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ABSTRACT

**THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE NARRATIVE
SCRIPT INTO FILM VISUALITY**

SCIENTIFIC COORDINATOR:

prof. univ. dr. Marilena Preda Sânc

CANDIDATE FOR A DOCTOR'S DEGREE:

Maftai Ion-Alexandru

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ABSTRACT

The metamorphosis of the narrative script into film visuality is a complex, intense and relatively long process. The person responsible for leading this transformation is the film director. The process from the written text - the script - towards the moving images accompanied by sound - the film - is made up of analysis, discovery and creative thinking taking place either in the intimacy of the working office or in collaboration with a numerous artistic and technical team on studio sets or post production facilities.

My thesis goal is to take apart this interdisciplinary process into its most simple and intimate components. My aim is to find how the narrative structure shows up in the two mediums of expression and how space and time representation expresses specifically in the written text and film medium. This is my point of view as an active film director who wishes to theorize this process using narratology, cinema and visual studies, writings of important film directors and also an in depth look into my own working methods used for making my own films.

My theoretical study makes for two different directions: the understanding of the narrative text and its elements and defining the elements of filmic visuality.

Using intermediary visual representations like storyboards, sketches of the sets, maps for the characters and places of the action as well as frames captured from my finished films I analyzed retroactively the process of transforming two film scripts into movies: *Hello! How are you?* (2011) and *Miss Christina* (2013). I followed a reversed path regarding the film *One step to eternity* (2016) which started from the visual world of the Storck house-studio-museum that emerged into a script and then into a film.

The first chapter of my thesis defines the layers of the narrative text and the elements of the narrative. Starting with narratology concepts developed by theorists like Gérard Genette in the field of literature and their developments in the field of film and visual arts proposed by authors like Christian Metz, Roland Barthes, Seymour Chatman, Scott McCloud, Markus Kuhn, Dumitru Carabăț or Mieke Bal, my research looks for instruments of analysis and expression that allow the film director to start from a script or narrative text and turn it into a film by structuring and organizing his creative work.

The act of storytelling implies an agent that tells the story (*narrator*) to a receiver (*narratee*) using a support medium (written or oral language, static or moving images, sound, gestures, dance or other means, or a combination of such means of expression). This is the first layer of the problem.

A story is a narrative *material* presented and organized in a specific manner into a *narrative discourse*. This is the second layer of the storytelling act.

The narrative material consisting of a series of events related either chronologically or logically, caused or suffered by the characters in a space-time context - that would be the third layer of our analysis.

The reader or the audience has access to the narrative text layer - be it visual, literary or filmic - and through understanding gets to the narrative discourse that leads him in a certain way to the narrative material and from there towards a sense and a vision about the world and life as expressed by the author.

The narrative material is made up of *fixed elements* - characters, the place of the action and the objects of that world - and *processes* – i.e. events that involve the characters, the objects and the places in a temporal development.

Changing from one state to another points out that the event is a process, an alteration of an initial state towards another, and that it makes sense only in a temporal flow. Three criteria are relevant in recognizing an event: the change, the choice and the confrontation.

The concatenation of events in the narrative material has a logical or chronological relationship. Claude Bremond, who claims that the rules that govern this are the same that control our thoughts and human actions in general, proposes a model of concatenation of events¹. These rules are logical and determined by a cultural and historical background. For example, one of the logical rules is that the effect is preceded by its cause.

Events from narrative texts are quite different from their counterparts in real life, although they borrow their form. They are part of the artistic imaginary. We can perceive them, understand them, interpret or analyze them, but we cannot interfere with their development.

The *character* is an anthropomorphic figure about whom the narrator tells us something and who has distinct characteristics. Characters are like the humans. But characters

¹ Claude Bremond, *Logica povestirii*, Editura Univers, București, 1981.

are not humans in flesh and bones. They belong to the world the author imagined, made up of fantasy, memory, imitation or a combination of all these. Many times for the reader or the cinemagoer there is no clear line of delimitation between characters from a story and the human beings from everyday life. We go even further and identify with the characters.

Dumitru Carabăț thinks the character is front and center of a script or a narrative text as "*it is bringing forward the human condition in its real aspect - social, national, ethical, historical and eternally human, individual and universal, namely the modeling of the character*"²

When a character appears for the first time in a story we don't know anything about itself. As we progress into the story, some features of the character are presented, in a repetitive way, consistently, and shape the image of that character. *Accumulating* separate elements regarding a character and *compacting* them into a consistent whole is a way of building the character in the mind of the receiver. The character also takes shape from *relations* with other characters and with itself. These relations tend to group around two major categories: opposition and similarity.

The character may *change*. The transformation of the character alters its whole configuration and represents one of the most important elements of the narrative - especially in narrative film scripts.

To identify the main characteristics of a character we can use a method of selecting a semantic axis based on pairs of contrary values. To limit the number of relevant axes we will choose for analysis only the ones connected with a major event of the story. These axes could be used then to describe oppositions and similarities between different characters, making clear the qualifications of each of them and assigning them with actantial marks.

Presuming that the thinking and acting of a human being is aimed at a goal, Algirdas Julien Greimas made up an actantial model that tends to define the structure of most of the stories. This model starts from the teleological relation between the elements of the story: the characters have an intention, wish for something, aspire to a goal. This aspiration is either achieving a good thing, or avoiding a bad thing such as a threat. In this model we have classes of characters that have the same relation with the goal in the narrative material. This actantial model has six actants and three axis. The axis of *desire* containing the *Subject* and the *Object*. The axis of *power* containing the *Helper* and the *Opponent*, and the *knowledge* axis containing the *Sender* and the *Receiver*. The *Subject* wishes for the *Object*. He is supported by

² Dumitru Carabăț, *Spre o poetică a scenariului cinematografic*, Editura Pro, București, 1998 p.125

the *Helper* and impeded by the *Opponent* to reach for it. The *Sender* is the one requesting the quest for the Object and the *Receiver* the one benefiting from achieving the Object.

In *Morphology of the Folktale* Vladimir Propp propose the term *function* defined as an *act of a character from the perspective of the meaning it has in the story*. Propp lists 32 narrative functions that are classes of actions he identified by analyzing a large number of Russian fairytales.

We can observe a correspondence between Greimas's model and Propp's. For example the wish of the Subject to get the Object finds its equivalent in the functions that are the engine of the action: the *harm* that leads to *lacking* that determines the protagonist to make a plan (*mediation* and *beginning counter-action*) and fight all opposing forces (*struggle, victory, difficult task, solution of difficult task*) to remove that lacking (*eliminate the lacking*). The Subject - Helper axis is represented by functions like *donation, hero's reaction, receipt of magical agent*, and the Subject - Opponent axis by some other functions: *spying, disclosure, trickery, complicity, harm, struggle, branding, pursuit, difficult task, punishment*.

Further developing Propp's model, Carabăț suggests a method for generating new functions from proppian ones using four methods: functions resulting from an abstention from action, from unsuccessful action, from forcing the action and from semantic deviation. This way, Propp's functions are extended beyond the fairytale area and get enriched, finding their application and relevance in the wider area of narrative text in general.

The places in the story can be surveyed in the same way that one would survey real cities or countries. The concept of place is strongly connected with physical space, but it doesn't exist like in real life. Similarly to the way in which the story is a way of presenting the narrative material, the places are connected to specific points of perception. Space becomes a relation between places and their perception. The semantic content of places is built in the same manner as the characters are, through a combination of determination, repetition, accumulation, transformation and relationship between different places.

Similarly to the way we can categorize characters by choosing a system of relevant values, places of the action can be grouped according to opposition and similarity into semantic maps.

The events in the narrative material are transformed into narrative discourse using a series of procedures: *selection, ordering, storytelling speed, frequency and focalization*.

The narrative material could in theory be infinitely abundant, because as we plunge into details it can grow to astronomic proportions. *Selecting* some of the moments from the wider narrative material is the first method to organize the discourse towards an idea that the

author wants to highlight. *Ordering* the chronological events from a narrative material in a different order in the narrative discourse is called chronological deviation. Three parameters characterize different types of *achrony*: *direction*, *distance* and *interval*.

Storytelling speed is the relation between the duration of an event and the duration of telling this event in the story. Storytelling speed is inversely proportional with the attention dedicated to different moments in the story. And these differences of attention dedicated to some of the moments compared with others express a vision about the story that is communicated to the reader or spectator in an implicit way.

The general rhythm of a narrative discourse is dictated by the attention that the big episodes receive in the narrative material. Most of the time there is an alternation of events presented in short (*sketched*) with events presented in detail and which are dedicated a longer time (*slow motion*) or events isochronous with the storytelling time (where the speed is equal to one). Some events can even be completely absent - we then have an *ellipsis*.

Frequency is the proportion of the number of repetitive events in the narrative material compared with their number in the discourse.

The narrative modes are opening the discussion about the objectivity of the storyteller. An objective point of view means that all comments and implicit interpretations are avoided. But perception itself is a psychosomatic process deeply dependent on the position of the observer. It depends on so many factors (position of the object, the way the object is illuminated, previous knowledge about the object, psychological attitude regarding the object, etc.) that it becomes almost impossible to reach. Pretending that you *show objectively* means that you pretend you don't comment in any way. And, on the contrary, pretending you *tell something about it* leaves enough room to comment. In other words the quantity of objective information and the presence of the informer are inversely proportional.

Genette distinguishes two attributes that controls the access to information and defines different narrative modes³. They are *distance* and *perspective*. Distance is associated with the richness (or lack of) details that leads to the sensation of true (or less true) representation of the events in the story. Perspective is a way of controlling the information and is a result of choosing to have - or not - a restrictive point of view. This choice is made regarding the entity from whose perspective the story is *seen*. It can be a character that is part of the story or an entity outside the story. Similarly, one can categorize the identity of the narrator, the voice *telling* the story. Combining the possibilities provided by the point of view ('who is seeing?')

³ Gérard Genette, *Narrative discourse - an essay in method*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1980

with the one pertaining to the voice ('who is telling?') we can obtain different narrative situations classified by the term of *focalization*. Focalization is in the end a *narrative mediation* on the account of a character of the story or an instance outside it.

The last part of the first chapter refers to the media support used to transmit a story. The analysis of these media supports look for their power to represent time and space, two elements absolutely necessary for any kind of story. Even if different non-verbal media have limited capacity to express narrativity, that doesn't mean that they cannot concur, alongside with verbal language, into a multimedia combination that involves intellect and senses. Verbal language addresses the mind, images create space and bring visual concreteness, movement expresses temporality and music creates atmosphere and emotional force.

The second chapter of the thesis starts with an analysis of the way space and time are represented in film. The illusion of cinematographic show is deconstructed piece by piece.

The frame, that rectangle delimitating the filmic image on screen, plays a double role: to organize the elements contained by it but also to act like a window towards a world that spectators perceive as real. The relation between the frame and its content is bi-directional. The frame can be pre-existent with respect to its content or can be determined by its content and adapting to it.

The frame can be like a window beyond which there is an independent reality going on, or, on the contrary, the frame is composed in such a way to make the most of what is going on inside it. This duality, that we will also find when breaking up in shots and when editing, highlights two ways of making movies: one that appears like a pure recording of a reality (where randomness gives a sense of objectivity and realism) and another that is a fictional construction understood as such.

The frame *shows* us something and, at the same time, *hides* something else. In other words, the frame can reveal its content or put us in a position to wonder or imagine what lies beyond its limits, looking for ways to link what we can see and what we can not. This imaginary space that we perceive inside the frame is called *field*, and the *extra field* is the totality of what we do not see in the frame but which has a presence that we are aware of through an imaginary connection with what we see. The relation between seen and unseen that the duality of field vs. extra field expresses will lead the way to what I call *suggestion*. Not all the elements from a story should be seen. Choosing what to show in a movie and what can be left out is foreshadowed in the script, but the final decision about it is taken by the director in its breakdown of shots and in the editing process.

Cinema is the most recent of arts that uses perspective (*perspectiva artificialis*) following painting and photography. A movie camera is a descendent of the *camera obscura*. It is equipped with a lens and with a system for recording the images projected inside it. These images are mechanically generated but they contain, as paintings also do, a *point of view*. This is like an ADN that cannot be changed or ignored. And, to the extent that the author is the person who has the *intention* to communicate something, this point of view becomes an important means of expression. The point of view of a cinematic image is defined by a few simple parameters (shot size, distance, height, inclusion angle, angle of shot) that can be combined in different ways and offering numerous filmic expression possibilities.

Depth of field refers to the part of the shot that is in focus. It is controlled by the focal length of the lens and the f-stop used. Depth of field establishes the focus relation between different plans at the right angle to the optical axis, therefore the relation between foreground and background or between subject and background.

Sound is part of what I call filmic visuality. Sound emphasizes the temporal dimension of the image, offering a vectorial orientation to the time flow. It unifies the filmic space, the field and the extra field, and establishes the sound atmosphere where the action takes place.

Apart from shot size, distance, shot angle and depth of field - all of them parameters of the point of view - filmic visuality is also defined by motion. Motion is present at two levels: cinematic illusion (a fast succession of static images creates the impression of motion) and movement inside the frame (camera movement or character/object movement inside the shot).

The temporal manifestation of the film is the *shot*, understood as a continuous recording of an action from a single point of view, be it fixed or in movement.

Cinematographic show takes place in time. The attention, the memory and the imagination of the spectator transform this lineup of images into story and emotion. Between the time of perception and the time of the story there could be some offsets (or not). Sometimes the time of the story from the screen can be exactly the same with the time of the spectators in the cinema hall. This absolute concurrence contributes to the impression of reality that a cinema performance offers.

Film, like any other art, is a result of a process of selection and combination of images in motion and of sounds into different arrangements and proportions, done by the author. The concept of editing can extend its definition area to units larger than the shot (sequences or chapters of the film), smaller than the shot (sequence shot), different from the shot (association of soundtrack and image) or even from different movies (films by the same author or belonging to the same artistic current, etc.).

There are at least two schools of thought regarding editing and they imply two different ways of positioning the art of cinema with respect to the representation of reality. The first one considers editing a technique of production essential to cinema. Film is a discourse and uses as it sees fit the fragments of the reality it represents and, as Jean Mitry put it, it "replaces continuous reality (or, more precisely, the homogeneous reality of our continuous perception) with a series of discontinuous fragments."⁴ This fragmentation of perception puts the audience in a different point of view during the scene, giving it an apparent freedom of movement. The represented fragments of space and time are put one next to another, building an imaginary world different from the real one.

The second school of thought on editing starts from the idea that the ontological vocation of cinema is to reproduce reality, and reality doesn't have a specific arrow, it is ambiguous. Bazin says that "cinematographic specificity, summed up in its pure state, lies, on the contrary, in the simple photographic respect for space unity."⁵ Cinema's vocation is to create the illusion that we are witnessing a real event in its continuity and its integrality.

These two opposite tendencies - one of them avoiding or at least diminishing the visible presence of discourse in film and the other one exploiting to the fullest all expressive resources of discourse - tend to have given birth to a flurry of shades of grey in-between them in modern times. For one thing, images in modern times are no longer the expression of a reality that existed in front of the camera. Objects and creatures created digitally are sharing the screen with others that were actually shot. Filmic image in the digital age does not limit itself to reproducing reality as it is but also as it could be, although inexistent.

Film wouldn't exist without spectators, and not only financially speaking. Filmic visuality is a result of an interaction between the spectator and the moving shadows on the screen. The fact that cinematographic representation copies the way humans perceive reality audio-visually and the fact that spectators in cinema theaters have several characteristics in common with a newly born (physical immobility, exacerbation of audio-visual functions) led Jean-Louis Baudry to find some analogies in specific stages of primary identification (such as the mirror stage) and the situation of a spectator in a cinema theater. The primary identification in cinema (as Christian Metz calls it) is the identification of the spectator with the *eye* of the camera, with the vision that unfolds in front of the spectator's eyes. The latter

⁴ Jean Mitry, *The aesthetics and psychology of the cinema*, translated by Christopher King, The Athlone Press, London, 1998, p. 168

⁵ André Bazin, "Montajul interzis" *Ce este cinematograf?* vol. 1, traducerea Andreea Rațiu, UNATC Press, București, 2014, p.125

identifies with his or her own act of looking. The real world is momentarily suspended and the shadows seen in front of the eyes become the image of reality itself.

This type of primary identification in cinema is the foundation of the secondary type that takes place at the level of the story. If we are to remember the actantial model of Greimas, where the Subject wishes for the Object, this is the primordial level where the spectator is hooked. Even if one doesn't see oneself in "the mirror" of the screen, one is soon absorbed by the the Subject's quest for the Object. Seeing a movie is ultimately seeking for a truth embedded in us: the desire to get something in the name of a delegation (or idea) and the struggle to obtain that something.

The third chapter of my thesis is dedicated to the script's metamorphosis towards filmic visuality using analysis, sketches and storyboards.

The script reports objectively the actions and dialogues of the characters as well as the description of spaces, objects and characters. The script describes with simplicity and clarity a mostly audio-visual world that grows in the imagination of the reader. The character of this world is undetermined, immaterial, in opposition with the filmic discourse where images and sounds are perceived directly and have a determined character.

The metamorphosis of the narrative script into a filmic visuality starts with the analysis and profound understanding of the script: who is the protagonist, what is the incident that triggers the lacking, what is his Object of desire, who is opposing the protagonist, how is he or she transformed by the final confrontation, what is his or her transformation arch. The analysis of the script is conducted at two different scales: the big picture and in detail.

The visual concept of the film starts from a series of rules of representation the director adopts regarding the script to be turned into a movie. These rules come from the narrative analysis of the script and from the artistic intentions of the director, but also take into account the production means available.

This visual starting point should be strong, unique and able to be developed in successive variations covering the whole narrative material of the script. The way that space and time are fragmented (meaning the framing, the length of the shots and the editing style) gives a key that once established should be kept consistently in the film.

The first sequences that are going to be storyboarded are the key ones: the beginning, the confrontation and the end. These are crucial points in the script and the visuality expressed here should be kept like a matrix and applied to the whole.

The fourth chapter of the thesis puts order into my own film directing experience following the above principles.

The visual concept of the film *Hello! How are you?* is exposed at large using the storyboard and sketches done before the shooting as well as screen captures from the final movie. The concept relies on hiding the eyes of the characters from the visual field in order to create a sensation of unknown identity, on using the rules of the classical shot-reverse shot principles but with characters situated in different spaces, and on using symmetry and repetition that underline the similarity of the two characters.

The solution to an important problem from the script that led to defining the visual concept of the film was that of appearance of the texts the two characters write to each other when chatting. These texts follow an evolution of the relationship between the two characters: from a certain concreteness - such as texts on their computer screens - towards something more poetical and abstract that would embody the thoughts, aspirations and obsessions of the two characters in love.

The development of filmic visuality from Mircea Eliade's novel *Miss Christina* started from the dreaming sequences and the way miss Christina appears audio-visually in these dreams. What was specific to these dreams was that the border between dreams and reality was continuously questioned. The false continuity hides the changes from one space to another, whereas the repetition in a spatial or temporal loop creates a sensation of paradox specific to dreams.

The mysterious presence of Christina, marked in the novel with the discrete violet perfume, finds its equivalent in the film: the character has a diffuse, radiant pink-violet fluorescence. This visual treatment was then extended in sequences where miss Christina did not appear, but when her spirit took over other characters or was in the air.

The graphic embodiment of the book universe in the opening and closing sequences of the film, that were added to Eliade's novel, but are an extension of the narrative material offered by the author, placed the entire action of the novel into a retrospective, Egor being the focal character. Egor's obsession for Christina's image materializes in the script in an opening sequence where we discover Egor among the ruins of the burned manor, long after the action of the novel, sketching in a repetitive way, with a piece of charcoal improvised from burned wood, the shape of Christina but without any facial features.

Visual thinking applied to narrative script finds its reversal in the way the film *One step from eternity* (2016) was conceived and worked out starting from a rich visual material: the works of sculpture and painting of Frederic and Cecilia Cuțescu Storck, works displayed in the house-studio-museum of the two artists, itself a monument of architecture.

The organizing idea of this abundant material was the dialogue of arts. The themes approached by the two artists, friends and life partners, made up the subject of this dialogue and were enriched with texts from Cecilia's memory book *The fresco of a life*. In parallel with this discourse, I used soundtrack elements and a special way of shooting the Storck house to give a feeling of the presence of the spirit of the two artists beyond the visible, material world.

The metamorphosis of the narrative script towards a filmic visuality is a process that supposes a deep understanding of narrative text and mastering the visual expression means specific to the cinematographic medium. Keeping the structure and the discourse of the narrative the script is proposing, the film director is responsible in principal with the translation of a written text - with images that are undefined, latent, potential - in a dynamic audio-visual development with a realist look.

Narrative film has one more dimension compared with visual arts - time - but also an enormous realistic resolution compared with other narrative support mediums.

The realistic envelope of cinematographic images becomes the source of tension with the fictional nature of the stories itself. Cinema is a perfect mechanism of illusions that absorbs us because it operates in the end with general human values that we recognize and that trigger emotions.

We are looking for human experience and eager to relate to a kind of universal memory that cinema can connect us to in a direct, total, multisensorial way.

This magnetism that transforms us in moths that fly around a world that looks so real has its roots in the power of stories and images. Located at the interdisciplinary junction of the art of storytelling with visual arts, narrative cinema borrows from both fields' features and general principles but also earns with good reason the status of an art with specific rules and expression forms.

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Keywords:

Film, director, script, text, narrative, story, visual, visuality, art, cinema, cinematographic, realism, reality, real, imaginary, fiction, objective, editing, identification, image, filmic, video, character, actor, event, action, emotion, experience, memory, projection, screen, frame, photography, perspective, point of view, place, space, time, relation, conflict.