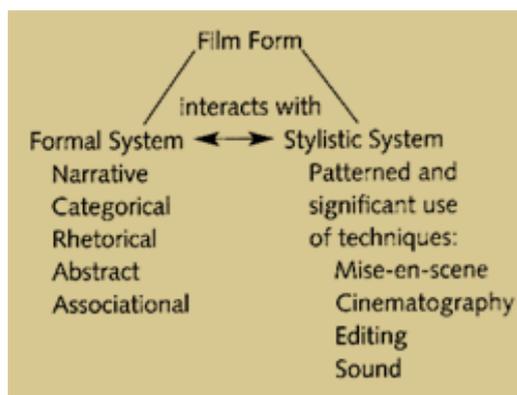


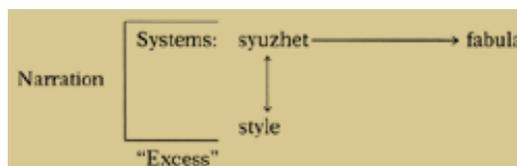
16:9 in English: Bordwell on Bordwell: Part IV – Levels of Engagement

Af [JAKOB ISAK NIELSEN](#)

Many of the concepts and practices presented in books authored or co-authored by David Bordwell have become part of a theoretical canon in film criticism and film academia. One of his most influential books is *Narration in the Fiction Film* and one of the most influential concepts in that book is the recasting of the formalist terms syuzhet (plot) and fabula (story) into a mold that incorporates the viewer's cognitive activity. Generally speaking, the cognitive perspective is *the* central reason for the prefix neo- in the research perspective that has come to be known as neoformalism. Film style is also accounted for in the "master" schemas of film form as they are presented in *Narration in the Fiction Film* as well as in Kristin Thompson and Bordwell's central text book *Film Art: An Introduction*.



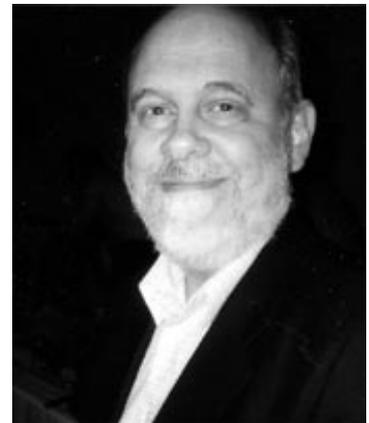
The model of Film Form in *Film Art: an Introduction*.



Film as Phenomenal Process in *Narration in the Fiction Film*.

However, *Narration in the Fiction Film* was written more than 20 years ago and the first edition of *Film Art* dates back even further. This final part of our interview series takes its vantage point in a question many prominent scholars have been asked about their earlier work: "Do you still agree with you?" In light of his recent work on film style and stylistics, we ask Bordwell whether or not he has found reason to adjust his views on the formal system of film.

*My first question concerns your views on syuzhet and style and whether or not they have changed over the years. [Nielsen and Bordwell look at figure 1 and 2 from *Film Art: an Introduction* and *Narration in the Fiction Film* respectively]. When reading sections of*



David Bordwell.

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your forthcoming book like this “Style is the tangible texture of the film, the perceptual surface we encounter as we watch and listen, and that surface is our point of departure in moving to plot, theme, feeling-- everything else that matters to us” I can’t help but wonder whether or not you are approaching a position where style is seen as something that shapes rather than reflects or interacts with narrative. Or is it just a question of rhetoric?

That’s exactly what it is. It’s a *façon de parler*. It’s introducing the spectator or reader who may not have read these things to this idea. My first approximation is “let’s look at the surface of the work.” Now, I’m going to go on and argue that that surface is organized in elaborate ways but I simply wanted to call attention to the fact that all the things that film scholars and critics care about depend on – are starting with – the texture of the work. Our elaborations go far, far beyond what we’re given, but we are given *something*. That’s where I wanted to start and just explain that concept of style. That’s just the lead-in. Once we get into it, the argument would be that style is organized and patterned. It’s not just the surface of the work but the principles of the surface’s arrangement.

Are you still in agreement with these “master” schemas?

Well, the one in *Narration in the Fiction Film...* That book was written in 1983 and people were still talking about cinematic excess, which Kristin [Thompson] and others have written about. If I were to do it over again, I’d just ignore it. I think that this has been a dead-end: the issue of whether or not there are things at the surface level of the film that *aren’t* organized, that just give you a buzz or aren’t patterned in any way, maybe even looking at the surface as an abstraction the way Von Sternberg said “you can project my films upside-down and they’d still be beautiful.” [laughs] “They’re just patterns of light and dark.” In the air of post-structuralism people began to think “oh, this is a cool idea,” but it is an empty idea in my way of thinking. I don’t think there is much to be said about it.

*As to the relationship of style versus the narrative system I suppose it is a matter of commentative versus expressive heuristics. **

Yes, I think that’s right. To me this represents a simple way to think about style. Again it’s a way of aiming rhetorically at people who know nothing about style – even in literature or music or style in painting. So one way to look at it is to say: “okay, there are two levels of organization of a film.” One level is action-based with agents and situations and the activities they pursue and so forth. This is an overarching formal system, and narrative is one of these formal systems. *Another level is the audio-visual patterning of the film itself. And the two mesh. There is a coincidence between them. That is, the way you organize the texture of the film medium is connected to the organization of this large-scale formal entity you have, be it narrative or non-narrative. That’s all I’m trying to introduce with this schema: the idea that there are two levels of organization. If students nowadays had what I consider really sound literary educations and education in aesthetics it wouldn’t be necessary but since hermeneutics has taken over every level of education it is something that you have to tell students about.

Are you approaching a position that Noël Burch opens the way for: that style shapes narrative and not vice versa. If we postulate for instance that we will make a film that starts with 10-second long shots and ends with 2-second close ups...

Well, I think in some traditions style does. That’s where I would back off to the historical poetics position and say: “in some traditions it *can*, certainly in the avant-garde tradition in America and other countries it has.” And I would say that there *are* traditions in which the texture of the work plays a constitutive role in the work to a greater degree and other traditions where it really is secondary.

* With regards to narrative film the distinction can be summed up approximately like this: commentative heuristics can be said to be an explanatory procedure arguing that the style of a film shapes its narrative structure and subject matter whereas expressive heuristics argues that narrative and subject matter determine the style of the film.

* Other formal systems include rhetorical, categorical, abstract, and associational form.

It becomes a question of which paradigm we're looking at?

Exactly! What historical norms have been erected around this? Burch was – I think – very, very important and I regard him as a key film theorist though a lot of people disagree. I think he is very important at that stage in his career because he calls our attention to this. Something that, again, is commonplace in, say, music, which is his master metaphor. When you have Alban Berg writing *Woyzeck* or *Lulu*: in organizing the musical texture of the piece, he then uses certain *stylistic parameters* as the basis for the *dramatic texture* of the piece. That's a very profound insight and it *does* capture the way some things work. It also ties into the possibility that once we recognize this relation which Burch points out we can recognize the decorative functions of style more easily.

Yes, style becomes more visible. I'm a little bit surprised by how closely you relate Burch's parameters to the decorative functions of style. [To me your description of the decorative functions of style almost sounds as a description of parametric narration.

I would argue that parametric narration is a highly self-conscious and organized use of the decorative or ornamental function of style. That is, you can have style performing decoratively in one-off occasions. I think of Busby Berkeley-films for instance where it is just there for the moment and then it's gone and you go back to the ordinary story. And I don't think you want to argue that Busby Berkeley-films have parametric narration. They are taking the conventions of the musical and on one little occasion or another in the film elaborating a very simple musical number into highly artistic and complex visual patterning that I would say is functioning decoratively. The camerawork and the compositions of those scenes are decoratively designed. They do not especially express the music; they don't have much to do with the characters.

It's aesthetically pleasing...

It's aesthetically pleasing and decoration is. If you think of decoration in all cultures, it takes a functional object that is used for other purposes and embroiders it. So you have a jug. The jug's purpose is to carry water but why would anyone then paint a zig-zag pattern on the jug? Well, it's aesthetically pleasing! It doesn't have anything to do with the water; it doesn't represent the water or the ritual functions of the jug in society. Well, it might have but it wouldn't have to. It's aesthetically pleasing and then someone sees it and says: "I can do that better and I have a jug here that I'm going to paint differently." And so the standard patterns of artistic creativity emerge: recognition, discovery and competition.

So it's very deep-seated, maybe one of the earliest functions that style performs. What I want to argue is that we can have decoration within a narrative film. True, there are some films that are decorative throughout....

...without being rooted in a narrative...

...right, without being rooted in a narrative tradition. But in a narrative film you can have a decorative level of style there too – either as a one-off thing as with Berkeley or a more complex case with parametric narration. So parametric narration for me becomes a case where the decorative function of style has become part of the whole film's organizing principles.

I guess there are two maybe even three positions at work within the decorative...

I am not sure we can split them. That would have to be explored more. It's possible that if you start to look at films from this perspective you might discover that the decorative aspect is more pervasive in films.

* See also Bordwell's earlier description of the decorative function of film style in [Bordwell on Bordwell - Part II](#).

Yes, what I was getting at with regards to a further complication of the decorative category is that, for instance, many aesthetically pleasing camera movements can also be said to serve narrative functions even if it is only a matter of expressing the feelingful quality or mood of a scene. For instance, the tracking shots in the ballroom-scene in The Magnificent Ambersons or Ophuls' rhythmic long takes. So the decorative aspect need not exist independently of a narrative function but is also something that can be built on top of it. A camera movement can both be compositionally motivated according to narrative demands and at the same time be visually appealing in itself?*

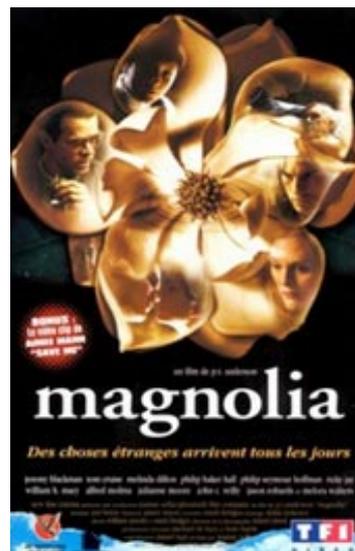
Exactly, that's right but there has to be a level of awareness of patterning for decorative to work. When you walk into a room and say "it's beautifully decorated," you're aware of the juxtaposition of the various parts. Or if you look at the tiling on the floor, which is a classic case of decoration, and you register it as an aesthetic statement. I think that level of awareness has to be there for it to be decorative.

In film studies we would look at our most stylized genres - melodrama, the musical and such places - for narrative cinema's decorative impulses. I also think it can oscillate. It's complicated because there is a long tradition of camera movements being used purely as flourishes but if you think of a film like *Magnolia*, at a certain point I would say that the camera movements in general take on a decorative dimension. For instance, we have two characters talking to one another and the camera is moving in time to the music... bum-ba-da-ba-da-bum... that kind of musical pattern and the camera is moving slowly in on one character and then it moves slowly in on the other character and then slowly in on the first again. And after a while you become very aware of the juxtaposition of these two camera movements in time to the music. It's definitely expressive – though it's hard to say exactly what it is expressing – and you could argue that to some degree it's denotative because it's giving us closer views of the character's facial expressions but it is somewhat beyond what is necessary according to the minimal norms of denotation and expression. It's a little more than you'd need and so you begin to think "okay," and then you begin to realize that it's this harmonization. There's an actual audio-visual harmony in terms of the rhythms of the camera movements and the rhythm of the music and the timing of the cuts.

I haven't analyzed the film in detail yet so it's up to you and others to do this [laughs] but I have a hunch that there is a decorative dimension to those camera movements in *Magnolia* by virtue of the fact that they're so strictly repeated symmetrically and because of the fact that they are tied to the music. You cannot but become aware of them to a degree that you are not of the patterning in *Die Hard* when we track in on Bruce Willis as a new line of dialogue gives him a new piece of information. That's an intensifier, that's a denotative-expressive intensifier I would say. But when you start to have these symmetrical movements that are so closely timed to the music, I begin to think it has lifted up that intensifier another level to something more decorative.

This analysis allows you to move to interpretive possibilities because there's almost a kind of inevitability to this and so much of this film is about the inevitability of chance. It's going to happen, sooner or later, that these incredibly weird coincidences will take place, just by random variation. Sometimes it just turns out that if you dial a random number it turns out to be 1-0-0-0-0. What are the chances of that? Well, exactly the same as dialing any other configuration. It's just that the meaningful configurations pop out at you as somehow over-determined but they are just as randomly selected as any other and I think that part of this film works to make us aware of the interplay of pattern and accident. By suddenly seeing a patterning of these very common devices of the camera moving in, we suddenly become aware of the aesthetic patterning of the work as a whole. We're starting to see that at the very fine-grain of each scene there is a kind of visual design that is mirrored by the larger convergence of all these characters' fates around a single event.

* What Bordwell would term "the expressive function of film style." See [Bordwell on Bordwell - Part II](#).



In a sense the decorative function takes you beyond or outside the diegetic world, doesn't it?

Well, it could, yeah, yeah. What I was trying to capture with my Ozu-examples* was that you're in the diegetic world because you're getting this information but the patterning makes you highly aware of the artifice of the whole thing so in a way you are outside of the diegetic world too. But you're appreciating the artistry of it just as when you are looking at the design of a painting.

It's a different type of appreciation though...

A different level of engagement, I would say. You're engaging not just with the story but also with the artifice of composing the story. And we can conclude with this perhaps: what I consider to be one of the biggest mistakes of film theory – of contemporary film theory – is to feel that there is this notion that either you're immersed within the world of the story and you take it as an illusion and you're completely unaware of its design or you're outside looking critically as a Brechtian spectator. This is far too simple. We have always been both. In classical cinema characters turned to look at the camera; the end of the film had people turn away from us. I mean, classical cinema is built on a high degree of overt narration and that's part of its interest for audiences. That's a level at which they interact with the film just as much as when they feel with a character or feel sympathetic or whatever. Classical cinema – in fact, all cinematic traditions – build into their concern an appreciation of their own artifice. This is not some special thing theorists need to tell us about. This is something audiences have always been aware of and always enjoyed in all filmmaking traditions. And the issue is not whether we're inside or outside the narrative but rather the relationships between the kinds of narratives we have and the kinds of conceptions we have of being appreciative of the artifice. For instance, appreciating Ozu's artifice is not the same as appreciating Minnelli's artifice or Hitchcock's artifice. It's not a question of transparency or illusion on the one hand and detachment on the other.

It would be more worthwhile to account for the many different types and levels of engagement?

Exactly.

Facts

Part I-III of the interview series:

[Bordwell on Bordwell – Part I](#)

[Bordwell on Bordwell – Part II](#)

[Bordwell on Bordwell – Part III](#)

The schemas can be found in:

Bordwell, David: *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1995): 50. First published in the United States of America by The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

Bordwell, David; Thompson, Kristin: *Film Art: An Introduction, 7th edition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004): 175. First edition published in 1979.

* See [Bordwell on Bordwell - Part II](#).



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