Film, Space and Narrative: 'What Happened to Andres Lapeteus?' and 'The Postage-Stamp of Vienna'

Summary

Each film creates its own characteristic chronotope, in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense[1], which marks the spatio-temporal framework of the narrated story (time and place of the plot), determines the situations and relations between the characters, and conveys various more general messages and value criteria. However, besides what is being depicted, the way it is depicted must also be kept in mind. Film commands diverse equipment, apparatus that help create a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional screen, 'where space and time are compressed and expanded'[2], and manipulates all spatio-temporal, narrative and formal aspects. This is a set of effective techniques and methods[3] which considerably influence the patterns of meaning of the film text as a whole. Besides the narrative, camerawork, montage, different elements of the *mise-en-scène* and sound comprise a formal system that inevitably constitutes a factor that creates a message[4], from the viewpoint of both the artists and spectators.

As the above-mentioned formal elements have been constantly changing over time and space, at different periods and geographical locations, establishing new and, almost always, unique associations with the narratives in feature films, their comprehensive mapping is practically impossible. The current article therefore approaches the issues of film space in the form of case analysis, tackling and comparing two films: 'What Happened to Andres Lapeteus?'[5] and 'The Postage-Stamp of Vienna'[6]. I will examine how the films use spatial aspects and whether and how the depicted environments merge with the lines of the narrative. The first part of the article is a more general form analysis, guided by David Bordwell's claim that the work's 'content comes to us in and through the patterned use of the medium's techniques'[7], and by the theses of Alexander Prokhorov[8], a researcher of 1960s Soviet cinema.

1 See M. M. Bahtin, Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics. – The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays. Ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson, M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, pp. 84–258.
2 J. Hopkins, A Mapping of Cinematic Places: Icons, Ideology, and the Power of (Mis)representation. – Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film. Eds. S. S. Aitken, L. E. Zonn. Lanham, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994, p. 47.
3 The apparatus theory was one of the leading frameworks in film studies in the 1970s, which emerged from semiotics and psychoanalytical theory, mainly based on the ideas of Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser.
4 See, e.g., D. Bordwell, K. Thompson, Film Art: An Introduction. Seventh Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004, p. 175ff; J. Gibbs, D. Pye, Introduction. – Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film. Eds. J. Gibbs, D. Pye. Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 2005, p. 10.
5 'Mis juhtus Andres Lapeteusega', dir. Grigori Kromanov, cinematographer Mikhail Dorovatovsky, set designer Linda Vernik, Tallinnfilm, 1966. Screen version of Paul Kuusberg's novel 'The Case of Andres Lapeteus' (1963), script by Paul Kuusberg.
6 'Viini postmark', dir. Veljo Käsper, cinematographer Harry Rehe, set designer Rein Raamat, Tallinnfilm, 1967. On the basis of Ardi Liives's play of the same title, script by Ardi Liives.
7 D. Bordwell, Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005, p. 32; see also D. Bordwell, K. Thompson, Film Art, p. 175ff.
8 A. Prokhorov, Inherited Discourse: Stalinist Tropes in Thaw Culture. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2002. – *http://etd.library.pitt.edu/ETD/ available/etd-07242002-135513/*. A. Prokhorov, The Unknown New Wave: Soviet Cinema of the 1960s. – Springtime for Soviet Cinema: Re/Viewing the 1960s. Ed. A. Prokhorov. Pittsburgh, 2001, pp. 7–28. – *http://www.rusfilm.pitt.edu/booklets/Thaw.pdf*.

In the Estonian context, the 1960s are considered the era of the 'rebirth of national film'[9], when professionals educated in Moscow and Leningrad took over the baton from guest artists (mostly directors) who were dominant in local film-making during the post-war decades. In the general cultural arena, film still remained in the role of a 'big loner', as Lennart Meri bitterly admitted in 1968.[10] 'What Happened to Andres Lapeteus?', and partly also 'The Postage-Stamp of Vienna' were both films that, nevertheless, managed to attract the attention of the public and of critics.

Narrative and Presentation: Connections with Soviet 'New Wave' Cinema

'What Happened to Andres Lapeteus?' presents a personal drama with desolate undertones against the background of insecure social circumstances during the decades after the Second World War. The protagonist Andres Lapeteus is shown as an outwardly successful man, who shrewdly operates under sensitive political conditions and achieves material prosperity and a relatively stable social position. However, his superficial ascending trajectory is opposed by a chain of questionable personal choices, soon to become fatal.

The plot of 'The Postage-Stamp of Vienna' centres on the topic of telling the truth. The story, in a farcical tone, tells of the (re)establishing of the authority, both in his professional and family life, of Martin Roll, a skilled worker in a box factory and a keen philatelist.

Alexander Prokhorov, who received his PhD in 2002 from Pittsburgh University for his thesis 'Inherited Discourse: Stalinist Narratives in Thaw Culture', proves quite convincingly that, although during the 1960s film-makers regarded their work as an an-

tithesis of Stalinist cinema, they still focused – true, in a modified form – on the essential topics of Stalinist culture: the positive hero, family and war. At the same time there was a significant shift in scale: the grand heroism of Stalinism was replaced by more chamber-like and personal achievements, the domestic milieu often replaced battlefields, the (nuclear) family no longer reflected only the Big Family of Nations, and the (male) individual, whose identity, personal self-expression and world of perception formed the core of the stories, was preferred to the masses. The iconography connected with heroes and scoundrels went through a remarkable transformation. Another significant aspect was restoring the revolutionary mentality lost in the course of the Stalinist regime, and returning to the 'pure' Leninist ideals of the 1920s.[11] These narrative features are present in both films, in one way or another.

The mainstream of Stalinist film officially rejected the Soviet avant-garde's experimental manner of depiction of the 1920s, which relied on various film technologies, primarily on the possibilities of montage. The period of the 'Thaw', in the second half of the 1950s, introduced new means of expression which preferred visual aspects to narrative and sound aspects. Following the example of European 'art cinema', film-makers started experimenting with different screen technologies (quick-paced montage, which did not always follow the principles of spatiotemporal clarity, frequent dissolves, complicated panoramic shots and subjective point-

9 Õ. Orav, Tallinnfilm I. Mängufilmid 1947–1976. Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus, 2003, p. 20.
10 L. Meri, Suur üksiklane. – Sirp ja Vasar 1968, February 9.
11 A. Prokhorov, Inherited Discourse, pp. 30–31, 51ff; A. Prokhorov, The Unknown New Wave, p. 8ff.

of-view camera patterns[12]). What was mostly revived from the history of Soviet film were the montage techniques of the avant-garde of the 1920s. However, the avant-garde style was imitated or quoted almost always at elevated narrative moments, when the story was momentarily halted in order to, for example, convey a character's strong emotions and his subjective point of view. By the time of the Thaw, the 1920s avant-garde had become part of the canon, and its usage supported the diversifying of the narrative regime created in the 1930s[13], rather than trying to undermine the ideology on which it was based.

Innovative visual style elements can be found in abundance both in 'The Postage-Stamp of Vienna' and in 'Lapeteus'. In that sense, 'What Happened to Andres Lapeteus?' is more interesting and diverse, although "The Postage-Stamp of Vienna' also offers some dynamic pictorial solutions. Many of those are a part of the field of cinematography and montage. 'Lapeteus' and 'The Postage-Stamp of Vienna' are similar in the usage of low-angle close-ups, which often focus on only the most important character at a given moment, pointing to his (power) relations with other characters, his superior position, and his self-confidence.

Film Space

'Lapeteus' and 'The Postage-Stamp of Vienna' are connected by a common geographical location and relative proximity on the diegetic and the real time axis: the films were completed within one year of each other, and both depict events happening in contemporary Tallinn. At the same time, they create two rather different space models, emphasising divergent film elements and methods to unite space and narrative. 'Lapeteus' is dominated by a strongly personified space, where

the existing place of action, or one specially created for the film, alludes to the state of mind of some characters, notes his or her social position and value criteria, or has the function of expressing the (power) relations between people. In 'The Postage-Stamp of Vienna', on the other hand, characters are depicted in a caricatured manner by means of spatial polarities; in addition, there is a clear aim of drawing mental parallels between the environment and some developments of the plot. Elements of architecture and interior design as images are more strikingly marked in 'The Postage-Stamp of Vienna', whereas in 'Lapeteus' the constructed environment and its details are woven into the narrative in a much more refined and polished manner. 'Lapeteus' is more focused on filigree cinematography and the characters' placement in each shot, as well as montage that maintains the continuity in the relatively fragmented plot, which leaps both in time and space. 'The Postage-Stamp of Vienna' is more keen on (studio) decorations and a constructed environment. These differences are partly caused by the diverse genres of the two films: 'Lapeteus', as a drama of relationships and the individual, indeed concentrates on human nature and relations, whereas the other film, in true comedy genre, 'animates' the inanimate objects in the surrounding environment as a source of comical situations. We could refer here to such comedy classics as Charlie Chaplin and Jacques Tati, as well as, for example, to René Clair's film 'À nous la liberté' (1931). The latter is associated with 'The Postal-Stamp of Vienna' by the imagery of modernist ar-

12 A. Prokhorov, The Unknown New Wave, pp. 12–13.
13 A. Prohhorov, Inherited Discourse, pp. 62–67. See also A. Maimik, "Hullumeelsus" – modernistlik üksiklane 1960. aastate eesti mängufilmis. – Teater. Muusika. Kino 1999, no. 11, p. 85.

chitecture. A significant difference between the treatment of space in the films also exists in their locations: 'Lapeteus', as mentioned above, was mostly filmed in a natural setting, whereas 'The Postage-Stamp of Vienna' mainly uses pavilion shots.

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Films can use space for vastly different purposes, creating compact and unique time-spaces, together with the narrative. However, feature films, especially those of the mainstream, where both 'Lapeteus' and 'The Postage-Stamp of Vienna' are certainly placed, are mostly characterised by the strong association of spatial aspects with the narrative, thus offering significant information about the personalities of the characters, their social positions and mentalities, fixing the time and place of action, expressing the relations between the characters and supporting the film's more general messages. All elements of the film apparatus help create the narrative's space of meaning and, although the *mise-en-scène* and especially sets, as well as the natural or artificial environments, carry the spatial representations better and architectural forms produce more remarkable images, fascinating narrative places can also be produced by cinematography, montage and sound.

Translated by Tiina Randviir
proof-read by Richard Adang