

The Doctoral School of the University of Theater and Film

The Dramaturgy of Endings in the Fiction Film: Figuration in Film

Endings

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This dissertation deals with the figural analysis of film endings which is a very exciting contemporary method of film analysis, although it isn't very well known. These days the field of film analysis is ruled mainly by contextual historians or neoformalist narratologists, but in Hungary, film criticism is still conceptualized as a kind of auteurist study and there is little room for different, eccentric kind of approaches to cinema. This study tries to reveal the emancipatory qualities of figural analysis which is connected to the fact that this method or theory conceives cinema as an immensely dynamic configuration or circulation of formal and narrative elements. This idea of cinema as a figuration of elements and bodies transcends the conventional borders of film studies and it builds bridges between art house cinema, avant-garde films and mainstream movies. Therefore figural analysis can be understood as a unique cinephile praxis and it can be used as an eminent tool for teaching cinema.

The dissertation tries to use this approach in the interpretation of the transformative work of film endings. The core idea of the text is that there is a possibility to rethink the workings of film endings from the perspective of figural theory, and there is a possibility to rethink the figural theory from the perspective of film endings. Since the original form of figural analysis deals with the system of prophecy and with the dialectic transformation between figura and fulfillment, or, event and the final event, it is obvious that the final *figura* has a very important role in the dynamics of figuration. My text tries to catch and localize these kind of fulfilled figures in the endings of films, which allow us to look for the prefiguration of the fulfilled *figura*, and this investigation can reveal the figural dynamics of the „film work”. The important thing about this type of interpretation is that it wants to do justice to the films themselves and it uses the idea of figure and figuration to make the film do the thinking, to let the films tell us what type of figures they create in their endings. „Take the risk of the work itself” – says Nicole Brenez, the Godmother of figural criticism, and this dissertation tries to be true and faithful to that, so the interpretations of this text attempt to give voice to the work of films and use the ideas of them and not the other way around by demonstrating these ideas through the films.

The first part of this thesis draws the theoretical framework of this study. In this introductory chapter, I review the contemporary theories of film endings in film studies and narratology. I summarize the statements of the main works on this field including Richard Neupert's *The End: Narration and Closure in Cinema*. Then I give an overview of all the ways how film theory used the terms *figura* and *figuration* in the last four decades. Finally I outline the methodology of the figurative analysis of film endings which I call figurative archeology. In this chapter, I

argue that the terms of *figura* and *figuration* regularly appeared in the texts of film theory since the 1980's and the emergence of this term is connected to some problems of psychoanalysis and the exhaustion of (post-)structuralism. The figurative thinking was grounded in the work of Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, Dudley Andrew and Jean-Louis Schefer, but this topic was marginal for all them. It was not before the appearance of Nicole Brenez that figural thinking obtained a fully developed form in film studies. I argue that the fulfilled form, the Final Figure of figural thinking (at least for now) is the work of Nicole Brenez which created a highly sophisticated system of thought and conceived a critical praxis around this idea of the figure. Brenez agrees with Deleuze that psychoanalysis and structuralism lost its track by treating cinema purely as a sign and symptom and forgetting the aesthetic specificity of its material. Nonetheless, Brenez' thinking springs from the structuralist idea of autonomous textual systems, and she conceives cinema as an autonomous form of creating and changing bodies and elements which has nothing to do with verisimilitude and the boring ideas about the innate relationship between moving image and "reality". This conception of cinema opens new possibilities for film studies in general and for the analysis of film endings in particular. But this figural analysis of the finale in films is inspired by an other figure, too: the famous literary scholar of the Weimar period in Germany, Erich Auerbach, whose understanding of figural interpretation shows the importance of fulfilment and the final figure in the figurative thinking. In my dissertation I claim that the figural analysis of film endings can be established from the ideas of Nicole Brenez and Erich Auerbach, but this method can use the means of contemporary narratology and the current theories of film endings, too.

So the first thesis of my dissertation is that figural approach can enrich the analysis of film endings, and my second thesis is that this figural approach is not necessarily contradictory or opposed to contemporary neoformalist approaches or narrative analyses of film endings. As the analysis of films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Sleepaway Camp* or *Son of Saul* shows, the structural or narrative analysis can help the figural understanding of a film, but the figural understanding can be helpful for the classical approach too, because it can reveal the transformation of energy and material which is beyond the reach of well-established narrative analysis.

The dissertation argues that this figural analysis is relevant in the interpretation of some film endings. The second, third and fourth part of the text proves this statement with the analysis of films. These interpretations show that the figuration in cinema can affect all the levels of

cinema: the dynamic transformation of motifs can happen at the macrofigurative level (which is the level of gestures, situations, bodies) and at the microfigurative level (which is the level of sounds and camera movements). So the main thesis of this work is that the figural transformation of motifs in film endings can be apprehended as much in the formal, abstract level of the film as in the narrative context. The interpretations of the very different films show that these films can figure aural motifs (*La Cienaga*), small bodily gestures (*Superman*), the whole system of formal representation (*Son of Saul*), and can create a totally new kind of cinematic bodies (as it happens in *Sleepaway Camp*). The examples of macrofigurative transformation of motifs include the smiles at the end of *Omen*, *Superman* or *Son of Saul*; the situation of digging in *Son of Saul* or the situation of idyllic happiness in the sand of the beach in *Sleepaway Camp* or the the movement or figure of dance in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. And the examples of microfigurative transformation of elements include the slow panning shots from left to right in *Sleepaway Camp* which are transfigured in the ending of the film, the backwards tracking shots at the beginning and at the end of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and the sounds of phones, dogs and thunderclouds in Lucrecia Martel's *La Cienaga*.

These different levels of figuration create meaning in a very dynamic interconnection and inter-relation: the figural work of the camera movements in *Sleepaway Camp* creates a substantive meaning in connection with the figural creation of a monstrous body, and the transfiguration of the formal system in *Son of Saul* helps us understand the exact meaning and role of the final gesture. So the conceptualization of cinema as a constant creation and circulation of bodies and dynamic figuration of motifs is helpful in understanding the way film endings create meaning and transform units of meaning. Therefore the dissertation argues that figural approach can help us in understanding the way film endings work. "An imperceptible substance is taking shape, yearning for light. The cinema is bringing us nearer to this substance." – Antonin Artaud said in his essay called *Witchcraft and Cinema*, and maybe figural thinking can prove that he was right.

Finally, the texts demonstrates that figuration means not only an interpretative tool for analysing cinema, but a way of composing film text as well. The fifth part of the dissertation shows how the film director Bernáth Szilárd and myself as the dramaturge and co-writer used this kind of compositional strategy for conceiving the last sequence of the Hungarian feature film, *Larry*. This part of the text argues that the idea of figuration can enrich the conventional thinking about

screenwriting and script development, and it can contribute to the teaching of screenwriting and creative writing as well.