

16:9 in English: Bordwell on Bordwell: Part III - Writing On Film Style

By [JAKOB ISAK NIELSEN](#)

This is the third installment of Jakob Isak Nielsen's interview with David Bordwell. Part II of the interview concluded with a discussion of Bordwell's views on transcultural functions of style. Part III picks up the thread, yet changes the perspective somewhat by moving on to a discussion of how Bordwell himself writes about film style and how he encourages others to do so. [Click here](#) to read Part I of the interview. [Click here](#) to read Part II.

Both in On the History of Film Style and your new book you anticipate one of the objections that have been raised about your inquiry into style. Namely, that it is trite and hollow formalism that remains agnostic about ideological or political content and ties to the culture at large. By limiting your focus to the denotative functions of style, some would say that you have made it even harder for your approach to yield interesting results. But one of the main tasks that you have taken upon yourself is to prove that a poetics of cinema need not be trite and hollow. Most will agree that you have succeeded but it is also clear that you are encouraging others to join you in the endeavor. It seems to me that you have chosen one of two strategies in buffing up your claims and analyses:*

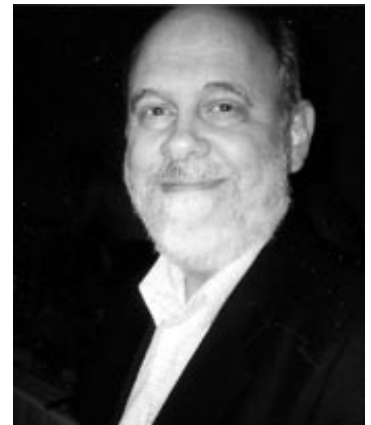
A) You have tackled stylistically idiosyncratic directors: Dreyer, Ozu, Feuillade, Mizoguchi, Hou, Angelopoulos and most recently Hal Hartley.

B) You have built up claims about the stylistic norms – often transcultural norms - of a large group of films: Japanese cinema, Chinese cinema, Hong Kong cinema, an international tradition of depth staging from 1908-20, contemporary Hollywood and classical Hollywood cinema for instance.

Naturally, others could follow in your footsteps and fill out the gaps within these two categories but what other types of inquiry could be well suited for the poetics approach?

Let me just back up first. I wouldn't say that I was only concerned with the denotative functions of style. Again it is a matter of seeing how much I can squeeze out of a single concept. I'm interested in the expressive functions, I'm interested in the decorative functions and so on but I would distinguish between projects which are trying to trace particular techniques or stylistic devices across history from projects that are interested in other kinds of units like, say, the work of a single director. I think there is a great deal of work to be done at that second level.

I also think there is a great deal of work to be done studying particular directors. None of my books on stylistics or poetics in general have really plumbed the depths of what particular directors do. I have written



David Bordwell.

* *Figures Traced in Light*, forthcoming from The University of California Press. You can pre-order the book [here](#).

books on particular directors and there I try to be as comprehensive as I can but when I write about, say, depth in cinema or ensemble staging in this new book, I am only talking about a rather narrow part of each director's oeuvre. I don't claim to have a definitive take on Feuillade or Mizoguchi or Hou or Angelopoulos. I'm just interested in how they relate – on this dimension – to a tradition. There are so many filmmakers that you could do very interesting studies of within this perspective of poetics. How do they use certain kinds of historical material in their films, how do they bring the thematics of their cultural inputs into the film? How do the films participate in wider patterns of comprehension? How are Iranian films - say Kiarostami films - taken up by certain reading communities? I think there is a huge amount of work to be done at the level of individual directors.

I also think – to go back to the earlier point about certain stylistic choices – that ... what I've tried to do in a very gross way is to map a menu of options that seem to be existing in, say, classical Hollywood cinema at a certain point, Japanese cinema at a certain point. Those of course demand more refinement. They are just approximations. So I think particular devices could be studied more thoroughly. We still lack a comprehensive account of color in film, we lack a comprehensive account of many, many aspects of sound. I have put these particular stylistic devices into an ensemble and said: "well, you can do this and you can do that, and when you do this maybe that follows." But we don't have a really solid history of most cinematic figures. We don't even have a study of the history of lighting, something that is so essential to all films – or even a portion of that history, say, lighting in the classical Hollywood cinema or the 30s even. If you actually go on a set, a lot of the time is spent on lighting. It is certainly one of the hardest things for young filmmakers to learn and I think most people in film studies are really quite ignorant of the history of lighting and of the particular practices that filmmakers use in lighting. So there is a huge amount of work to be done on these particular technologies or these particular techniques.

Again, it would be wonderful if they could be comparative in terms of periods; of how lighting changes between the 20s and the 30s in American studios; or across different cultures: how German lighting was different from American lighting in the 1920s or how widescreen cinema varies its use in Japan as opposed to the United States. If you look at the 1950s, Japanese cinema is using the widescreen in ways that no one ever thought of using it in the 1950s in Hollywood. You look at films by Kurosawa like *Hidden Fortress* and you wonder "how is it possible for them to get this shot? This couldn't have been done in Hollywood. What lenses are they using? How are they able to do this?" I don't have an answer to those questions but it's clear if you just look at these films that there is an enormous amount of innovation going on at the level of composition in the widescreen in Japan and I presume in other cultures as well. So we're actually just beginning. There is an enormous amount of work to be done. Now, there is a lot of value in having someone like Barry Salt* combing through the literature, watching as many films as he can and coming up with or starting to observe some patterns. Still, this work isn't informed by a central question. It isn't informed by a research question, it is a compendium or compilation of information and with some of the information we don't know where it comes from. It's useful but I think now is the time for people to ask more focused and precise research questions and then use those kinds of resources to explore them. I've always been a purist about watching films on film and so forth but now with DVD it is a quantum jump above videotape. It is a huge change because now many films that I couldn't study...

Widescreen films ...

Particularly widescreen films, particularly color films. It would be completely different now to write a book like *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. It would be at once easier and more difficult. It would be easier because a great many of these films are now available in one video format or another. It would be more difficult, I think, because you would

* See for instance *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis*, 2nd edition (London: Starword, 1992). For a recent article, see "The Shape of 1999" in *New Review of Film and Television Studies* (vol. 2, no. 1, May 2004).

be constantly feeling that you would need to see everything [laughs]. "Well, my sample is quite limited. Maybe I should sit down and watch all these films on Turner Classic Movies for the next two months?" It would be an abyss. When we all wrote books before the Internet, it was useful to have limited information. Now we have too much information so we can't write [laughs]. All these things were squirreled away at archives or were just never available. You never had access to people who knew lots and lots of things but now you put something on the Internet and twelve experts will respond. It's much more exciting and more interesting and now is a good time to launch this kind of project because more and more material is becoming available and we can do more fine-grained research. I guess what I'm saying is that I don't regard those strategies that you sketched as foreclosing research. I think it is really an attempt to open some doors for others to see that there is a huge amount of material out there if we ask these kinds of questions.

Behind your question earlier though was the idea of postponing the ideological or political dimension of the films. My feeling is that research proceeds from many motives and there is nothing wrong with partisan scholarship. It's fine if people want to produce an ideological critique of cinema or aspects of cinema. My only concern is that it be scholarship and that it follow principles of rational empirical inquiry. To me, producing another ideological reading of a single film in terms of the cold war or in terms of a *Zeitgeist* or so forth is just not something I want to pursue because, frankly, I think we know how to produce ideological readings of films. Some people do it well, some do it less well but we don't know a lot about a huge number of other things. And since I regard scholarship as the production of knowledge I think those should also be pursued instead.

In your work – even on individual film directors and even on individual films - you bring in a larger stylistic paradigm instead of, say, an ideological framework. Even when you write on Feuillade or Hal Hartley your analyses are more or less directly set up against a broader paradigm of filmmaking.

Yes, but I do think that stylistics and more broadly poetics have always been comparative. First of all, if you think back to literary stylisticians like Leo Spitzer or Roman Jakobson, they are always looking at a particular stylistic choice, seeing it as an option – what could've been done but wasn't done. But when you start to imagine those virtual alternatives, you start to conjure up a different sort of poem, a different sort of artistic project. And I think that one of the advantages of historical poetics in the literary field – or in musicology, or art history – is that they had a very firm documentary base. They understood what works had influenced other works - what works were present in the consciousness of writers – so that writers themselves often are seen as writing with or against or both with and against a tradition.

A presupposition of a lot of poetics is that writers work in a kind of milieu where they are responding to other writers either by influence or rejection or by modification. Now there is one form of poetics – this is a good example of talking about diversity within this framework - that is very object-centered and I would say the later Jakobson is an example of this. The later Jakobson looks at the poem and the relevant comparison class is the grammar of the language and not what the poet's tradition was or what the poet's own milieu was or anything like that but rather: "Given the grammatical structure here, what are the semantic differences in these choices?" The relevant comparison class then becomes the syntax of the language. Whereas if you take the Russian formalists of the 1920s, when they made a stylistic or formal analysis they were always concerned with... "well, within this tradition in which the poet was writing, what were the preferred alternatives, what were the norms?" Now Jakobson of course comes out of that formalist Russian - or Slavic – tradition and he went much more toward what I would call structuralist poetics. But in his early days, he too was interested in those kinds of comparison classes. His essay on the Dominant comes out of this concern for structure of the work as inheriting patterns of composition from other traditions. I think there are

"Ideology doesn't turn on the camera!" David Bordwell

different ways to go on this but I do think that poetics in general - and stylistics in particular - tend to be very comparative. And a historical poetics tries to find plausible and pertinent comparison classes for the work of art at hand.

If I know that Hartley has seen films by Godard and Antonioni and in some sense sees his work as related to those traditions – either by extension or revision – then I'm going to look at Antonioni and Godard as possibly having affinities with Hartley. In the case of the piece on Hartley that you're mentioning,* I saw those even not knowing that. I saw the first Hartley films and went "Oh, this is like late Godard." And then when I saw certain scenes I thought there could be something related to Antonioni. So I asked him [laughs] – fortunately he was alive [laughs] – and he said "Yes." Even if it turned out that there was no influence, it's useful heuristically or pedagogically to point these out. Even if he wasn't influenced by Antonioni, we see here two ways of handling dramatic space and actors moving through a dramatic space. Those two options are creative choices – maybe even subconscious choices - made on the part of the filmmaker. I guess there are two advantages of comparison. One is that it could actually be an historically appropriate comparison and the second is that even if it turns out to be far-fetched, at least it has a pedagogical or discovery value. It can be illuminating: "Oh, I never noticed that about Antonioni before, about how his characters really don't ever look at each other – except at certain key moments." It just funds your greater appreciation of the film.

This also tends to set the poetics approach apart from the hermeneutic approach. At least I assume that one of the reasons why many scholars or critics have favored the expressive and symbolic functions of film style (and implicit and symptomatic meanings) is that it can enrich - or in some scholars' view mystify - the interpretation of individual films. For most scholars it would take years and years to build up a conception of the stylistic paradigm within which a film is made. So working within the hermeneutic tradition it would be more likely that you take a single film and then build upon that.

I think that's right. At lot depends on what your questions are. For practical criticism I think interpretation is indispensable. I think if you are going to talk of a particular film or filmmaker, you want to know that work as intimately as possible. You want to absorb that work as fully as you can to remain alive to all its possibilities and I think you have to be interpretive as well as analytical. If you want to know certain aspects of the work better, I think the poetics approach is more suitable.

I wouldn't say that poetics is harder but it *does* require more in-depth research. One of the advantages of the hermeneutic approach is that it allows you to read broadly and generally about certain interpretive strategies and then you can pretty much apply them with refinements and adjustments to particular films. I know that sounds like a terribly mechanistic way of doing it but I think that much interpretation is mechanistic in just this way. One of the reasons that I think fewer scholars pick up the poetics perspective and try to develop it is because it seems focused on minutia or triviality. It inquires into highly esoteric issues and I have to say it parallels the standing of stylistics and poetics in literary studies.

In literary studies you don't get any mileage or traction for being a stylistician [laughs]. You have to be an interpreter. You have to be a Frederic Jameson; you have to be an Edward Said; you have to be a Gayatri Spivak. You have to be a hermeneut. That's just the way that community organizes itself and the contrast, I suppose, would be art history or musicology where the hermeneutic turn has come much later.

I would like for us to discuss how your conception of a poetics of cinema hooks up with your views on interpretation and meaning as set forth in your 1989-book Making Meaning. In that book you delineate four different types of meaning: referential meaning, explicit meaning, implicit meaning and symptomatic meaning. You argue that the making

* The essay on Hartley is published in Danish in [16:9, # 7](#). Not yet published in English.

of implicit and symptomatic meanings is an act of interpretation whereas the making of referential and explicit meaning is an act of analysis.

Yes, or comprehension. The uptake of them is comprehension but for film analysis, I think we start with those two, yes.

Can we hook this up to your inquiry into matters of style?

Yes, I think so. What a lot of stylistics in the hermeneutic tradition turns out to be about is looking for implicit and symptomatic meanings. When trying to attach symbolic meanings to certain configurations of shots or certain images or materials *in* the shots, we'll either say "well, implicit meaning is in some sense volitional." We postulate that the filmmaker is voluntarily creating this meaning for us. Or it's symptomatic in that it may be involuntary but nevertheless tells us something about this filmmaker or the social milieu or the broader worldview that the filmmaker subscribes to. To my way of thinking, the hermeneutic tradition is very much about looking for the symbolic dimension of style and about reading that symbolic dimension either implicitly or symptomatically. Whereas the kind of stylistics that I'm proposing by concentrating on denotation and then secondarily on expression and decoration says "actually referential meaning matters *a lot*." The construction of referential meaning – the construction of the story space, the character's mental states and things like that – is a large part of the business that filmmakers concentrate on. And so we ought to expect that the kind of meanings that we're focusing on for stylistics would start there. It's a kind of bridgehead or benchmark, or point of departure I think, for the others.

So I suppose the hypothesis would be somewhat like this: "Through analysis or comprehension - and not interpretation - of the denotative functions of style we can construct referential and explicit meanings"?

Right!

At least that seems to be the approach you are suggesting.

That's correct.

On the other hand, meaning does not always seem to be the deliberate end-point for you.

Well, I take meaning in this very gross sense. I would say that there are abstract meanings and concrete meanings. Within the cognitive perspective that the *Making Meaning*-book sets out the assumption is that we all make meaning through inferential elaboration and that we have some pretty low-level inferences and that we have some pretty high-level inferences. A low-level inference is "this is a man talking to a woman; they are in conflict; they are in a room." These are so primary that we don't even think about them. A high-level of elaborate inference would be "he represents the phallus." There is a huge spectrum in-between those two things and those layers are what I'd like to get at. In that book suggesting that in a way a poetic-centered approach – though I argue at the end that a poetics approach is complimentary to hermeneutics – a poetic-centered approach can also shed light *on* hermeneutics. In a way what I try to do in that was to produce a poetics of cinematic hermeneutics [laughs]: what are the purposes and functions?; what are the norms?; what are the standard practices?; what are the standard moves that people make?; how do they set this out in style?; how do they use rhetoric? In other words, what are the commonplaces or taken-for-granted resources of interpretation of films?

In a sense that is very parallel to looking at a historical poetics: "what are the norms?; what are filmmakers doing automatically; how are these regularities that we find in the films connected to the concrete practices and the like?" It sounds too fancy but I basically would like to

say that the hermeneutic approach is a cognitive activity: people use their minds to do it. It is also a linguistic activity: people use language to do it. And we can study those two activities as, indeed, cognitive and linguistic tasks. And *Making Meaning* is my attempt to study them as tasks within a certain institution that developed largely in Western film criticism. There may be other ways to understand these tasks but interestingly enough I haven't seen anybody else counter this position. I've heard people *rejecting* it but I haven't seen anyone actually say "no, it isn't a cognitive task; no, it isn't taking place within institutions; no, it isn't a matter of a combination of rhetoric and construction of meaning." I would say that most film scholars nowadays are constructivists when it comes to meaning and here I propose a constructivist account of interpretation and I'm surprised that people have not either said "yes, that seems to be pretty much what we do" or "no, it's not what we do. Here's really what we do." It's odd and I think the fact that I was critical of the repetitiveness of contemporary *academic* interpretation has taken the center rather than my – I thought – neutral and fairly objective analysis of all types of cinematic interpretation: academic, journalistic, pedagogical or whatever. That, I think, is the nexus of my case. The fact that I think that academic interpretation is very routine is my own view, my own opinion. You can accept it or reject it but the *account* I give, the explanation I try to give, of how interpretation works is detachable from that.

*In the next and final part of the interview, Nielsen asks Bordwell if he is still in agreement with his views on narration and style as presented in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985). This initial question leads on to a discussion of the decorative function of film style, the concept of excess and, ultimately, the levels at which viewers engage with films.*



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