

# TOWARDS THE ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE FILM AS INTEGRATED ARTISTIC MULTIMEDIA TEXT

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## ABSTRACT

According to the contemporary point of view in film studies, the integrity of artistic text is constructed of both visual and acoustic means of expression, and the filmic meaning emerges from their interaction. The present analysis of a film as multimedia text is based on encompassing the interaction of image, speech, nondiegetic and diegetic music, noise, special effects (e.g. echo), silence, etc. All these filmic means of expression are equally subordinated to the narrative, and, in turn, mediate the narrative meaning. On the example of an Estonian feature film *Ukuaru* (1973, directed by Leida Laius, original score by Arvo Pärt) we aim towards film analysis as specified above, focusing on the role of film music's composition, and montage of music and image in the construction of compositional unity as well as the interpretation of film as integrated artistic text. There are two types of filmic meaning in which construction music can participate, and from the musical point of view we can speak of two types of feature films: the ones where music mainly functions on the primary level of narration (music "illustrates", "interprets" the plot); the ones where music's functions proceed essentially from the conceptual perspective. *Ukuaru* belongs to the second category.

## 1. BACKGROUND

In search of a method to analyze narrative film as integrated artistic multimedia text we turn to the field of semiotics. Following Lotman (1981) and Gorbman (1987) we distinguish between two levels of cinematic narration and, accordingly, two levels of narrative meaning. One of them is associated with the story told, and might be called the principal level of narration (the plot). The other is associated with authors' conception of the story, or its "message", since it is a characteristic feature of a narrative artistic text to point to something universal through telling a specific story. Both of these meanings are simultaneously communicated through the composition of filmic means of expression and their montage in film.

The present study focuses on a feature film *Ukuaru* (1973) directed by an Estonian director Leida Laius (1923-96). Original score for *Ukuaru* was written by Arvo Pärt, today one of the best-known contemporary Estonian composers who has composed music for about 50 films (Hillier 1997), including feature films, documentaries, animated films.

The story of *Ukuaru* is set in the 1930s and 1940s historical context of Estonia. The protagonist is a young woman Minna, a woodworker's daughter. She has hopes to go to city in order to study in a sewing school, but her father refuses to support her. Minna is drawn to a young woodworker Aksel who is a good accordion player. Instead a rich widowed farmer from Keldriaugu

comes to offer marriage to Minna. Her wish to start living her own life seems strong enough to accept his proposal, although she does not have any romantic feelings towards him. But on her way to the widower's farm she meets Aksel in the forest, and this marriage plan comes to an end.

Aksel and Minna get married and move to live in Aksel's parents' farm. Soon it turns out that without Minna's knowing Aksel has borrowed a great amount of money, and has spent it on wedding and on buying a new accordion. Relationships between Minna and Aksel's parents get more and more tense, until Minna makes a decision, to move with their newborn daughter to Ukuaru – a rundown farm in the thick forests. Keldriaugu's owner marries Minna's childhood friend Loreida.

Minna's father dies and her mother is suffering from paralysis. After the funeral Minna brings her mother to Ukuaru where she recovers from her sickness. The Second World War begins. In the course of Soviets' invasion to the country, Minna's and Aksel's debt gets erased. Aksel receives a mobilization order from Russians and has to leave home. After departing from Minna, Keldriaugu's owner lures Aksel to join the guerillas. At first, Aksel agrees but later changes his mind and tries to escape from the company. The guerillas catch him soon and Aksel is shot. Keldriaugu's owner brings the news to Ukuaru, announcing first that his wife has hung herself, and inviting Minna to Loreida's funeral. But when Minna refuses he blurts out what has happened to Aksel. Minna is in shock and only her mother's whack across her ear brings her back on the earth. Her newborn son cries of hunger and she has no choice but to get up again, to continue living.

It is evident that the above plot has strong melodramatic elements (the triangle of two males and a female) which are connected to the historical context in Eastern Europe before the Second World War (invasion of the Baltic countries by Soviet Union). Laius, however, shapes this story into the form of psychological drama, narrating through characters rather than action, especially through the female protagonist.

## 2. AIMS

The aim of this analysis is to find out how the use of music in *Ukuaru* helps audience to discover and to understand the higher-level meaning in the film, according to Lotman (1981) – the message of the story. Through analyzing the composition and montage of music and image we try to: (1) demonstrate the isomorphism between the syntactic and semantic structure (Jakobson 1971) of *Ukuaru* narrative; (2) explain music's significant role in bringing forward the nodal points of attention relevant for understanding the compositional integrity of the artistic text, and framing the interpretation of conceptual meaning.

Every story takes place in certain spatio-temporal context that is depicted as a certain reality. This world of actions and characters referred to by the primary narration has been called 'diegesis'. Gorbman (1987) has distinguished between diegetic and non-diegetic music in a film. Diegetic music is such that is produced in course of the filmic narrative itself: it is expected to be audible to characters in the film and its source is either explicitly present or narratively implied. Non-diegetic music, on the contrary, is audible only to the film audience: its source is external with respect to the plot. In *Ukuaru* diegetic music always functions at the same time on both levels of narration.

### 3. METHOD

*Ukuaru* was described from beginning to end as a succession of 451 shots; the presence of 37 musical cues in film was described in shot numbers and real time measurement. The hierarchic levels of film's syntactic structure were defined on the basis of Lotman's (1981) application of the general model of narrative to film text: episode is a lower level content-plane unit formed by succession of shots; scene is a higher-level content-plane unit formed by succession of episodes.

All musical cues were analyzed in terms of their compositional structure (form analysis). In addition to the recurrent waltz, 5 principal melodic themes of nondiegetic music were determined. Characteristic of *Ukuaru* score is to avoid exact repetitions of musical themes or entire cues due to which the music is rich in variations.

Next the relationship of music and image was analyzed according to the principle of media pairing (Cook 1998): music was read in terms of the image and vice versa, and in terms of the narratological theme of episodes and scenes and vice versa. This was done in order to determine the possible musical leitmotifs and their possible signification.

In order to conceptualize the montage of image and music we made use of the theory of markedness following the way Hatten (1994) has applied it to music.

The treatment of the film's conceptual meaning was based on the method of chronotopical analysis (Torop 1987). Torop has been concerned with the issue of different types of spatio-temporal contexts (chronotopes) in artistic intersemiotic or multimedia texts. He has distinguished between topographical, psychological, and metaphysical chronotope. Topographical chronotope is the depicted rather than narrated world, "real" time and space where the plot events proceed and characters move; psychological chronotope communicates different worlds of different characters, their nature of being, their point of view to the plot events (e.g. by language, behavior, dressing code a character mirrors his/her attitude to the narrated time and space). Topographical and psychological chronotopes may consist of different worlds whereas in metaphysical chronotope, or the level of conceptual meaning, that what is narrated becomes integrated as a whole. Attention to different chronotopes and point of views is drawn via signals of simultaneity. These can be recurring images or motives (incl. leitmotifs) of any medium: visual, aural (incl. musical), audiovisual.

## 4. RESULTS

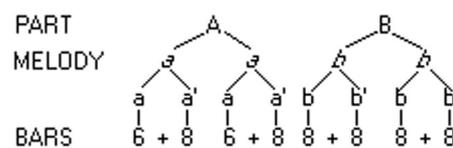
### 4.1. Composition of musical cues

Within every self-contained formal musical segment or entire musical cue of *Ukuaru* score we encounter synchronous or successive opposition of musical material. The opposition could be manifested, for example, in the simultaneity of homophonic and (pseudo-)polyphonic texture, of very narrow and very wide melodic contour, of dissonant and consonant sounds (e.g. bitonality, or tonal melody accompanied by sound clusters); it could appear as collage of styles, or – as in case of the waltz – as a structural conflict.

The central musical element in the *Ukuaru* score is a waltz originally played by Aksel on his accordion. A significant part of the following analysis is focused on various occurrences of the waltz, for the following reasons.

- The waltz occurs (partly or in full) six times altogether in the film, and is performed both as diegetic (on the accordion) and non-diegetic (by symphonic instruments) music.
- The waltz as a musical composition is unusually complex against its general stylistic background of the period's popular music.
- Frequent occurrence of the waltz in the score leads one to think of it as a possible leitmotif: at the same time, however, it is not immediately clear which phenomenon the waltz as a leitmotif signifies.
- The compositional structure of the waltz and its montage principles are characteristic of every other musical cue in *Ukuaru* score.

The accordion waltz (in  $\frac{3}{4}$ ) is written in binary form and consists of two themes (see Fig. 1).



**Figure 1:** The formal structure of the waltz, based on the composition of the melodic line.

In the score only the melodies of *a* and *b* are notated. The harmony is based on the alternation of tonic and dominant chords, except for the plagal cadence in the end of Part B. In the film all the six occurrences of waltz differ from one another in terms of form and "spatial anchoring" (Metz 1985). In order of appearance it is performed as follows: (1) ABA, Aksel plays accordion, diegetic; (2) BA, Aksel plays accordion, diegetic; (3) A only, Aksel plays accordion, diegetic; (4) fragments of *a*, children play accordion, diegetic; (5) again fragments of *a*, flute and violins,

nondiegetic; (6) AB, accordion, nondiegetic. While the contour of the melody *a* stays the same, minor deviations (not indicated in the score), appear in its intervallic composition. In its last occurrence the deviations become perceivable: the tempo of Part A is considerably slower, and the melody *a* is expanded (instead of the previous 6+8 bar composition it is now 12+11 bars).

The complexity of this composition lies in its higher-level meter. There is a “conflict” between the syntactic structures of melodic and bass line, especially in Part A. Against general stylistic expectations their syntaxes do not coincide, nor is there any regularity in their synchronous formal relationships in each of the six occurrences of the waltz. The conflict springs from the circumstance that melodic line *a* always falls into two formal units (6+8 bars), and the bass line into three or four formal units with different bar lengths in every time part A is repeated, as well as in every occurrence of the waltz (e.g. 4+7+4, 4+7+7, 4+3+4+3). This “conflict” also disperses formal borders of waltz’s two parts: when and where one part ends and another begins always remains ambivalent. In this piece of music the melodic and bass line are equally important, i.e. the role of bass line is not that of mere accompaniment.

In this line of reasoning the dominating compositional principle of *Ukuaru* score could be expressed as [+/-].

## 4.2. Montage of image and music

In pairing musical and visual media in terms of the principal level of narration, at first glance it seemed that music of *Ukuaru* does not make use of the leitmotif-technique, otherwise quite typical to film music practice. In this film no one musical theme nor instrument could be associated with one particular person, emotion, idea etc., since their variation of visual and narratological contexts is too vast. In an attempt to find meaning in this kind of montage of image and music the unmarked and marked contexts of each musical theme were charted. From the point of view of the narrative we began to see that the principal opposition down to which any unmarked–marked relationship of filmic means of expression could be reduced to is that between Minna and Keldriagu’s owner.

Laius’s central interest in rendering of *Ukuaru* story is the female protagonist. Therefore it is only natural that music also centers on her. Until the last third of the film music starts in shots that display visual image of Minna; the entire melodic material (each of the 5 themes) is associated with her. Minna is the only character whose movements within a shot are consistently edited to music (or vice versa): her movements fill the musical pauses, and musical rhythm and tempo accord with rhythm and tempo of Minna’s motion. The last third of the film displays a disruption of this order. The plot event that begins the last third of the film is the break-off of the war. The parallel of Minna’s losing control over the plot events (Aksel leaves home, Keldriagu’s owner lures him with a bottle of vodka to join the guerillas, and shoots him after he tries to escape) is her “losing control” over film music. Quite expectedly it is the Keldriagu’s owner who then “gains control” over music. For example, in the scene of joining the guerillas we see Aksel’s movements edited to music. On the one hand this is musical material with *a priori* ominous intonations (e.g. dissonant sound clusters, intervallic constitution

of minor seconds and tritones). On the other hand, it is necessary to emphasize that this is not new musical material but one that has sounded before when Minna was present. Therefore, on this level of narration we can say that musical material does not carry any meanings *per se*; instead, in association with different characters the same music acquires different connotations.

Not only nondiegetic music centers on Minna. In the film it is visually emphasized that so does diegetic music. Even though on the level of plot the accordion waltz is associated with Aksel’s figure, we always see Minna when the waltz is sounding. This kind of composition of music and image spontaneously excludes the possibility to give music signification on the plot level – for example, to draw parallels between the inner structural conflict of the waltz and Aksel’s personality.

## 4.3. Chronotopical structure of *Ukuaru*

The center of topographical chronotope, *Ukuaru* farm, is depicted as intact from the real time of the plot, i.e. Estonia of late 1930s and 1940s. “The years of 1940 and 1941: no flags, parades or cheering, instead a general confusion in backwaters; a glimpsing shot of a train, heavy artillery [tanks] under the tarpaulin on the wagon; cancellation of liabilities, relief for the poor; getting lost of domestic animals” (Remsu 1986: 28). But this idea of timelessness turns out to be crucial: *Ukuaru* is presented as the embodiment of a world that is subordinated to cyclic time: time is marked here by recurring images of felling and planting of trees, changing of seasons, Minna’s pregnancies and births of children. Also, while in film music practice it is quite typical to communicate the topographical chronotope through music, i.e. use music to specify the time period (e.g. via imitation of musical styles), or geographical and ethnic space (e.g. via characteristic sounds, melodic scales, timbres) of the plot, the style, instrumentation (traditional symphonic orchestra), and composition technique of this film’s nondiegetic musical cues also carry the idea of universality. Thus we recognize that *Ukuaru* is depicted as a mythical time-space, a “magical circle” (Cassirer 1946) where man is presented with the totality of being; a closed structure from which nothing exists outside or apart, and everything acquires meaning within the circle itself (if this circle includes a human being, they acquire meaning through each other). Outside the forest border of *Ukuaru* exists Keldriagu that becomes mythologized as *Ukuaru*’s *Doppelgänger*, an opposite world in every sense. But the tension between these opposite worlds that at the same time exclude and depend on each other becomes apparent in psychological chronotope, through Minna and Keldriagu’s owner – two powerful characters and the embodiments of these opposite worlds.

In *Ukuaru* all the mentioned chronotopes are intertwined: topographical chronotope frames the interpretation of psychological chronotope, and both of these communicate the point of view of the metaphysical chronotope. In our interpretation the topographical chronotope presents a text of mythological type which communicates continuous, stable, balanced, natural (also in accordance with nature) order of the world. Through the psychological chronotope, through the characters’ lives, a story is narrated where non-violence and violence interlock, and where brutal ruthlessness breaks the balance of the world of natural order. In metaphysical chronotope the idea of balance rises again,

but with different quality: in topographical chronotope the balance is *a priori* given within the world itself (Ukuaru as “magical circle”), but in this level of meaning it gradually emerges from constant interlocking of two opposite phenomena (diachronic axis), and eventually includes both of them (synchronic axis). In addition, the balance here arises through human being. The structure of this balance we will describe as [+/-].

Hence the “message” of the story: it is not enough to live in the balanced world; one has to have inner balance as well, which moreover has to be in accordance with one’s world. In other words, the key to remaining (alive) is the capability of finding one’s own inner balance which in turn allows to constantly create it in one’s world (‘balance’ as a dynamic concept). Minna is the only character in *Ukuaru* to achieve this.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

From the present study the following conclusions can be made:

- Music carries a significant role in distinguishing and uniting two opposite worlds of the psychological chronotope. The fact that the same nondiegetic musical material is associated both with Minna and Keldriaugu’s owner leads us to interpret these characters and the worlds they represent as the two sides of the same phenomena. One becomes mythologized as life-giving and -preserving, the other as life-taking force – the principal difference between them being the reverence for life (Minna) or its absence (Keldriaugu’s owner).
- The underlining principle that organizes the composition of musical cues, all similar in principle, and the montage of image and music is that of [+/-]. The one musical cue that draws attention to this is the accordion waltz – the only cue in this film with the potential to be heard and remembered, and hence the leitmotif of ‘balance’.
- The formal and expressive functions of this film’s music proceed essentially from the conceptual perspective. In return, music brings forward the nodal points of attention that are relevant for understanding the compositional integrity of the artistic text, as well as frames the interpretation of conceptual meaning.

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