

Book Review

OLEV REMSU
FILMIDRAAMATEHNIKA

Olev Remsu, *Filmidraamatehnika [Techne of Film Drama]*,¹ Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2016, ISBN 978-9949-77-081-6, 392 pp.

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DOI: 10.1515/bsmr-2017-0007

Slowly, but surely, the body of introductory Estonian-language books on cinema is growing. In addition to the translations of what we could already call the modern classics such as Juri Lotman's *Semiotics of Cinema* (trans. Elen Lotman) and Robert Stam's *Film Theory: An Introduction* (trans. Eva Näripea, Mari Laaniste, Andreas Trossek), a collection of essays on film by Jarmo Valkola was published in a single volume titled *Audiovisual Language of Cinema* (trans. Elle Vaht, Karol Ansip, Kristiina Davidjants) in 2015. Olev Remsu's recent addition to this list, an almost 400-page *magnum opus* called *Techne of Film Drama (Filmidraamatehnika)*, is

situated somewhere between the approaches of the aforementioned books. The content of the book was originally delivered as a series of lectures when Remsu was teaching at various Estonian universities – the majority of the lectures have also been published in *Teater. Muusika. Kino* (2004 2–2006 1) and on the website *filmidraamatehnika.blogspot.co.uk*. Thus, the chapters of *Techne of Film Drama* vary somewhat in length and style due to the initial format, something that Maarja Ojamaa has also pointed out in regard to Valkola's collection (Ojamaa 2015: 127). At the same time, according to the summary on the back cover and Remsu's statement on a separate occasion (quoted in Ilves 2016), *Techne of Film Drama* is meant to be a handbook for scriptwriters, and as such has a more coherent thematic structure than *Audiovisual Language of Cinema*, resembling the books by Lotman and Stam mentioned above.

Techne of Film Drama is divided into eight chapters, providing a thorough survey of many of the important aspects of film narrative, i.e., what is dramaturgy and how to create inescapable situations; what is a story and the classical unities of time, space and action; what is narrative composition and the conventional structure of film; what kind of characters can typically be found in cinema; what is the function of dialogue and how should it be used in audiovisual media; how the viewer interacts with film; what are the most common genres of classical narrative cinema and beyond; and finally, how to differentiate between a screenplay and a script. As the latter suggests, the author is at times quite meticulous in his terminology, helpfully drawing the reader's attention to the differences between common and field-specific lan-

guage usage, and to variations within the latter. In this regard the author not only provides an invaluable reserve of Estonian-language film terminology, but also develops several useful neologisms, such as *enigmalugu* for 'mystery' (p. 90); *inimestamine* for the process of developing a character beyond simple stereotypes (p. 156); *võitlusfilm* for the action genre, rather than *märul*, in order to emphasise the genre's preference for fighting for a greater cause, instead of highlighting just the fighting aspect (p. 333); and *võitlusdokumentaal* for issue-based documentary (p. 252).

On the other hand, some of these novel terms, such as *suspense* for 'suspense', do not seem well-grounded enough when compared to the more natural sounding alternatives, such as *pinge* (suspense/tension). There are also parts of the book where the author seems to be too engaged in his own terminology, which in turn can seriously complicate the reading experience. For example, when he prefers terms such as *kulminatsiooni dispositsiooni ekspositsiooni sõlmitus* ('the interlinkage of the exposition of the disposition of the culmination', p. 134) to something much more established and simple, such as 'the culmination of the second act'; or when he uses the word *kulminatsioon* ('culmination', p. 137) four times in a row (*sic!*) in order to highlight the finer details of a film. Such wording can become quite cumbersome and easily counteract the initial intent of better explaining a film. On a somewhat pretentious note, it seems a bit odd that with all this attention being paid to terminology, both 'film' and 'techne/technology', which already appear in the title, are applied throughout the book as self-evident terms requiring no explanation, whereas an entire

1 My translation.

chapter is dedicated to the third term – ‘drama(turgy)’. Nonetheless, considering the attention that the author pays to terminology, it is most unfortunate that the publisher has decided not to include a term register at the end of the book, opting to include only a name register. This can be seen as particularly problematic, given that the aim of *Techne of Film Drama* is to serve as an easy-to-use guidebook to cinema.

Stylistically, *Techne of Film Drama* is a hybrid creature, which despite the author’s proclamation, cannot be unequivocally placed into the handbook genre. The acknowledgment section and short prologue – where the author thanks his mentors, friends and colleagues, such as Valentin Chernykh, the writer of, among others, *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (*Москва слезам не верит*, Russia, 1980, directed by Vladimir Menshov), and maps out his own relationship with cinema – already suggest how personal this project is for the author. This impression is reaffirmed as one delves deeper into the book – in parts *Techne of Film Drama* reads more like an autobiography than a textbook. For instance, the author tells us about the lasting impression that Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Léaud), the protagonist of *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*, France, 1959, directed by François Truffaut), left on young Remsu (p. 32). Telling us which of the Three Musketeers the author dreamt of being (p. 315), certainly makes for interesting reading, but is perhaps not that useful for a striving scriptwriter. There are also chapters (pp. 292–296) of *Techne of Film Drama* that are more suited to the historical film studies genre than that of a script textbook, e.g. discussing in detail Sergei Eisenstein’s relationship with Joseph Stalin. Certainly learn-

ing that, because of the rigid censorship in Stalin’s Soviet Union, Eisenstein had the most exclusive script editor in the world – the General Secretary! (p. 295) – is fascinating; and the author’s personal memories of his former teacher Andrei Tarkovsky (pp. 324–325) are invaluable. However, they can make the book’s central pedagogical purpose harder to follow. That being said, the author’s reminiscences are most definitely a testament to the power of cinema, which might motivate a budding scriptwriter to develop his or her craft even more diligently.

For the most part, *Techne of Film Drama* rather consistently adheres to its catchphrase that ‘a film is ready even before the camera is turned on’. What the author means by such a paradoxical statement is that a script, the part preceding the shooting, is the most essential aspect of a film (p. 10). The fact that the book is designed above all to be a scriptwriting manual might justify such a provocation to some extent. Some readers might even agree with the author’s statement on the back cover that, in order to make a good film, first of all one needs a good script. But it should be pointed out that this is where *Techne of Film Drama* differs significantly from all the aforementioned books (perhaps to the greatest extent from Valkola’s collection, which, already in its title, highlights the importance of cinema’s audiovisual quality); i.e., in its general disregard for all aspects of cinema *other* than those directly related to the narrative. The deliberate choice by the author to publish a book without any actor names and pictures (see Ilves 2016) is likely aimed at keeping *Techne of Film Drama* focused on a particular aspect of cinema, that of scriptwriting. However, reducing the wealth of cinema solely to its

narrative techniques not only leads the author to overemphasise the role of the narrative at the expense of cinema’s others qualities, but also causes him to neglect several aspects, from visual cues to acting, that are vital for understanding how narrative actually works in cinema. Even if the aim of the book is to help the reader develop a good script, some further consideration of how a script later materialises in cinematic form would have definitely been useful.

While it is perfectly fine to have a cinema book without pictures (many, if not most academic books on cinema are not illustrated), it is much harder to find justification for how the book benefits from disregarding the manifold nature of cinema. Firstly, the author’s prioritisation of narrative as the basis of film (–drama) causes him to make generalisations that are too broad, which in turn lead to logical impasses and terminological and thematic vagueness. For instance, starting at the very beginning of the book (pp. 15–18) the author claims that drama is something that can be detected everywhere, but which, at the same time, also preceded humankind. Such reasoning renders the term ‘drama’ practically useless as it could signify almost anything. As Ferdinand de Saussure (1966: 116) argued, a sign gains value only in opposition to other signs. Furthermore, claiming that drama exists separately of people is an extremely difficult philosophical proposition that cannot be simply glossed over. This is particularly true considering the fact that even recent philosophical attempts at suggesting that mathematical properties provide means of thinking beyond the subject-object correlationism have received their share of criticism (see Meillassoux 2008, for the original argument; and Van

Houdt 2011 and Golumbia 2016, for related criticism). Clearly this is even truer for a concept such as drama, which, according to Keir Elam, is a mode of fiction represented in performance (Elam 1980: 98); and thereby suggesting at least three possible agents: one who creates fiction, one who performs it, and ideally at least one at whom such action is directed. Even if we conjoin these parties by assuming that a scriptwriter performs in his or her own piece and that it remains a performance even if there is nobody to witness it, imagining a performance without a performer proves a taxing task. In short, it is clear that such stylistic exaggerations unnecessarily dwarf the genuinely interesting ideas that could benefited from further attention; i.e., that all the great moral texts that have survived throughout the history have done so because of their aesthetical, rather than their ethical significance (p. 18); or that Monsieur Hulo (Jacques Tati) is in a cultural dialogue with the Tramp (Charles Chaplin) in the same way that Romance culture is with Anglo-Saxon culture (p. 37).

Secondly, *Techne of Film Drama's* prioritisation of narrative – captured in phrases such as '[i]t does not matter how a story is being presented to us. It can be through dancing, singing, talking, writing, or in some [sic!] audiovisual way. Story is the *primum mobile*, the primordial cause, the source of all movement' (p. 60) – not only contradicts the aims of the visual turn in humanities, but raises questions about the specifics of scriptwriting. If we are to understand that the story is all that matters, why direct the book to scriptwriters rather than offer a more general account on story writing as such. Although all books do not have to follow the central trends of

film studies today – which not only emphasise the range of cinema's audiovisual qualities in their own right, but at times attribute almost sentient nature to these qualities (see, for example, Frampton 2006 and Brinkema 2014) – saying that a medium does not affect the narrative is highly debatable. If the author wanted to argue against medium specificity, which can be traced back at least to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1776 classical essay *Laocoon: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, and has not disappeared even with the appearance of new media (see Hayles 2001 and Soules 2002), he would need to do more to convince the reader of the validity of his point of view.

Also, the prioritisation of story over the other elements of cinema creates several tensions within the book itself. This is apparent from the way a number of authors that Remsu quotes – many of whom are either scriptwriters or authors of scriptwriting manuals – keep pointing to a different direction – namely, to the audiovisual nature of cinema. Yet, *Techne of Film Drama* does not set out to challenge these secondary authors with its own account. Rather, it simply overlooks aspects of the original argument that do not support the author's prioritisation of the narrative. For instance, the contradictions between the author favouring the verbal and the secondary sources focusing on the audiovisual become apparent when Remsu quotes Ted Tally, the writer of *The Silence of the Lambs* (USA, 1991, directed by Jonathan Demme), who advises the reader to 'show rather than tell' (p. 92); or when Nick Lacey stresses the friction between visual and verbal in cinema, but Remsu only develops the second part of Lacey's argument (p. 104); or when Robert McKee suggests that 'we watch film, whereas we

listen to a play' (p. 195), which is not only quoted by Remsu in the chapter on dialogue, but based on which, he continues to discuss the aspect of sound, ignoring the original emphasis on the visual. Since it is clear that many of the authors quoted in *Techne of Film Drama* represent a different position than Remsu's, the reader cannot help but feel that some of the potentially interesting debates between the author and the secondary literature have been avoided for the sake of simplicity.

These comments are meant to stress that an obvious strength of the book, the author's close readings of several classics – such as *The Gold Rush* (USA, 1925, directed by Charlie Chaplin), *La Strada* (Italy, 1954, Federico Fellini), *400 Blows*, *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Stalker* (*Сталкер*, Russia, 1979, Andrei Tarkovsky), *Week-end* (France/Italy, 1967, Jean-Luc Godard), *Jaws* (USA, 1975, Steven Spielberg) and *Rocco and His Brothers* (*Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, Italy/France, 1960, Luchino Visconti) – has been unnecessarily disadvantaged by the deliberate choice of extracting the narrative structure from its cinematic form. This is especially unfortunate when considering that the author has a sharp eye for visual detail, evident from the way he describes the usage of microfilm in *The Silence of the Lambs* as a brilliant method of quickly informing the viewer about past events (p. 151); or when he explains how an act as simple as hanging the laundry out to dry can reveal the socioeconomic status of the characters in *Rocco and His Brothers* (p. 208). *Techne of Film Drama* would surely have benefited from a further exploration of these principles, because it is highly probable that young Remsu's identification with Antoine

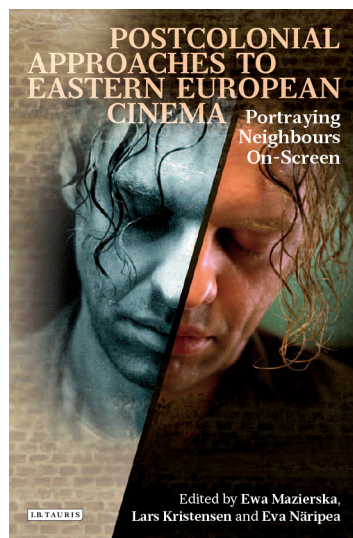
(p. 33–34) was established mainly by audiovisual means – such as the way the character is captured by the camera, the acting, the audio score, the editing, the lighting and the mise-en-scène; and fact that the end of the film grabbed Remsu's attention, not simply because of its lack of a clear conclusion, but because it ends suddenly with one of the most iconic freeze frame shots in the history of film. Although the author repeatedly states that the spectators are so accustomed to some of the conventions of cinema that they tend to miss their specific qualities entirely (p. 123), and he often reminds the reader that one can remember 90% of the visual information and only 25% of the dialogue one hears (p. 183), he somehow manages to overlook the significance of these statements, thereby highlighting the continuing value of Christian Metz's observation that a 'film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand' (Metz 1974: 69).

Nonetheless, *Techne of Film Drama* is clearly an essential addition to the corpus of Estonian-language film books. The author's great erudition allows him to effortlessly navigate from discussing the dramas of Sophocles to explaining the specifics of Molière's characters. *Techne of Film Drama*'s essayistic style, extensive use of the personal pronoun, and various film and book recommendations, which differentiate it from a typical textbook, also provide the book with a unique voice – one that eloquently discusses an impressive array of important cultural and philosophical topics. Because of the broad scope of *Techne of Film Drama*, it might be best suited for a more advanced reader, who wishes to flesh out the main principles of drama and narrative through a larger cultural context.

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Book Review



Ewa Mazierska, Lars Kristensen and Eva Näripea (eds.), *Postcolonial Approaches to Eastern European Cinema: Portraying Neighbours On-Screen*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2014, ISBN 978-1-78076-301-9, 342 pp.

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DOI: 10.1515/bsmr-2017-0008

Many scholars have dismissed postcolonial approaches to the study of Eastern Europe and its cultural products. This rejection is borne of a number of mitigating factors. The dominant Three Worlds Theory, for example, positioned the second world, or the ex-Soviet bloc, as occupying a better socio-political position than that of the colonised Third World. Furthermore, left-wing intellectuals, such as Albert Camus, were often blind to the colonial machinations of the Soviet Union due to their staunch belief that the USSR operated under a less exploitative system than the Western