

The Author's Conceptualising Presence in Film: A Stylistic Analysis of Sulev Keedus's *Georgica*

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In the paper, I analyse the authorial style of Sulev Keedus. Authorial style is not defined as simply the formal pattern emerging from stylistic choices but also as an author's conceptual strategy that manifests itself through these stylistic patterns. Thus the formal aspects of style will be analysed in dialogue with the conceptual function they fulfil in a film.

Film authorship is traditionally assigned to the film director, who controls the process of film-making and orchestrates a set of people, as well as a set of shots, according to his vision. However, an author can also be defined as a theoretical construct,¹ one which can be studied through stylistic or thematic patterns. This article uses the three-level model of chronotope proposed by Peeter Torop to model authorial presence in film. Torop's model is based on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of chronotope and establishes the author as one of the layers of meaning in film. According to the model, film is composed of three layers of meaningful organisation, or 'chronotopes' (the topographic/narrative, psychological/character's and metaphysical/authorial). Although Torop refers to some of the stylistic elements of each level, his chronotopic analysis was not initially designed for stylistic analysis. Yet I will try to explicate its utility for stylistic analysis as well, especially for studying authorial style, since it allows one to move beyond the analysis of formal style and to establish authorial style as a conceptual strategy of film that manifests itself through stylistic patterns.

Sulev Keedus is one of the most prominent figures in Estonian *auteur* cinema, and critics have pointed to both aesthetic and thematic unity throughout his films, implying his central role in the collective process. *Georgica* (1998) is his second feature film, a poetic and symbolic account of occupied post-war

1 'Author function' (Foucault), 'implicit author' (Booth, Chatman) etc. See M. Foucault, *What Is an Author? – Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structural Criticism*. Ed. J. V. Harari. New York: Cornell University Press, 1979, pp. 141–160; W. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 74; S. B. Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 74.

Estonia, about the loss of homeland, and coping with the past, memories and an uncertain future. The story is told through the relationship between Jakub, an old man, and Maecenas, a boy who has lost his ability to speak due to a trauma and is sent to be healed by Jakub. Jakub used to do missionary work in Africa but now lives alone on a deserted island used by the Soviet Army as an area for target practice. Virgil's *Georgics* (39–27 BC), a poem about agriculture and farming, divides, on the extra-diegetic level, the film into four books, but is also present in the diegetic world, as Jakub attempts to find redemption through translating it into Swahili. As a synthesis of these two levels, the *Georgics* also becomes the central symbolic framework for the film.

This article does not aim to arrive at a comprehensive interpretation of *Georgica*, but only to reveal how stylistic patterns can guide the spectator in the process of interpretation and how the author emerges through these stylistic patterns as a central controlling agent who organises and integrates the film into a meaningful whole.

The concept of style, as well as stylistic analysis, has an ambivalent position in film studies. On the one hand, style can be defined as a formal aspect of a work, a cluster of sensory features that can be studied empirically and statistically. On the other hand, it can be described as a significant form that assigns meaning to the work and therefore requires interpretation and understanding. As a consequence, stylistic analysis is always located at the crossroads of the quantitative and the qualitative, the 'measuring' and 'interpretative' approaches.

Thus we can describe authorial style both formally (e.g. rapid dolly zooms

into close-ups as a signature style of Martin Scorsese) and conceptually (e.g. Michelangelo Antonioni's knowing camera and Jean Renoir's inquiring one). Therefore one could ask: where is the author manifested: in the formal or conceptual aspects of style?

Outside of statistical style analysis, the issue of stylistics has always concerned the ways cinematography transforms a pre-filmic experience into a filmic one. Style, from this perspective, can be seen as a set of connotative procedures that add new meaning to the denoted object (e.g. the theory of photography by Roland Barthes). Yet style can also be conceptualised as a modelling system that does not simply re-semiotise the already meaningful world but creates it as a meaningful object within the filmic system, thereby establishing a certain system of values. As a result, the object represented cannot be detached from the way it is represented. In addition to the spatiotemporal modelling of film diegesis discussed by Yuri Lotman in his *Semiotics of Cinema* (1976), this can be exemplified by film narration and the impossibility of separating the thing narrated/shown from the narrative agent who narrates/sees it.

Thus style is a mechanism of selection that simultaneously articulates what it represents and ascribes to the spectator certain ways of seeing and understanding it. This reveals the limitations of formal style analysis and the need for complementarity between formal and conceptual analyses.

This complementarity allows for the analysis of style on different levels. Firstly, there is the *formal description of style*, which analyses framing, camera movements etc. and establishes the system of marked and unmarked stylistic aspects; secondly,

there is the *expository description of style*, which aims to explain the formal aspects in relation to what is represented; and thirdly, there is the *conceptual description of style*, which offers a more holistic interpretation of the style as it functions in the film as a whole. Authorial style can be analysed on all three levels.

The dominant stylistic feature of Keedus's formal style in *Georgica* is the use of sequence shots, which determines many other formal features: for example, shot length, dynamic camera style (since the sequence shot is also sometimes labelled 'fluid camera'), and the use of deep focus and foreground/background depth composition. Camera movements are slow, flowing, omnidirectional and complex, often punctuated with brief static moments. The camera angle is mostly neutral. The film is mostly shot in colour, though some sequences are monochrome, and the tonality is brown. Thus short, static detail or long shots are marked stylistic features, as well as jump cuts, rapid, restless or disoriented camera movements, and a few other features.

On the level of expository description, the stylistic strategy can be described as character-centred, although it should be pointed out that this does not apply as an overall conceptual strategy of the film. This method is manifested in shot composition, which usually positions a character in the centre of the frame, and deviates from that mainly when another character enters into the frame. Although camera movements are mostly motivated by the movement of characters, the camera retains a certain independence from them, by lagging behind, anticipating the characters' movements etc. This is often conceptualised as a sign of authorial presence in film. Some shot styles are

motivated by the character's subjectivity. The sound is diegetic (dialogue and noise), meta-diegetic (the close-up sound of breathing), extra-diegetic (narration) and non-diegetic (music).

To conceptualise these stylistic choices, I use the chronotopic model that is based on Bakhtin's distinction between three chronotopes: that of the represented events, of narrator and of author. Peeter Torop applies this model to film analysis, pointing to some stylistic features of the levels: the *topographic (narrative) chronotope* is presented by the neutral camera, the *psychological (character's) chronotope* builds from the narrator's and characters' points of views, and the *metaphysical (authorial) chronotope* designates the organisation of the text as a whole.

In *Georgica*, both topographic and psychological chronotopes are fragmented and their delimitation is problematic. For example, one could suggest that the first inter-title (*Liber Primus*) is the starting point of narration, hence Jakub's psychological chronotope and the end of the topographic chronotope. Yet the frequent and intensifying representations of Maecenas's subjectivity make it difficult to reduce *Georgica* to Jakub's chronotope. At the same time, the motivation behind the representations of Jakub's and Maecenas's subjectivity are problematic. For instance, the memory sequences are not narratively motivated; nothing recalls them organically. Rather, their occurrence seems to be dictated by some higher organising agency (the author). Also, the point-of-view shots often present objects that reoccur in the narrative and thereby assume certain symbolic dimensions, which lessens their subjective value.

As a consequence, these and other aspects suggest that the metaphysical

chronotope is the dominant level in *Georgica*, where various elements become organised into a coherent and meaningful whole. This is, to a great extent, achieved through stylistic patterns that help to organise different elements into correlating configurations through stylistic repetitions or associations. For example, there is the circular camera movement in the scene where Jakub dances while listening to African music, or in scenes with the horse in the silo-tower, combined with the memory sequence of the children dancing in a circle, the kaleidoscope etc. In addition, the sound bridge (mouth harp) between the island sequences and the memory sequences integrates the boat scene into the same mythological configuration. Finally, there is the way bombardment disrupts Jakub's circular movement in the last scene, and Maecenas's leaving with Jakub's kaleidoscope and hat, together with changes in the stylistic strategy for the sound (the silencing of Jakub, and Maecenas regaining his ability to speak), as well as the configuration arising from elements framed in detail shots (hands, (glass) eyes, bees, photos and fish) etc.

Thus, the central locus of meaning is constituted by stylistic features, marking sequences as belonging to one or another chronotopic level, and through the extent to which these sequences fail or succeed in constructing a holistic meaningful organisation. Authorial style can therefore be theorised as a conceptual stylistic strategy where the topographic and psychological chronotopes are left fragmented and certain marked stylistic features that cannot be conceptualised in the context of either of these two chronotopes come to anchor other elements and integrate them into

meaningful configurations on the level of the metaphysical, authorial chronotope.

Summary by author