

Eötvös Loránd University

Faculty of Arts

# **THESES OF A DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

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## **Abstract Forms of the American Avant-Garde in American Science Fiction**

Doctoral School of Philosophy

PhD Program in Film, Media and Contemporary Culture

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**Budapest, 2017**

In my dissertation I have examined the limited but striking encounter between avant-garde and narrative film, two remote traditions of film history. I have studied the intersection of the two practices through the phenomenon of the so-called 'framed abstraction'.

Developments of film history are driven by the migration of effects between different ages and tendencies. For instance, the peculiar style of German expressionism left a distinct visual trace on post-war American film noir, European modernist auteur cinema and the genre films of the 1960-70s' Hollywood Renaissance. The theoretical and historical analyses of these effects has built up a considerable tradition. However, the filmmaking practice of the avant-garde had been completely excluded from the dominant part of the film industry: since it did not conform to basic narrative rules, it could not be integrated into the system of production and distribution, it did not become such a practice that could produce a visible alternative of film history, thus, it remained marginal.

In my dissertation I have examined the encounter between the two aforementioned filmmaking practices in the period after the 1950s, using a clearly definable formal feature called filmic abstraction. It was my endeavor to analyze the phenomenon of framed abstraction—abstract sequences embedded in narrative genre films—based on theoretical and historical aspects.

It is important to highlight that the encounter of narrative feature films and the abstract avant-garde had only been examined very rarely. In the historical discourse of abstract cinema, the context of Hollywood filmmaking merely appeared as an institutional counterpoint, and no one had tried to analyze abstract sequences from this viewpoint. Theoretical texts discussing the larger domain of narrative filmmaking only mention the incidental appearance of abstraction in the chapters devoted to science fiction, but they do not offer in-depth formal analysis—precisely because of the separation of the two canons of film history. In my dissertation I have undertaken the task to synthesize and make use of the insights of the discourse of the narrative, 'classical' film history and the marginal avant-garde, in order to discuss the questions relevant to both from a new angle. This way, the distance between the two strands of film history may be somewhat lessened.

The school of abstract cinema has produced the oldest, most radical form of the avant-garde tradition. However, the visual world of abstract cinema—thoroughly different from that of narrative film—could somehow lodge itself into the narrative structure of certain genres for a long time. In order to achieve this, those techniques of abstract cinema had to appear in the '50-60s that 'dematerialized' the image, getting much closer to the Hollywood approach committed to illusion-making. For this reason, I have put more emphasis on the different techniques of abstract cinema and the way these can be adapted.

Abstract sequences using avant-garde techniques appeared almost intact in the fantastic genres of Hollywood filmmaking built upon a much larger infrastructure than the avant-garde. The two practices, developing in a parallel fashion, almost independent from each other, could find a common ground by way of this migration of abstract cinema. Abstract sequences occurring in narrative feature films—often made with the help of avant-garde filmmakers—will be discussed here by using the umbrella term 'framed abstraction'. The basic statements of my dissertation examine the phenomenon of framed abstraction.

The 1960-70s' Hollywood Renaissance offers numerous examples as to how formal and stylistic techniques originally considered marginal or even experimental appeared and later on became embedded in mainstream filmmaking. We can see this by looking at frame-freezing (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Wild Bunch*), the use of handheld cameras (*The Sugarland Express*, *Deliverance*), alienating subtitles (*The Bellboy*), or certain narrative traits developed in European modernist cinema and opposing the traditional Hollywood approach. The phenomenon discussed in this dissertation is one of these examples, however, it bears a special importance. It is quite impossible to find a more suggestive example in this period for the institutionalization of the avant-garde than Hollywood's acceptance of abstract cinema. In this case, we can see how the most conventional filmmaking practice welcomes the most experimental and non-conventional endeavors. Let us for a moment have a look at András Bálint Kovács's apt words defining the avant-garde cinema. He says avant-garde is the "personal, non-commercial, non-narrative and reductive use" of the medium.<sup>1</sup> As opposed to this, classical Hollywood cinema is often—true, not necessarily—impersonal, obviously profit-oriented, story-centered, and decidedly has an aesthetizing approach (thus, it is by no means reductive). The thesis of this dissertation is that *by the appearance of framed abstraction in 1960-70s' Hollywood films, the filmmaking approach that is first and foremost narrative, commercial, non-reductive and only a little personal, integrates the exclusively subversive, spectacularly non-narrative, only a little commercial, exceedingly reductive and personal films. The exploitation of the radical avant-garde by the Hollywood system is part of the process that brought about the appreciation of attraction logic and visual dynamics from the 1970s onwards in the American cinema. At the same time when—and in a paradoxical fashion—Hollywood cinema adopted the visually-oriented or, if you will, sensual nature of the avant-garde—practically, when it narrativized avant-garde elements. My dissertation focuses on the examination of this paradox.*

In my dissertation, through working out this thesis, I have managed to confirm the following hypotheses:

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1 Kovács András Bálint: *A modern film irányzatai*. Budapest: Új Palatinus könyvesház, 2010. p. 49.

– By examining the framed abstraction present in the films in question it is possible to state that abstraction in the classical narrative is always diegetic. This is true even in the case of those abstract sequences which endanger the unity of narrative film in a radical way (e.g. the sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey* analyzed thoroughly at the end of my dissertation). To denote these I have used the term undivided framed abstraction. Framed abstractions such as these are the closest to the free, unlimited flow of spectacle present in the avant-garde, and they constitute a rare narrative feature of blockbusters using attraction logic. Abstraction always signifies crucial breaking-points or crises in narrative, but no matter how lengthy or weakly framed the abstraction is, the narrative always provides a strict framework for avant-garde forms—the form of avant-garde has become a norm within the narrative structure.

– Making abstract visual elements diegetic almost instantly brought along the fantastic, since non-traditional forms are always legitimized with some kind of narrative function. The sequences of framed abstraction enriched the iconography of science fiction: this was a direct consequence of the specific approach of abstract cinema that makes use of a non-representing, independent spectacle, and that of the attitude of filmmakers earnestly interested in technological innovation and mystical philosophy. Thus, the genre of science fiction and the abstract branch of avant-garde cinema could mutually impregnate each other: the presence of abstract sequences ‘smuggled in’ the intactness of pure spectacle into narrative film. Abstraction became an instrument of the fantastic, the no-man’s land signifying the crossing of the border between worlds, an act that nor the characters, nor the viewers could explain (or only in a very difficult way). Abstraction became the representation of miracle and magic, became concrete, an event or an organic part of the plot—abstract forms and illusions of space turned into functions that are definable, spaces that are tangible in the context of science fiction. The border- or passage-function of abstractions is a continuation of the transcendent attitude of the American avant-garde cinema within the framework of narrative film.

– By using framed abstraction, the approach and technique of the avant-garde had a lasting effect on the American film industry that was undergoing a major transformation in the 1960-70s. The appearance of the attraction of avant-garde makes it possible to term films like *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *The Trip* trend-changers of New Hollywood, for framed abstraction plays an important part in these feature films.

This phenomenon cannot only be attributed to the strong counter-cultural attitude that popularized every artistic form expelled from the mainstream. The technological innovations of the

sixties were very much defined by the artists of the American abstract cinema who, being visual effects specialists, contributed to putting framed abstractions into Hollywood films. However, the appearance of abstract elements is not only rooted in the technical experimentation within the Hollywood system.

Slowly, the film industry of the 1960-70s began to base its production strategies on a more effect-oriented, so-called 'attraction-centered' attitude, considering grandiose spectacle, visceral effects more important than narrative. This change of approach gave birth to films such as *Jaws* and *Star Wars* which are partly the results of the reformed distribution strategies. I myself wish to develop Tom Gunning's attraction theory that examined how the attraction strategy of pre-narrative cinema lived on in the non-narrative, spectacle-centered films of the avant-garde and in the special effects based films of New Hollywood. In my opinion, the phenomenon of framed abstraction clearly displays this tendency: by using abstract sequences, the attraction of the avant-garde became directly 'injected' into narrative feature films. This tendency began in the 1960-70s and continues to this very day, precisely due to the revival of the fantastic genres and the ascending of the film technique into taking the position of the main hero. Hollywood always displays its technological breakthroughs, the newer and newer accomplishments of the special effects industry by making a film that belongs to one of the fantastic genres and can be marketed as revolutionary—not to mention the fact that these movies often contain abstract sequences, that is, framed abstraction. What is more, abstract forms can create spectacular visual orgies that are non-referential, thus, the authenticity of the given special effect cannot be called into question, the special effects people can freely experiment with forms.

These films demonstrating an array of special effects always enthrall the audience with the revitalizing of the techniques of the avant-garde, the fantastic phenomena of framed abstraction. That is why, in my view, Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* has an especially important place in the history of the decades that reformed Hollywood. *2001: A Space Odyssey* is a film that advances the strategies of contemporary post-classical cinema, designates certain discernible trends that have an influence even on present-day movies (thus, it determines certain future changes in an essential way), which is why it can unequivocally be termed as the opening chapter of a new period in Hollywood's history. I consider Kubrick's film a fundamental piece of work of *framed abstraction* that is the main notion of this dissertation. This approach partly modifies the interpretation that the central film of the Hollywood Renaissance (or, if you will, New Hollywood) is Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* or Hopper's *Easy Riders*.

In order to provide a foundation for the hypotheses mentioned above, I will first and foremost examine the abstract techniques of the avant-garde, and the roots of the emerging of abstract cinema, that is, the 'motivation' of abstract cinema. By building upon the film historical discourses

of the American avant-garde, I will reveal the connection between abstract cinema and the fantastic genres, the common denominator, so to speak. Since the two parallel canons are essentially two different institutional systems, I deem it important to describe the institutional network that establishes the 'visibility' of the avant-garde, the schools and film clubs that had a significant effect on the generation of Hollywood directors beginning their careers in the sixties.

In the second part of my dissertation I will define the notion of framed abstraction and I will create its precise typology. Furthermore, I will show the potential blind spots where it is difficult to detach framed abstraction from other modes of stylization. In order to make it clear why the abstract technique of the avant-garde appeared, I will base my line of thought on the discourse of Tom Gunning's attraction cinema. By connecting framed abstraction with this, I will interpret the latter as a special attraction that played an important part in the birth of New Hollywood itself. I will analyze the functions and limitations of framed abstraction by the classical narrative norms identified by Bordwell. Interestingly, the two theories will meet through the notion of framed abstraction.

In the last chapters of my dissertation I will examine the phenomenon of framed abstraction in genres that more or less build upon the fantastic. Finally, by analyzing *2001: A Space Odyssey*, I will illustrate the aforementioned aspects through an elaborate dissection of a key scene. To support the hypotheses of the dissertation, I will provide a formal analysis of certain excerpts, and I will work out a typology that makes the examination easier by a stylistic categorization of the phenomenon. In order to achieve this, I will mainly refer to Bordwell's work and methods.

The form of abstract cinema is the farthest from that of narrative cinema, since not only the non-narrative structure but the complete lack of human beings and recognizable forms makes abstract cinema the polar opposite of narrative film. This spectacular aesthetic difference makes it easy to analyze the point of intersection between the two film histories: the relatively rare abstract sequences can quite effortlessly be separated from the traditional images of feature films, thus, the fusion of avant-garde and narrative cinema becomes essentially measurable. In my formal analyses, I have endeavored to present such an exact classification, since the basic material itself offered a possibility.