

## **ABSTRACT doctoral dissertation “Artist on the Make: David Mamet’s Work Across Media and Genres. An Essay in Semiology”**

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During a prolific career spanning four decades David Mamet has attained a rare degree of popular and critical success in a wide array of artistic ‘disciplines.’ At the same time, his omnipresence starkly contrasts with the extensive, though mostly one-sided scholarly attention his work has received for over a quarter of a century. Indeed, only a small fraction of the secondary literature addresses the interrelations between these various ventures, and if so with but limited theorizing involved. Regrettably so, since descriptive studies of de-contextualized pieces fail to attain a broader relevance. For this reason, the present study aspires to fill a gap in the extant Mamet-criticism by confronting the findings of close readings with a progressive, yet non-causal argument ‘disciplined’ by the interplay of concept and object. It is believed that without such in-built reassessments little justice can be done to the meandering quality of David Mamet’s work, not to mention its wider artistic implications.

In practice, the various research objectives presented along the aforementioned argumentative ‘progression’ are addressed through clusters of closely interrelated subchapters. These, moreover, are structured according to a fluid pattern which like an ‘organic spiral’ (Deleuze, 1983), begins with the contextualized introduction of one of the argument’s central constituents and is followed by its theoretical reassessment. The latter, in turn, is challenged in short case studies. Neighbouring clusters similarly overlap in order to establish a consistent progression that repeatedly confronts, integrates, and refines the different focal points. Each of this study’s three main chapters, likewise, is built around analogous renditions of the said clusters, providing another means of gauging the systematicity of Mamet’s media and genre crossings. Because a work of art constitutes, in the words of Susanne K. Langer, ‘a single, indivisible symbol’ (1976), it always conveys in its semblance of unity a tensional opacity. Accordingly, to be representative without being reductive, the overarching methodological framework of this study should function in a similar, reciprocal fashion: a hypothesis gives rise to predictions, which are theorized and subsequently subjected to an empirical analysis that either confirms the hypothesis or not, thereby yielding new perspectives for adjusted hypotheses, and so on. Thus conceived, the present study should result in an illuminated reconsideration of disingenuous distinctions between theory and practice, between concept and object, between a descriptive and an analytical approach.

For the very reason that artwork, medium, and meaning are inextricably entwined, mediation and perception constitute two sides of one and the same cognitive coin. In the postmodern context of a cultural complex where fields or ‘disciplines’ hybridize and distinctions crumble, where the last remnants of ‘truth’ are assaulted from within, and where methods increasingly admit to their own powerlessness, a semiological perspective inspired by the heuristic qualities of the analogy-principle (see B.M. Stafford, 2001) allows for ‘functional,’ though non-reductive readings of the necessarily elusive means of ‘meaning making.’ With so many communicative media to be covered, a common denominator imposes itself. The product of intuitive associations not unlike those stimulated on a theatre stage, analogies are ‘scandalous’ semiotic phenomena (Eco, 1986) capable of integrating an unlimited number of signifying systems. Hence the semiotic excess generated by the essentially functional interconnection of the different analogical vehicles can be repurposed for epistemological ends.

But since this is first and foremost a critical study of David Mamet’s work across different media and genres, and the elaboration of a semiological model a not so distant second, the primary ‘epistemological’ objective concerns a better understanding of the artist’s chief artistic tenets (Chapter 2). Along the proposed ‘loopish’ feedback model of gradual and reciprocal refinement funnelled by a ‘superobjective,’ to use terminology coined by Douglas Hofstadter (2007), then, the study’s following main focal point translates as a diachronic take on the technical evolution of the artist’s work, intra- as well as trans-medially (Chapter 3). Once the applied and more media-oriented ‘epistemology is in place, Chapter 4 then (re-) conceptualizes the inter-medial creations, relations, and transfers that inform a significant part of Mamet’s artistic output – once again as part of the overall argument, and as verification of the preceding chapters. Chapter 5, finally, wraps up this ‘semiological spiral’ with an analogously structured reassessment of the study’s various stages. From David Mamet’s aesthetic, through his work’s artistic impact and influences, to its meta-artistic and philosophical relevance for contemporary cultural studies, the paradigm here presented winds down to a purely pragmatic halt.