 2010), are used in *Sherlock* to maintain a

viewer's access to information. For example, keying, or text and/or material overlaying an image (Mittell, 2010), is used in "Bride" to reveal to the viewer the written text in Mary's mysterious note and Holmes' telegram to Watson (Vertue, 2016). the keyed communiqué is an intrinsic norm found in *Sherlock*; cell phone texts, laptops screens, and fragments of Holmes' mind-palace are "storytelling practices that get established as typical" (Mittell, 2010, p. 233) of the series. There are many examples present in "Bride" that rely on image manipulation, including green-screen, or chroma-keying (Mittell, 2010), such as to background a sprawling Victorian London skyline (Vertue, 2016). The program's visual effects earned it a primetime Emmy award for Outstanding Special Visual Effects in a Supporting Role, according to IMDb ("Sherlock," 2018).

Sound is used to haunting effect in "Bride" given the case's supernatural undertones. In one scene, the antagonistic Sir Eustis Carmichael and his wife hear a strange woman's voice singing off-screen as they tremble in a hedge-maze shrouded by fog (Vertue, 2016); this tune is repeated throughout the program. Another scene uses the *absence* of sound to comic effect, when Holmes and Watson visit the detective's condescending brother at the Diogenes Club (Vertue, 2016), which in some parts of the lodge has a rule of absolute silence. Watson's confusing sign language (subtitled, of course; another example of keying) causes an exasperated Holmes to scoff audibly, thereby breaking this sacred rule. The program also uses non-diegetic sound, that which only the audience can hear (Mittell, 2010); one such example is the "whoosh" heard as the narrative shifts from the past to the present. This "whoosh" is a sound bridge of sort, though other than hearing the next scene's sound before the cut like a conventional sound bridge (Mittell, 2010), it signals to the viewer a disturbance between the two narrative planes, such as when Holmes awakens from the mind-palace past into the plot's present.

Sherlock's camerawork, staging, editing, graphics, and sound effectively piece together the material required for the viewer to unravel the mystery at hand. These elements of styles work together to create an operational aesthetic that is prevalent throughout the *Sherlock* series, constructing a specific, naturalistic realism – that is, more representative of our actual living world (Mittell, 2010) – that quickly become familiar to *Sherlock* viewers. But how do these aesthetics highlight the series' and program's narrative complexity? The remainder of this essay will partly explain the narrative unconventionality present in both the *Sherlock* series and "Bride" program.

Operational Aesthetics and Narrative Complexity

Mittell (2006) states operational aesthetics are "less about 'what will happen?'" (p. 35) and more about how the program's producers managed to pull off this complex narrative. It is useful then to define narrative complexity, a narrative mode wherein a story rebels "against the conventions of episodic and serial traditions in a range of intriguing ways" (Mittell, 2006, p. 30). "Bride" is unique from other episodes for its own brand of unconventionality. The program follows particular protocols, a concept known as procedural literacy (Mittell, 2006), that stand apart from the other *Sherlock* episodes. The fantastical time shifts, the struggle between reason and the supernatural ("Lord help me, I think it may be a matter for a priest," Lady Carmichael tells Holmes and Watson in one intriguing scene [Vertue, 2016, 0:32:58]), and Moriarty's return from the dead are just some factors of the likes which have not been encountered in previous *Sherlock* episodes. Because "Bride" is unlike other *Sherlock* programs, its important thing that the viewer negotiates accurately the program's intended meaning, whether it's in Victorian London, a jet plane, a dream, a drug-induced hallucination, all happening within a storyworld that may or may not be inhabited by ghosts.

This essay has already touched on some operational aesthetics from "Bride"; however, as for how these aesthetics might construct a complex narrative, this essay will turn lastly to some textual meanings carried across the series. The aesthetics used in "Bride" are largely the same as that of other *Sherlock* episodes. Firstly, the use of flashbacks and retellings is crucial to the series, but not always relevant to the case at hand. Sometimes these flashbacks are from an event in a previous episode; in fact, "Bride" immediately begins with the title card, "So far on Sherlock" (Vertue, 2016, 0:00:01), before a montage of highlights from previous episodes remind the viewer of prior important events within the existing *Sherlock* diegesis before suddenly whisking the story off to 1895. *Sherlock's* flashbacks maintain a compelling cross-continuity that keeps the viewer engaged to the point of waiting years before a new season. After all, there are very few episodes of *Sherlock*. Also, the aforementioned resurrection of the primary antagonist Jim Moriarty, who had committed suicide at the end of Season Two before returning as a hacked video feed in Season Three's cliffhanger finale, serves as a direct narrative link to episodes of *Sherlock*. In true arch-nemesis fashion, Moriarty is indeed the crux of Holmes' numerous adventures (and misadventures) throughout the series.

Sherlock, and "Bride" in particular, certainly caters to a valued niche audience, a key aspect of narrative complexity (Mittell, 2006). *Sherlock* viewers will recognize many time parallels between "Bride" and other *Sherlock* episodes: the beginning credit sequences in "Bride" is a historical alternate to the series' regular opening sequence, presenting antique lab equipment and a Dickensian London with horse-cabs and gaslights in place of its present-day counterpart. In fact, the beginning of "Bride" opens just like "A Study in Pink" (Vertue, 2010); Dr. Stamford introduces Watson to Holmes as the detective beats a morgue corpse. In essence, this scene could be viewed as the series' adaptation of Holmes' literary debut, an incongruity of sorts as *Sherlock*

itself is based on the premise of the Victorian pulp detective heroes residing in the present and using modern technology. In other words, this program is an answer to how a modern Sherlock Holmes retelling might appear against a 19th-century setting, which is precisely the original text's setting and the very reason for why a *Sherlock* viewer might consider this intentionally circular logic. Technological advancements, also, can heighten a television series' narrative complexity (Mittell, 2010), and *Sherlock* is just one example. "Bride," nor any other *Sherlock* episodes, looks like a low-budget multi-camera television production, but rather a professional "made-for-TV" film otherwise fit for a wide theatrical release.

Conclusion

Sherlock's value as a niche program designed for a niche audience is due in large part to the series' operational aesthetics. Formal elements of style are used to convey these aesthetics, which in turn composes the series' naturalistic realism. Meaning is negotiated to literate viewers through these elements of style, for which connections can be made to previous *Sherlock* episodes. This overall narrative complexity helps define *Sherlock's* brand as a smart series for smart people, with many complex aspects involved. Time, however, is perhaps the most complex aspect of all. Indeed, the end of "Bride" is a cliffhanger in its own right, if only in philosophy. Here, 1895 Sherlock says to Watson as he stands at the upstairs window of 221B Baker Street, peering into the busy London street beyond: "But then I've always known I was a man outside of his time" (Vertue, 2016, 1:31:51). The camera dollies out, revealing 1895 Holmes looking upon a busy present-day Baker Street, ultimately leaving the viewer to consider where in time the detective really resides, and whether the previous episodes are merely modernized interpretations of cases from 1895 Holmes' mind-palace.

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