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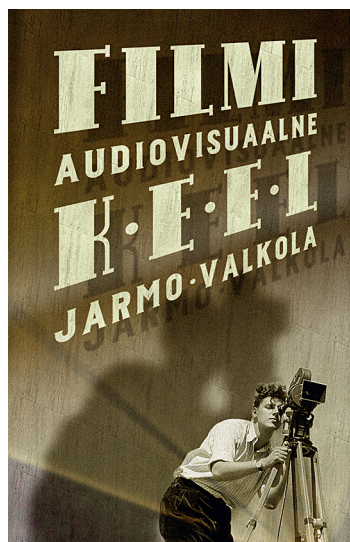
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Book Review



Jarmo Valkola, *Filmi audiovisuaalne keel [Audiovisual Language of Cinema]*, Tallinn: Varrak, 2015, ISBN: 978-9985-3-1938-3, 487 pp.

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Jarmo Valkola's work on the audiovisual language of film is a mosaic of diverse takes on the continuously spellbinding phenomenon of film. The study – several chapters of which have been published previously – comprises philosophical, historical and psychological approaches. In his preface to the Estonian translation, the author states that his main aim for writing the book would be fulfilled if the reader would share his excitement about the theoretical problems that the work deals with. And this aim is most probably filled – the volume offers manifold ideas that can potentially provoke dialogue and stimulate further reflections by any true cinephile. However, the lack

of a clearly formulated conceptual whole that would emerge from the diversity of viewpoints, i.e. a new integral understanding of the topic of film language, might hinder the experience for the reader.

The book's table of contents reflects a somewhat disproportional structure (the chapters range from only six pages to over 100 in length), and its logic is pretty difficult to grasp initially. Thus, an explanation of the compositional logic of the work would have been a welcome addition to the foreword. The synopsis on the back cover describes the volume as one of the first works related to film theory of its kind in the Estonian cultural space. Valkola himself with his teachings, as well as his writings on Estonian films (e.g. 2007, 2008) and film theory (e.g. 2013), has contributed to this space. Therefore, a short explanation by the author showing how this work is linked to the local context would have equally been helpful for the reader, providing a clearer survey of the gaps and problems that this book is helping to resolve in the local cinema-related discourse.

In the foreword, which focuses primarily on the concept of image, Valkola positions his research object in the context of the contemporary image-centric media sphere. He then proceeds to provide the reader with a fascinating and non-clichéd introduction into the nature of the form and content of film. He clearly stresses that in his view, film is a language in no other sense than a metaphorical one and its essence is not realistic (p. 38). Among other things, he argues that time and movement in space are the dominant characteristics of film (p. 48–49), and thus does not agree with the indispensability of montage (p. 53) nor with the purely photographic nature (p. 48) of film.

Thereafter, Valkola sketches a historical survey of the canon, i.e. the key approaches to analysing film narrative as well as major cinematographic waves from German expressionism to French *nouvelle vague*. This is complemented by a compact survey of the main historical genres and subgenres of (mainly American) cinema. Valkola's take on the ways the semantic elements of these genres continue to evolve in the so-called 'post-genre' cinema would have been a captivating addition to this subchapter. The book then proceeds from feature films to documentaries, defined as the 'creative treatment of reality'. The chapter not only engagingly explains documentaries via the aspects and characteristics of indexicality, style, montage, sound, etc., but also discusses broader philosophical subjects, such as the essence of reality (pp. 231–232).

Valkola's discussion of the aesthetics of image seems to be the focus of the volume, both physically and conceptually, and thus it is a pity that the concept itself does not appear in the terminological registry, even though the chapter provides a multifaceted overview of it. Next, a brief glimpse at the concept of cinematographic authorship precedes an empirical turn in the volume that results in perhaps the most enjoyable parts of the work in terms of reading experience: Valkola's profound analyses of the works of Alfred Hitchcock and Aki Kaurismäki. Whereas the first one is a treatment of the cinematographic form and meaning of Hitchcock's work more broadly, the section on Kaurismäki concentrates on the depiction of urban culture in the Finnish director's films. Towards the end of the book the reader will find relatively short chapters on the cognitive understanding of film, on the overall

orchestration of visual order, and on the functioning of sound in film. The final chapter titled 'Film and its interpretation' is dedicated to film criticism and more closely to the mechanisms and challenges related to the understanding of interpretation as a cognitive process.

Throughout the volume, Valkola consistently supports his arguments with previous academic studies (mainly monographs), whereas the key paradigms for him are clearly found among the phenomenological and cognitive approaches. The author is rather straightforward regarding his personal sympathies and antipathies related to the wide range of existing theories and paradigms in the general field of film studies. One could argue that his criticism of poststructuralism/constructivism (pp. 405–406) or semiotics (pp. 27–28) is sometimes somewhat biased. For example, Valkola describes Juri Lotman's distinction between marked and unmarked elements in film (or between novelty and convention in Valkola's terms) as fairly strict, whereas Lotman himself clearly states that the binaries presented in his study only apply when the underlying idea is that any element of cinematic language requires the existence of its alternative because, otherwise, it would not be perceived as meaningful (Lotman 2004: 55).

In summary, Jarmo Valkola's *Audiovisual Language of Cinema* seems to be a personal take on a range of film theoretic problems by someone who has a very profound comprehension of and insight into the field. Thus, the work can perhaps be appreciated most by truly ardent cinephiles who are already familiar with the intellectual trends and theoretical paradigms of the 20th century mentioned therein. At the same time, it is not really suitable as an

educational tool (also suggested on the back cover), because of the way the author's knowledge has been presented in the volume. Besides the lack of a systematic whole, the language of the text is not easy to follow as is exemplified by the conceptualisation of one of the key terms – 'language' – on page 13. It is difficult to understand not only for an undergraduate student, but for a more advanced reader. Of course, it is possible that the complexity of the language is related to the difficulties related to translation and editing. From this perspective, Robert Stam's *Film Theory: An Introduction* (in Estonian: Stam 2011) or even Lotman's *Semiotics of Cinema* (*Filmisemiootika*, 2004) are better suited as introductory study materials for film courses. A selection of relevant images would also have functioned as a set of visual highlighters of the analytic dominants and thereby supported the mediation of the author's perception of film language.

Despite the criticism, it is clear that Valkola's book is a valuable contribution to the very small field of cinema studies in the Estonian language, supporting the cultivation of the local metalanguage for thinking about films. In this way it also helps to raise the level of film culture in general, by stressing that cinemas are not only places for entertainment, but also provide space for artistic and cultural values that can be revealed only by in-depth analysis.

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