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The Category of System in David Bordwell's Concept of Film Aesthetics

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Abstract
The aim of this paper is to analyse the role played by the category of system in the early books of David Bordwell. They have exerted an enormous influence on the understanding of film aesthetics, but little space has been devoted to their methodological background, including the category of system. In *Film Art: An Introduction* (1979), all elements of film form have a systemic character, which is visible in the chapter titles, such as "Form as System" or "Narration as a Formal System". In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, the film aesthetics is based on systems of narrative logic, time and space. In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, the systems of syuzhet and style are foregrounded. Bordwell's fascination with systems is rooted undoubtedly in their popularity in the 1970s. But do Bordwellian notions really fulfil the criteria of system theory, especially in its newer version, with such notions as chaos, feedback loop, self-regulation and others? Perhaps even Bordwell himself is not certain of that, since the word "system" disappears from recent editions of *Film Art: An Introduction*.

It is beyond doubt that David Bordwell's output exerted enormous influence on the way the aesthetics of fiction film is understood and conceptualised. Foundations of his aesthetic system were laid down by mid-eighties, mainly in three books: *Film Art: An Introduction*, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, *Narration in the Fiction Film*,[1] and then applied, developed and defended. The first of these books, translated into many languages, with its 18 editions, continuously improved and enlarged, is a phenomenon which merits special, separate attention. The second gave the notion of classical film a new life, making it one of the basic concepts in film aesthetics. The third proposed a four-fold structure of film narration (easily reducible to a bi-polar structure[2]), which got deeply engraved in thinking about fiction films. So, "David Bordwell's" role in thinking about cinema, especially fictional one, must not be underestimated. And yet, his aesthetic system has not been subjected to detailed scrutiny, which it not only absolutely deserves, but which, to my mind, is necessary. Some Bordwellian concepts have been widely applied, some of his ideas were discussed, criticised or contested, but the foundations of his aesthetics until now have escaped examination. This paper is a small splinter of a large project, which aims to change this situation and to put Bordwellian aesthetics of cinema through a thorough analysis.

On page XIV of the preface to *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* one finds the following statement: *to see Hollywood filmmaking from 1917-1960 as a unified mode of film practice is to argue for a coherent system whereby aesthetic norms and the mode of film production reinforced one another. This argument is the basis of this book.*[3] I find this assertion crucial to the whole book, not only because it is openly declared as such (*This argument is the basis of this book*), but also because it mentions three notions which lay methodological foundations to the other two books mentioned, and, generally, to Bordwellian thinking about cinema: norm, mode and system. Moreover, it stresses the role of mutual influences and interferences between various systems and modes as a crucial feature of film production and aesthetics. The notion of norm, absolutely fundamental to Bordwellian thinking, has been investigated elsewhere[4], a paper on mode is forthcoming, and the notion of system will be tackled here.

It appears that "system" is among the most often recurring notions in the three aforementioned books and plays a crucial role in their authors' thinking about cinema. It is applied in two different contexts and spheres: film production and film aesthetics. In some places, there are evident attempts to combine these two spheres, to prove that film aesthetics and the mode of film production are interdependent. In others, they are tackled separately, as two independent phenomena. Let us consider both these options.

System of film production and system of film aesthetics: in– or interdependence?

Both approaches can be found in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, and this division even has a structural and personal dimension. Some parts are about film style (that is, aesthetics), sometimes in the context of technology. They are written mainly by David Bordwell, and – separately – by Kristin Thompson. Some are about "modes of production", written by Janet Staiger. One subchapter, entitled

meaningfully "Technology, style and mode of production" was written jointly by Bordwell and Staiger. It belongs to Part Four ("Film style and technology to 1930"), but it is evident that its findings can be generalised and concern not only early cinema, but cinema *tout court*. A general assumption of the book is that systems of film production and film aesthetics are interdependent, that they exert an influence on each other. In other words, film style depends on the organisation of film production, and vice-versa.

Yet, the arguments that support the basic assumption are rather vague; in fact in many parts of this book we can find statements which show that the relation is unidirectional, from style to production modes. This is plainly visible for instance in the following statement: *As I suggested, a major part of my explanation as to why the mode of production developed as it did is the standards which the film industry established. In particular, we will be looking at certain traits of the classical Hollywood group style: the primacy of the narrative, "realism", causal coherence, continuity, spectacle, stars, genres. These traits, among others, influenced the emphasis on certain job tasks and in some cases caused the firms to create individual jobs* [emphasis added]. *Two of the most obvious instances of this are the addition of research staffs in the mid-teens and the continuity clerk in the late teens.*[5] It is quite evident in this quote that the influence goes from style to production organisation, not the other way round. While it might be argued that these stylistic standards were established by the industry, it is obvious that the industry did not do it in a void, arbitrarily. The whole description of early Hollywood cinema and a slow, gradual emergence of the classical style confirms that the filmmakers and the companies followed the viewer's tastes and developed the modes of filmmaking which proved to be most popular or promising. Why these particular traits proved to be most popular and/or promising is another question, but what seems to be certain is that labour force, the means of production or the financing of production – that is, the elements of the mode of production[6] – did not influence the stylistic options, such as primacy of narrative, "realism", casual coherence, and so on. Janet Staiger herself seems to corroborate this when she writes: *It is true that production practices, on occasion, caused certain stylistic techniques. But overall, Hollywood's production practices need to be seen as an 'effect' of economic and ideological / signifying practices. In some instances, as we have seen, a production practice affected the film style, but in general, we have to look elsewhere for explanations of why films looked and sounded as they did* [emphasis added].[7]

Similar conclusions can be found in a chapter summarizing the evolution of production modes in Hollywood, where one reads that while *[T]here is no doubt that economic factors have strongly affected the development of the classical style*, in the last analysis it is stylistic factors that *can explain the most specific and interesting aspects of Hollywood filmmaking. The particular nature of the classical norms depended upon models of storytelling drawn from literature, theatre, music, and the visual arts. After 1917, the principle of using narrative logic to control systems of space and time became central. Maintaining narrative dominance and its particular systems (e.g. psychological motivation, continuity editing) was a central cause for the emergence of successive production systems* [emphasis added]. *Once the director-unit method was succeeded by the central-producer system around 1914, a rigid mass-production framework was in place, to be elaborated and perpetuated in the*

producer-unit system of the 1930s and 1940s. When mass-production declined with the package-unit system of the middle 1950s, a detailed division of labor and a hierarchical work order remained. The classical style was critical in reinforcing both economic practices (e.g., cost efficiency) and ideological/signifying practices (e.g., the standard of the quality film). Within the mode of production, the tensions of standardization and differentiation, the increase of specialization, and the tendency of Hollywood's institutions to focus energy and capital toward a controlled uniformity all c r u c i a l l y d e p e n d e d u p o n t h e n o r m s o f t h e c l a s s i c a l s t y l e [emphasis added].[8]

What is evident in this quote is the dominant role of a relatively autonomous phenomenon of "the norms of the classical style". These norms did not result from the mode of production, but from the tradition of storytelling in other arts. Changes in systems of production, a series of transitions from central producer to package-unit system, did not crucially affect the output, that is, films, which basically respected the norms of the classical style. To the contrary, it is the mode of production that depended on the style, was shaped by the style. This applied also to later periods, after the termination date of the classical style, which Bordwell set (not without hesitations) on 1960. Since that year, Bordwell and Staiger state, *there have been several modifications in the US film industry, but most of them have had only minor effects on the mode of production.*[9] All this undermines the basic assumption of the book, that of the system of interdependence, where *aesthetic norms and the mode of film production reinforced one another*. Upon closer inspection, it appears that the aesthetic norms of the classical style are a metaphysical entity shaping both the ideological/signifying practices (films) and the modes of production.

The Classical Hollywood Cinema is basically a book about Hollywood cinema from its inception to 1960. Literally speaking, the argument about the interdependence of film style and mode of production refers only to the period 1917-1960 in the history of American cinema. The question arises, though, whether this argument is strictly localised and can be applied only to American films from the period, or it can be generalised to achieve the status of a rule, according to which there is a systemic relation of interdependence between film style and production mode. This question gains weight in the light of the last chapter of the book, entitled "Alternative modes of film practice", in which the authors (David Bordwell and Janet Staiger) reflect on whether alternative film styles entail alternative modes of film production. Searching for alternative styles, they turn to national schools first, maintaining that after World War I a need appeared *to distinguish domestic films from the American product*.[10] German, French and Japanese cinema are discussed in this context, together with more recent Australian cinema and the anticolonialist cinema of Third World countries. Next, alternative stylistic systems of some directors (especially Kenji Mizoguchi) are depicted, with emphasis on the points of difference with classical style. Some individual films are mentioned, including Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1928), *Wavelength* (1967) by Michael Snow, *The Passenger* (1975) by Michelangelo Antonioni, and then the authors turn to other general modes of film practice: the art cinema, the avant-garde cinema and the "modernist" cinema. All these descriptions are purely aesthetical, none of them is accompanied with a description of a mode of production. Therefore, we do not know whether the production mode

of, say, a German film with "Teutonic quality" differed from the production mode of American classical films from the period or other German films which lack this quality, as they try to imitate Hollywood films. Exactly the same can be said about all other abovementioned films. When near the end of this rather short chapter the authors do state that *[S]ome alternative modes of production can be identified with characteristics of entire national film industries*,[11] closer descriptions are debatable. First, a Soviet example. While it is undeniable that *The Soviet system of filmmaking after 1930 is an instance of the overt insertion of State ideological direction in the filmmaking process*,[12] in the last analysis it appears that the change did not concern the structure, or the "mode of production", but only personal matters. *They* [The Soviets] *set up a division of labor and a production head as in the Hollywood mode, but the Party and Committees remained the top decision-makers in the studios*.[13] The sparing mention of Japanese cinema is even less convincing. It is hardly surprising then – although incompatible with the book's declared approach – that alternative practices *have generally not been launched on an industry-wide basis*, but *have sprung from the choice of individual filmmakers or filmmaking groups*.[14] Examples are as follows: some filmmakers have a rather loose approach to the script; they do not use it or do not observe it. Some shoot in the order in which the sequences will appear in the finished film. Some demand sustained attention from their cast and crew. Some work in unusually small teams. Some work with music score and sound effects in an unorthodox way. Some insert dialogue only in postproduction, whereas others use only direct sound. While all of these are undoubtedly remarkable insights, it is questionable whether the depicted practices belong to sphere of the "mode of production", which consist of the labour force, the means of production, the financing of production. I would rather say that they are various artistic practices which can and usually do exist within traditional structures of film production.

In this light, the authors' conclusion – *It would be naïve to think that alternative styles necessarily lead to alternative production procedures, still less fundamental shifts in the mode of production*[15] – sounds as an expression of a common sense and as a sign of defeat at the same time. It is commonsensical, because it seems quite obvious that films that differ radically with regard to their styles can be realised within the same production structure, and *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* confirms that. It is a defeat, because what the book plainly shows – against its will – is that there is no direct connection or relation between aesthetic norms and the system of film production. An indirect sign of this defeat is that none of the *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* authors persisted in maintaining this relation. David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* delineates four different modes of fiction film on a purely stylistic level, without any reference to their modes of production.

The question that the trio Bordwell – Staiger – Thompson asked (whether the system of film production influences film aesthetics?) is an interesting one. Moreover, in the time when it was asked, it had a flavour of freshness. In accordance with the premises of New Cinema History, it brought a promise of liberation of film aesthetics from a purely textual approach. The result of their project has been disappointing, though. The dependence of aesthetics on the system of production has not been proved. To the contrary, what they proved – to a great extent against their premises – was that the film style is independent of the production system, or even that it exerts a decisive influence on this system. Perhaps the reason

for this was a wrong definition of the system of production in terms of labour force (especially division of labour), means of production, and finances; perhaps a different approach would have been more fruitful. Until now, though, no other approach has been proposed.

Film style as a system

The second "systemic" area in the Bordwell – Staiger – Thompson endeavour is that of aesthetics. In *Film Art: An Introduction*, film form, film narration and film style are "formal systems". This is mirrored by the book's structure, which – until the 9th edition – contains such chapters as "Form as System", "Narration as a Formal System", "Style as Formal System".[16] In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, the systemic nature of film form takes up central position in the whole argument, which is plainly visible for example in such statements: *The first and crucial step is to assume that classical filmmaking constitutes an aesthetic system that can characterize salient features of the individual work.*[17] In what follows, Bordwell presents not one system, but three, stating that *any fictional narrative film possesses three systems: A system of narrative logic, which depends upon story events and causal relations and parallelisms among them; A system of cinematic time; and A system of cinematic space.*[18] No less important are their mutual relations: *If systems are relations among elements, the total style can be defined as the relation of those elements to each other. Narrative logic, time and space interact with each other,*[19] which means that relations between systems also have a systemic nature. Apart from these three basic systems, a separate chapter is devoted to "The Continuity System",[20] without, however, establishing a structural link between it and the other three. In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, the situation changes, as it is stated that *filmic narration involves two principal formal systems, syuzhet and style*, whereas the ranks of time and space seem to be lowered, as they become merely *two stylistic aspects of the film medium.*[21]

As we can see, the term is used in several distinct contexts, and the decision as to what can be called "a system" and what not changes. Interestingly enough, although Bordwell assigns this term a central position, one can barely find its precise and rigorous definition in his works, or relate his thinking to system theory. He comes the closest to it in *Film Art: An Introduction*, where one reads: *Let us take a system as any set of elements that depend on and affect one another. The human body is one such system. If one compartment, the heart, ceases to function, all other parts will be in danger. Within the body there are individual, smaller systems, such as the nervous system or the optical system. A single small malfunction in a car's workings may bring the whole machine to a standstill; the other parts may not need repair, but the whole system depends on the operation or each part. More abstract sets of relationships also constitute systems, such as body laws governing a country or the ideological balance of the wildlife in a lake. As with each of these instances, a film is not simply a random batch of elements. Like all artworks, a film has a form. By film form, in its broadest sense, we mean the overall system of relations that we can perceive among the elements in the whole film. In this part of the book and in Part Four (on film style) we shall be surveying the sorts of elements a film may possess.*[22]

There is no definition of system in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* or *Narration in the Fiction Film*; one can only try to detect the term's meaning from scattered

remarks. For example, a system can be equated with a set of norms, like in the following statement: *Mukarovsky's work helps us move toward defining the Hollywood cinema as an aesthetic system. Plainly, the Hollywood style has functioned historically as a set of norms*.[23] In another place, a system is equated with a structure of information (*In narrative cinema … the film offers structures of information – a narrative system and a stylistic system*[24]), in yet another, its constitutive feature is the ability to arrange its components (*The syuzhet is a system because it arranges components – the story events and states of affairs – according to specific principles … Style also constitutes a system in that it too mobilizes components – particular instantiations of film techniques – according to principles of organization*[25]).

As we can see, in Bordwell's writing a system is defined as *relations among elements that depend on it*, as a set of norms, a structure of information, as syuzhet, as a form which has the ability to arrange components. It is not certain that all these notions are compatible.

This view on film aesthetics seems to have a clear polemical edge. The authors are against thinking about film form in terms of isolated devices equipped with a stable meaning and/or function – that is, in a perspective on film form or language characteristic of the "grammatical" school. In many passages of the books analysed here, and also in other books and articles by the same authors, one can find statements suggesting that we should not consider particular devices in isolation, because any device can serve many different purposes, ends and functions. What is crucial is the relation of a given device to some bigger "whole", which can be absolute (a film), or fragmentary and partial (time, space, narrative "logic", continuity, syuzhet, style). This whole is called a system.

While I fully sympathize with this polemical crusade against the "grammatical" perspective (it seems to me totally futile and unproductive), the way the notion of system is used stirs my mixed feelings at best. I do not know what to think about the difference between two books published about the same time. In one of them, systemic nature is assigned to time, space, and "narrative logic" (why logic? why do time and space not have their "logics"), in the other – to syuzhet and style. What is the relation between them? Are they compatible with each other? If so, what is their mutual relation? Or, perhaps, they are two different conceptualisations of basically the same thing?

Andrzej Zalewski claims that with American self-professed film cognitivists, we have a case of wrong self-identification. They are much closer to phenomenology than to real (philosophical) cognitivism. He points out that commonsensical orientation, respect for *a voice of experience coming from regions of everyday life and the ability to describe it without scientistic obligations*, which he finds in the analyses of film cognitivists, is also *the methodological stance of phenomenology*.[26] The reason for this mistaken self-identification is that cognitivism was much better known in America than phenomenology when the foundations for the "film cognitivism" were laid down.

One aspect of this crisscross between cognitivism and phenomenology, which Zalewski takes under close scrutiny, is schema. To a certain extent, Zalewski writes, Bordwell's usage of this notion resembles Kantian thinking. For Kant, the matter of perceptual processes is given; it is a kind of alien body, independent of our cognitive capacities. It is only the form, which is a schema of our intellect, that

brings about a subjective ordering of the natural world. Thus, the matter comes from the outside world, whereas the form is an expression of the subject's ordering force. Phenomenologists view it differently: for them, the matter is constituted by the subject exactly like the form, so the division between form and matter, what is "ours" and what is external, disappears, and what remains is one transcendental stream of experience, encompassing the whole world around us together with all its inhabitants.

Zalewski's remarks about schema can be easily extended to system. Here, too, we are not sure to which sphere a system belongs. Is this a cognitive schema, an extension of the subject's ordering powers, or does it belong to reality on equal footing with the matter? From the scarce definitions or descriptions of system quoted above, one can conclude that Bordwell is closer to the Kantian orientation. Systems are defined as "relations among elements", as something which "arranges" or "mobilizes" components. The duality of a system on the one hand and "elements" or "components" on the other is visible. Yet, the line between them is blurred and I think that Zalewski is right when he points out that in this respect Bordwell's position is somehow suspended or rather torn between the two orientations. A very practical question is: what is the system and what are the elements (or components)? Let us take "a system of cinematic time". What is "systemic" about time and what components are "arranged", "mobilized" or related to one another? Let us assume that components are events, and the system equals with norms along which these events are arranged. In that case, does a chronological ordering make up one system and, let us say, unchronological – another one? And if this is not the case, how could one coin or name a system which includes all kinds of ordering events? Would not it be more proper to say that time is a sphere prone to systemic arrangements, and to distinguish various systems of arrangement? Another thing: time has not only dimensions connected with events (order, frequency), but also with duration. In that case, the notion of event as a "basic unit", an element, a component susceptible to arrangement, loses its functionality. What is regarded as an element which mobilized by "a system of cinematic time" understood as duration? A similar question can be asked with regard to all other "systemic" categories elaborated by Bordwell, with a special distinction for style. What does it mean that style is a formal system? What are the ordering norms and what are the "arranged" elements? If we assume that the elements are "devices" (which in itself is not very clear, as Bordwell's whole argument lacks a clear-cut definition of a device), and the system is a norm (body of norms) according to which these devices are arranged or "mobilized", then should we speak of one "stylistic system", or rather of many stylistic systems, different for each "mode", "school" or individual director, or at least for some of them? And if this is the case, would not it be more accurate to speak of style as a set of devices susceptible to systemic organisation? And to say that there are many stylistic "systems"? But then the question appears whether the very word "system" is necessary at all, what added value it brings – if any, and whether it would not be just fine to talk about different styles, without this "systemic" component?

This brings us to the crucial question: what is the real nature of this quest for systems? It is undeniable that one of the biggest assets of Bordwell's and other cognitivists' writing are superb, detailed and insightful analyses of hundreds of

different films, very often supported or illustrated by frame-grabs. This seems to be this empirical dimension of their research that they are so proud of. Let us take a closer look at one such analysis from *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, that of three films by Kenji Mizoguchi (*Naniwa Elegy* /1936/, *Sisters of the Gion* /1936/ and *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemums* /1939/). Its point of departure is the observation that all three films can be loosely called melodramas and that they use very long takes. Yet on this basis, it is impossible to distinguish Mizoguchi's films from films by the American director John Stahl, who also made melodramas using long takes. *But Mizoguchi's work challenges the classical style in a way Stahl's does not: Mizoguchi systematically withholds our access to the character's psychological behaviour, especially facial expression. The long take becomes only one instrument of this strategy.*[27] The means are mentioned by which this withholding is effected: long shots, chiaroscuro, the aspects of the set which block our vision of the characters, the actors often being turned away from the camera. This is juxtaposed with Stahl's "classical" manner in which the characters' faces are clearly visible. Moreover, Mizoguchi eschews closer shots. *The shape and rhythm of the spectator's activity is changed when the "establishing" shot does not give way to nearer and clearer vantage points, or to the final close-up that reveals the heart of the action before we are whisked to the next scene.*[28] Other features, such as separating the voice from the body, saturating shot duration with recollection and anticipation of gestures, exploring environment, ambiguity of character psychology and spatial depth. *What enables these values to emerge, however, is rigorously systematic quality of Mizoguchi's alternative narration, the way camerawork, lighting, acting, setting, and causality function together.*[29]

This passage is very typical of Bordwell's analyses of non-classical films. It usually consists of two steps. The first is to distinguish a given film (or films) from the classical mode; the second is to find a central point – sometimes it concerns meaning, more often a function – which somehow justifies all these deviations, bringing them under some sort of a common denominator. What is crucial is that various devices are gathered under the same umbrella, working to achieve the final effect. The analyses of classical films are similar, only the umbrella is more un-equivocal. What is being proved is that all devices work together, basically at the service of the narrative and realism.

As an aside, although Bordwell stresses the importance of this second step, pointing out that it is by far not enough to counter the classical style – *one must at the same time show how films can construct systematic alternative*[30] – it seems to me that he is much more convincing and his analyses are much more fervent when he depicts the classical style and shows deviations and departures from it. It is visible even in analyses of three alternative "modes of narration" from *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Although their purported aim, largely achieved, was exactly to show a "systemic alternative", these descriptions or analyses are usually full of references to the classical mode. This is also evident in the analysis of Mizoguchi's films mentioned above. All deviations and departures from classicism are very convincing. The part on the systemic alternative is much weaker; it comes down to the conclusion that various aspects of film form work together (which is usually the case, also, evidently, in the classical style). But to which effect do they work? What is the positive character of this alternative, apart from the fact that Mizoguchi's style differs from the classical?

Leaving this matter aside, if systemic nature comes down to the fact that all devices, aspects, and levels of film form work to achieve a certain effect or can be gathered under one umbrella, then the question is whether this working together of various devices can really be called "a system". Probably yes, if we limit ourselves to a very narrow, colloquial definition, in which a system is simply an ordered "relation among elements". More advanced notions from systems theory, like open and closed system, feedback loop, self-regulation, boundaries, homeostasis, adaptation, reciprocal transaction, throughput, mesosystem, exosystem and many others do not appear in Bordwell's books. So what kind of "relations" ensues from Bordwell's analyses? The most definite and specific relation among elements in the above-quoted analysis of Mizoguchi's films is that which concerns withholding information about characters. Let us leave aside for a moment the fact that this part belongs rather to step one, that of comparison – Mizoguchi's manner of withholding information is juxtaposed with the classical manner of "full access". Nevertheless, several devices work to this effect: long shot, sparse lighting, set design, the actors' movement. It is rather difficult to speak of interrelation among elements, though, if by this we understand a dynamic set of influences. One cannot say that long shot in any way influenced the way other devices were used. In this sense, there is no mutual relation (or interaction) among elements. There is no logical, causal, or whatever connection between long shot and the kind of lighting used. The nature of relation among elements is different: all they together take part in the execution of a certain rule, idea or concept. Or, perhaps, looking from another end: they are all subsumed under an interpretive category which ensures the film's coherence.

In this way, the notion of system comes very close to the notion of dominant, coined by Russian formalists and employed fruitfully by American film cognitivists, who are also called neoformalists. Kristin Thompson writes in her book on film analysis that *[A]t first, the dominant seems to be simply another word for unity, for a structure that pulls together all devices of work into an organic whole*.[31] And although formalists, as Thompson states, soon abandoned this *initial, relatively static, organicist concept*, venturing towards a *more dynamic version*,[32] it seems that Bordwell stuck to it when elaborating his idea of aesthetic system, which is plainly visible in the above-quoted definition of a system, where he compares it to the human body. If this is the case, then "system" loses its status of an objectively existing structure of an artwork and becomes a tool for film analysis, like dominant, which *governs the perceptual-cognitive "angle" that we are cued to adopt in viewing a film against its background*.[33] And the dominant *is neither wholly within the work nor wholly a product of the spectator*.[34]

Tracing the roots of Bordwell's enchantment with systems, one cannot help the impression that it was the zeitgeist that played a crucial role. Bordwell's formative years fell in a period of the biggest popularity (in academic circles, to be sure) of general system theory, brought about by the publication of Ludwig von Bertalanffy book *General System Theory* in 1968. And yet, one can have serious reservations regarding the compatibility of Bordwell's approach with that of Bertalanffy. True, the likening of film to a living organism may sound "Bertalanffial", given that he was a biologist and the author of *organismic theory in biology*.[35] Also, Bordwell's conviction that isolated devices do not have a function or meaning on

their own, in isolation, but only in relation to a bigger whole, can echo Bertalanffy's view on systems. But there are also fundamental differences. Bertalanffy distinguished open and closed systems, and he focused on the latter. Open systems are the ones which exchange matter with their environment.[36] Bordwell does not use these notions; we do not know whether film style (aesthetics?) is an open or a closed system, whereas this distinction is crucial to Bertalanffy. Also, Bordwellian categories only very loosely fit Bertalanffy's definition of systems, understood as *complexes of elements standing in interaction*.[37] As we have seen above, it is difficult to speak of an interaction of elements in the Bordwellian system. If anything, it is rather the execution of a plan, which is more adequate to closed than open systems. Bordwell does not even mention many systemic categories essential to Bertalanffy, such as *wholeness, sum, centralization, differentiation, leading part, closed and open system, finality, equifinality, growth in time, relative growth, competition*.[38] Last but not least, Bertalanffy tried to apply his general system theory to many fields, such as biology, mathematics, cybernetics, sociology, even history, but never applied it to the arts or culture.

It seems that Bordwell has applied the notion of system in a similar way as other notions central to his theory, such as norms, modes, or even classicism. He uses them in a colloquial manner, without paying attention to their more elaborate aspects or tradition. Whether this manner is methodologically correct or not is a big question. Perhaps we should not carp at him for trifles, especially having in mind his extremely impressive achievements.

It seems, however, that Bordwell and Thompson themselves lost their enthusiasm for systems as time passed. The word "system" disappears from the list of contents in the most recent edition of *Film Art: An Introduction*.[39] The chapter title "Narrative as a Formal System" (in the first edition: "Narrative and Nonnarrative Formal Systems"[40]) has been replaced with "Narrative Form"; "Form as System" – by "Form as Pattern"; "Style as a Formal System" – with "Style and Film Form". Does that mean that the authors began to doubt in the accuracy of this notion as a tool for depicting film aesthetics? Perhaps. Luckily enough, they can express these doubts by making changes in subsequent editions of this book. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* and *Narration in the Fiction Film* are not that lucky – each was published only once.

Postscript

The inspirational force of systems in film theory did not die, though. Or if it did, then it rose from the dead again. A sign of this resurrection is a book by Maria Poulaki.[41] Its point of departure was a form of contemporary, postclassical cinema called "complex narrative", which tends *to contain many protagonists and parallel and interconnected stories, a different, for some scholars 'loose', form of causality, with chance or coincidence becoming a central force in the plot development, and a nonsequential temporal and spatial structure*.[42] Contrary to Bordwell, who attempted to reconcile system theory with a theory of film narration, or, strictly speaking, to shape his theory of narration by means of system theory, Poulaki pits them against each other. In her view, classical narratology, which has always tended *to prioritize the 'linear' causal-logical and temporal succession of events in its definition of narrative*[43] does

not provide *a satisfying framework to accommodate the complex and non-linear structure of complex films*.[44] This satisfying framework can be provided by an outgrowth of Bertalanffial general system theory, namely a complex system theory, which draws on new developments in the area of system research, particularly chaos theory from the 1980s and network theory from the 1990s. The main difference between classical system theory and new complex systems theory is that the former privileges top-down approach, in which *individual events make sense only as long as they are placed into a meaningful whole*[45] (this was clearly visible in Bordwell's attempt), whereas in the latter *the emphasis is placed on units and their decisive role in structuring the system*.[46] This approach is not purely textual; it incorporates also the film's extensions into the spheres of production, distribution, and relations with other media. *Thus, films do not fulfill their purpose when they become coherent wholes of interdependent elements in the mind of the spectator. These wholes rather stay open and function as nodes in the networks that connect films with other films, cinema with other media systems, and media systems with the complex system of global economy and cultural production*.[47] Poulaki chooses three fundamental processes of complex systems theory: reflexivity, emergence, and pattern form, and uses them as tools for the analysis of complex films. Although Poulaki's work appeared as a form of opposition to Bordwellian tradition, perhaps it can play the same role in relation to postclassical cinema that Bordwell's works played in relation to classical films.

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[1] "David Bordwell" is a shortcut. First of these books has two authors (David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson); in the second one, Janet Staiger joined the tandem; only *Narration in the Fiction Film* was signed exclusively by David Bordwell. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, a married couple in private life, collaborated closely, so it is really difficult to set apart their respective contributions to the final project. Writing this article, I considered giving another name to its subject matter, which would not be tied to one person: neo-formal film analysis, Wisconsin project, perhaps even cognitivist film theory. Neither fit: too narrow, too wide, or totally out of focus. I decided to stick to David Bordwell, fully aware that this is limiting and not quite adequate. I hope that Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger will forgive me.

[2] See: A. B. Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago – London 2007, p. 37, 56-65.

[3] D. Bordwell, J. Staiger, K. Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, Routledge, London 1985, p. XIV.

[4] See M. Przylipiak, "On the Notion of Norm in David Bordwell's System", *Panoptikum* 2019, no. 22 (29), p. 79-102 and R. D. Kokeš,

"Norms, Forms and Roles: Notes on the Concept of Norm (Not Just) in Neoformalist Poetics of Cinema", *Panoptikum* 2019, no. 22 (29), p. 52-78.

[5] D. Bordwell, J. Staiger, K. Thompson, op. cit., p. 94.

[6] Ibidem, p. 89.

[7] Ibidem, p. 142.

[8] Ibidem, p. 367.

[9] Ibidem, p. 368.

[10] Ibidem, p. 379.

[11] Ibidem, p. 382.

[12] Ibidem.

[13] Ibidem.

[14] Ibidem.

[15] Ibidem, p. 383. The issue of naivety with respect to the production/style relationship clearly plagued Bordwell, as in *Narration in the Fiction Film* one can read that *Accepting a historical basis for narrational norms requires recognizing that every mode of narration is tied to a mode of film production and reception. It would be naïve to think that, in a mass medium like cinema, norms rise and fall of their own accord* (D. Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1985, p. 154).

[16] D. Bordwell, K. Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 7th edition, McGraw-Hill Companies, New York 2004.

[17] D. Bordwell, J. Staiger, K. Thompson, op. cit., p. 4.

[18] Ibidem, p. 6.

[19] Ibidem.

[20] Ibidem, p. 194-213.

[21] D. Bordwell, op. cit., p. 13.

[22] D. Bordwell, K. Thompson, op. cit, p. 49.

[23] D. Bordwell, J. Staiger, K. Thompson, op. cit., p. 5.

[24] D. Bordwell, op. cit., p. 33.

[25] Ibidem, p. 50.

[26] A. Zalewski, *Film i nie tylko. Kognitywizm, emocje, reality show*, Universitas, Kraków 2003, p. 33.

[27] D. Bordwell, J. Staiger, K. Thompson, op. cit., p. 380.

[28] Ibidem.

[29] Ibidem, p. 381.

[30] Ibidem, p. 379.

[31] K. Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1988, p. 89.

[32] Ibidem, p. 90.

[33] Ibidem, p. 91.

[34] Ibidem, p. 108.

[35] A. K. Koźmiński, *Przedmowa do wydania polskiego*, in: L. von Bertalanffy, *Ogólna teoria systemów. Podstawy, rozwój, zastosowania*, trans. E. Woydyłło-Woźniak, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1984, p. 6.

[36] L. von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory*, George Braziller, New York 1968, p. 32.

[37] Ibidem, p. 33.

[38] Ibidem, p. 95.

[39] D. Bordwell, K. Thompson, J. Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 12th edition, McGraw-Hill Education, New York 2020.

[40] D. Bordwell, K. Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading 1979.

[41] M. Poulaki, *Before or Beyond Narrative? Towards a Complex Systems Theory of Contemporary Films*, Rozenberg Publishers, Amsterdam 2011.

[42] Ibidem, p. 11.

[43] Ibidem, p. 11-12.

[44] Ibidem, p. 12.

[45] Ibidem.

[46] Ibidem, p. 14.

[47] Ibidem, p. 17.

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Słowa kluczowe:
teoria systemów;
estetyka filmu;
David Bordwell;
neoformalizm

Abstrakt

Mirosław Przylipiak

Kategoria systemu w Davida Bordwella koncepcji estetyki filmu

Celem artykułu jest przeanalizowanie roli, jaką kategoria systemu odgrywała we wczesnych książkach Davida Bordwella. Miały one ogromny wpływ na postrzeganie estetyki kina na całym świecie, ale niewiele miejsca poświęcono ich zapleczu metodologicznemu. Kategoria systemu do tego zaplecza należy. Wydaje się, że w książce *Film Art. An Introduction* (1979) charakter systemowy mają wszystkie elementy formy filmowej, co widać choćby w tytułach rozdziałów: „Form as System", „Narration as a Formal System",

„Style as Formal System". W książce *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* estetyka filmu opiera się na trzech systemach: logiki narracyjnej, czasu i przestrzeni; charakter systemowy mają też relacje między tymi trzema systemami. Natomiast narracja filmowa, scharakteryzowana w *Narration in the Fiction Film*, składa się z dwóch systemów: sjużetu i stylu. Niewątpliwie fascynacja Bordwella kategorią systemu wynika z popularności tej kategorii wzbudzonej przez książkę Ludwiga von Bertalanffy'ego *General System Theory* (1968). Czy jednak rzeczywiście Bordwellowskie kategorie spełniają kryteria systemowości, zwłaszcza w ich nowszym ujęciu? Być może sam Bordwell ma co do tego wątpliwości, skoro słowo „system" znika z późniejszych wydań *Film Art. An Introduction*.