A PhD Thesis About Film Musicals
Sedat Yildirim. *Deconstructing the Film Musical Genre Through Film Semiotics and Postmodernism*. Tallinn: Tallinn University Dissertations on Humanities 59, 2020, 131 lk.[1]

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The thesis by Sedat Yildirim is based on three published articles. One of them has appeared in the Lithuanian periodical *Studies about Languages* and two of them in the Romanian biannual *Cinematographic Art & Documentation*. According to the Estonian Research Information System (etis.ee), the former belongs to category 1.1 as reflected by the abstract and citation database SCOPUS, and the two latter ones to category 1.2 as reflected, inter alia, by the Norwegian register for scientific journals, series and publishers ERIH PLUS. The thesis consists of 131 pages including an analytical overview which in its turn consists of three chapters, introduction and conclusions. Its supervisor is Professor Mihhail Lotman of Tallinn University and the University of Tartu.

The first article, "Identifying Kurds in Bahman Ghobadi's films: A film semiotic study", provides

> a brief insight into Kurdish culture and language and analyze[s] the Kurdish identity through the borders of four different countries in Ghobadi's films by a Film Semiotic approach. The theoretical basis of the research relies on Umberto Eco's types of codes […], Laura Mulvey's male and female gaze theory […], and syntagmatic types of shots introduced by French Film Semiotician Christian Metz […] (p. 127 in Article 1).

The second article, "Deconstructing the musical genre in *The Commitments* (1991)" is devoted "to the semiotic analyses of the visual language in the construction of two different types of musical movie genres", the Hollywood/American film musical genre and the post-modern musical movies. "The study explores one particular musical movie, *The Commitments* (1991)

by Alan Parker by using the theories of prominent semioticians, Christian Metz and Roland Barthes" (p. 23 in Article 2).

The third article, "Postmodernist musical film: *The Blues Brothers* (1980), *Evita* (1996), *Moulin Rouge* (2001), *Sweeney Todd* (2007) and *La La Land* (2016)", deals with the above five film musicals by applying postmodernist film theories to the so-called generic conventions of those films (p. 34 in Article 3).

Let me first deal with some conceptual issues in the thesis and finally present a list of minor mistakes I have noticed while reading the thesis.[2]

There seems to be a small genre problem with this work. Namely, the analytical overview contains research which is not reflected in the three publications (cf. "the third chapter […] analyzes five postmodern film musicals …" (p. 11 in the analytical overview). Those films are *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), *Jersey Boys* (2014), *London Road* (2015), *Straight Outta Compton* (2015), and *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018). This does not allow us to consider the thesis as an article-based dissertation par excellence (cf. "[a]n article-based dissertation is a series of research publications comprehensively dealing with the research topic together with an analytical overview", Tallinn University Regulations for Doctoral Studies and Defense of Doctoral Theses, § 14 (1)) but places the dissertation somewhere in the middle between that and a monograph. Also, the analytical overview is slightly longer than 30–40 standard pages for its main part, as suggested in the Regulations § 14 (3).

In *Semiotics of Cinema* (1973/1976) by Yuri Lotman,[3] one can find a number of comparisons of different art forms pointing to similarities and

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[1] Also available electronically via etera.ee.

[2] Since I was invited by Tallinn University to act as a preliminary reviewer of this dissertation as well, there may be overlappings between that review and the present text.

[3] Yuri Lotman 1976. *Semiotics of Cinema*. English translation (Russian original 1973), Michigan Slavic Contributions 5, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

differences between them. To some extent, in the present thesis I miss the comparative analysis of the structure and the processes taking place in music and in film. Let me present a few examples from Lotman's book (English translation, 1976) that point to the above comparison. "Music, because of the purely syntagmatic nature of its construction, can model (when it is oriented toward depiction) a picture, a synchronic non-discrete image of the world, and, when imitating speech structure, a narration" (p. 69); "In the 1930's Jan Mukařovský pointed out that sound augments the surface of the screen, giving it an additional dimension" (p. 81); "In the theater, when watching Hamlet, we must forget about the actor who plays him (opera is fundamentally different, since, in contrast to drama, *we listen to the singer* [italics in the original] in a given role)" (p. 90); "… in the film *No Ford through the Fire* we find an interesting example of polyphonic structure. The correlation of cinematographic and musical organizations seems to us to be rather familiar and natural, while in this film we have a similar contrapuntal arrangement of cinematography and visual art" (p. 95).

It is a little complicated to place Article 1 under the umbrella of the thesis title, *Deconstructing the Film Musical Genre Through Film Semiotics and Postmodernism*. Article 1 has no relationship whatsoever to the film musical genre. Instead, it deals with Kurdish national identity issues (very interesting and important ones, however). A broader title for the thesis would probably have solved this problem.

In Article 2, p. 27, the author writes: "Rick Altman divides the major realms of the American Film musicals in five that are respectively: setting, shot selection, music, dance and personal style of the major characters." I think it is remarkable that in the analysis (deconstruction) of film musicals, music is only one component out of five the so-called major realms, placed on the third place in their list. My general impression – maybe superficial – is that the structure of film musicals in this thesis is discussed mostly in terms of the plot. I do not think it is an inadequate approach but consider it, however, somewhat paradoxical.

The author uses the opposition between "low art" and "high art" (e.g., p. 110) but it remains unexplained where the demarcation line between them is located. True, in Article 3, pp. 36–37, the author writes that "postmodernist films are claimed to be part of the high art form" and "today's understanding of higher art forms […] are simply works that negotiate certain controversial issues of a particular society and bring them into view through a rather non-traditional narration and generic conventions". An extension of these ideas would have been welcome both in historic and contemporary arts.

On p. 22, the author writes: "Music is the main component that creates the structure of film musicals." For a musicologist, this claim seems self-evident. Otherwise the word 'music' should not be a part of the composite. The same might be said about the statement on p. 23 that "[o]ne of the greatest examples underlying the significance of music within the context of film musicals is undoubtedly *The Sound of Music* (1965)".

On p. 34, the author writes: "Metz thinks of cinema as distinctive, unique and more valuable than other art forms as it is the combination of moving picture and sound synchronized together which reflects the spectacle of reality for the audience much more efficiently." I strongly doubt the claim that some realms of art can be seen as more valuable than others. I agree, however, with the second half of the sentence.

On p. 37, the author refers to Yuri Lotman, who has written that "the different shots that form a scene are similar to the words making up a sentence". A well-known Russian director Alexander Sokurov has created a movie entitled *Russian Ark* (2002) which consists of a single shot only. I am wondering whether it is possible to accommodate Sokurov's film with the claim by Lotman.

I did not find explicit discussion in the thesis of the relationship between diegetic and non-diegetic music in film musicals. It would have been interesting to know whether any conclusions can be drawn about this opposition on the basis of postmodernist film musical deconstruction.

When discussing the movie *London Road* (2015), the author justifiably states that "[t]he musical crosses all the boundaries related to the film musical genre". After seeing that film, I would like to underline and discuss two phenomena related to it: the minimalist aesthetics that become evident in the form of abundant

repetitions, and the role of the chorus. Could we see the importance of these devices in designing the structure of this particular movie?

In Chapter 2 of the analytical overview, entitled "Postmodernist Film Musical", the author refers to several earlier important writings on the subject. This permits the compilation of a list of prominent features characteristic to postmodernism. I tried to do this with the following results: postmodernism as an irony or a parody of modernism; postmodernism undermining the metanarratives; scepticism about authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norms; making art for the masses but not for only the sake of art, thereby undermining the distinction between high and low art; engaging the realm of the family, gender relations, and sexuality. I would be interested whether some of these features are more important than others from the point of view of the genre – in other words, whether one can observe a certain hierarchy between them.

There are some statements in the thesis which I would like to scrutinize. On p. 128 of Article 1, the author writes about "the existence of the de facto Kurdish state since 1992." In Wikipedia, it is written that "Iraqi Kurdistan emerged in 1992 as an autonomous entity inside Iraq with its own local government and parliament".[4] I wonder whether the wording in the thesis may perhaps be a bit too strong.

On p. 137 of Article 1, the author writes: "My goal is not to prove whether Christian Metz' theories are credible or not. I will rather focus on applying these theories to the construction of the narration in Ghobady's films." I feel this sentence is strange. From the point of view of research discourse, what is the rationale of applying non-credible theories to the analysis of empirical material?

On p. 139 of Article 1, the author writes about the film *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000) that "[i]n spite of the title of the movie, we don't see horses in the film; rather mules are in the center of

narrative". It is not made clear whether the author has any explanation for this.

On p. 145 of Article 1, the author writes about the film *Turtles Can Fly* (2004) that "Americans are the savors [!] of the Kurdistan." Is this what personages in the movie feel or a more objective historical statement related to public opinion?

On p. 35 of Article 2, the author writes: "The universal belief is that language is one of the most important features that compose the national identity." I believe that ethnographers do not always think this way. The late Galina Starovoitova, for example, has shown that for diaspora Armenians the most important national consolidating factor is religion, not language.[5]

On p. 39 of Article 3, the author states about the movie *The Blues Brothers* that "[t]he movie lacks dancing." However, I can witness dancing, for example, in the scene in the church that starts at approximately 18:00 from the beginning or in the scene in a pub from approximately 56:00.

Now let me to proceed with smaller comments on the text of the dissertation.

For some reason, the title of the film *The Commitments* is many times (e.g., in the table of contents, p. 5) followed by the year of its release as a part of the title, i.e., within the quotation marks. I do not understand why. Besides, the use of capital letters is sometimes unexpected and, for me, counter-intuitive. Such examples include Film Semiotics, Discourse Analysis, Comparative Analysis and Literary Analysis on p. 7.[6]

On p. 10 the author writes:

> Thus, the first criterion for choosing these musicals [for paper 3] was whether they were released after the 1980s, the second criterion was whether they have postmodernist film traits and the third was their box-office-based popularity […] … there are also five other postmodern musicals analyzed in the body part of this dissertation […] These musicals are chosen by the same abovementioned methods …

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4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurdistan (assessed 21 July 2020).

5 Г[алина] В. Старовойтова 1987. *Этническая группа в современном советском городе: социологические очерки*. Ленинград: Наука. [G[alina] V. Starovoytova 1987. *Etnicheskaya gruppa v sovremennot sovetskom gorode: sotsiologicheskiye ocherki*. Leningrad: Nauka.]

6 Cf. also https://www.skillsyouneed.com/write/capital-letters.html and https://www.dummies.com/education/language-arts/grammar/when-to-use-capital-letters/ (accessed 30 July 2020).

I believe that the word 'method' is not appropriate here and we would talk about 'criteria' instead.

There are some minor errors, misspellings and inconsistencies. For instance, an em dash is systematically (e.g., p. 14) replaced by a hyphen, which is incorrect. In the non-numbered table on p. 55, middle section, the film *London Road* should be listed as well (currently missing). On p. 115 of Article 3, the author refers to M. Keith Booker, who writes about the film *Moulin Rouge!* that "the exclamation point in the title is definitely appropriate". In the thesis, however, the title of the film is used without the exclamation mark.

On p. 38, the author writes: "However, the number of artistic films including semiotic analysis has increased obviously." I do not understand this sentence. On p. 43, the author writes: "Baudrillard's concept of simulacra represents the media- or culture-simulated significations in our lives are related to the current understanding of our lives." I believe something is wrong with syntax of this sentence.

There are some layout mistakes, e.g. at the very top of p. 37 of Article 2: "[…] overflowing trash cans add a frantic and desperate excitement."(Don Kunz, 2001: 55) *(Figure 1 Figure 2 Figure 3)*". On p. 33, left column, of Article 2, the words 'establishment' and 'since' are distributed so that they partly overlap.

While Articles 1 and 2 and the Analytical Overview have undergone generally decent copy editing, this unfortunately does not apply to Article 3. There are a number of examples of sloppy formatting which I do not think should be listed here. Let me, however, ask just one question. What is the postmodernist opposition of the modernist concept of creation? Is it indeed "decre" as we read in the table p. 35? The internet seems not to know such a word.

Otherwise, the table mentioned above is quite thought-provoking. I started to think how films by Andrei Tarkovsky might be classified according to a modernism-postmodernism axis. If I consider, for example, *Mirror* (1975) then it should be characterized as anti-narrative and petit-historical rather than narrative and grand-historical. Should we interpret this as a sign of postmodernism in *Mirror*?

Sedat Yildirim defended his thesis successfully in front of the Doctoral Studies Council of the School of Humanities, Tallinn University, on 26 August 2020. It was decided to grade the thesis as approbatur. It is believed that despite the above questions and remarks, the thesis is a valuable piece of research which contains some original results, in particular, concerning changes in the language of film musicals when proceeding from the modernist epoch to the postmodernist one.