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On the Notion of Norm in David Bordwell's System

This paper originated as a by-product of work over a collection of essays about narration in contemporary cinema (Przylipiak, forthcoming). Seeking methodological inspiration I reached for classical "Wisconsin project" books, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson[1], *Narration in the Fiction Film*[2], both published in 1985. A look in this direction seemed natural to me, as I based my first book (1994) on this approach and I have always felt very close to it. Moreover, the significance of these two books in film studies can't be overestimated. At the time of their publication they were virtually showered with praises. CHC was called "a classic in film studies" (Elsaesser, 1985A, p. 52), "A landmark in the history of academic film studies in the United States" (Allen 1985, p. 87), a book which "is going to change the way American film history is studied" (Gunning, 1987, p. 74); NiFF "was heralded as a work that 'will undoubtedly ground the discussion for years to come' (Kozloff, 1986, p. 43)" (Arroyo, p. 75). After many years Thomas Elsaesser regarded both works (together with Gilles Deleuze's cinema books and the rise of cognitivism – all happening at about the same time) as a turning point, from which "the cinema, or rather "film", has entered an entirely different space of reflexivity and conceptualisation" (2009, p. 125).

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[1] From now on when referring to this book I will use the abbreviation: CHC.
[2] From now on when referring to this book I will use the abbreviation: NiFF.

Obviously, it is not my intention here to review books which were published 35 years ago, or to do justice to their enormous wealth of concepts and information. Working on the aforementioned collection I asked myself whether the concepts and categories worked out and launched in the mid-80s are still relevant. Can they be used for describing contemporary cinema? And, as a matter of fact, which concepts from the enormous, overwhelming wealth of concepts and categories launched in these books can be regarded as essential? An answer to this last question has been provided by Bordwell himself, who stated in the introduction to *Classical Hollywood Cinema* that "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." (CHC, p XIV). Three words in this short statement seem to me essential to the Bordwellian approach: system, norm and mode. Each of them deserve close analysis. In this paper I am focusing on the notion of norm, which in my opinion occupies a central place in the abovementioned approach.

The notion of the norm is absolutely fundamental for the Bordwellian project. Classical Hollywood cinema is presented as a set of norms. Moreover, a whole realm of fiction films across periods, styles and countries is perceived through a prism of norms and deviations from the norm. A mode of the classical Hollywood film functions like a peculiar "Sevres metre", a precisely calibrated, universally agreed basic point of reference. Deviations from "classical norms" provide a background against which alternative styles are delineated. So, the notion of the norm is absolutely crucial to the whole project which features so prominently in CHC and NiFF, but which is also present in such books as *Film Art: an Introduction, Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*, *Breaking the Glass Armor"* and others.

Taking into account how important the category of norm is to the whole project, astonishingly little space has been devoted either by Bordwell or his followers and critics to the concept's history and analysis. A remark voiced in an anniversary blog article that "Nowadays (…) one wouldn't need the extensive discussion of artistic norms David launched in Chapter 1" (Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 2009), is, to say the least, overblown, when we realise that less than two pages was devoted to theoretical discussion of artistic norms in monumental CHC and not much more in the only slightly less monumental NiFF. Numerous commentators have discussed various aspects and dimensions of Bordwell's oeuvre, but the notion of norm was left out of this discussion. Yet this notion and the way it is used by Bordwell undoubtedly deserves such discussion, especially when we take into account the enormous influence that Bordwell's research and approach have exerted on film studies.

Bordwell – Mukařovsky

It is well known that Bordwell borrowed the notion of norm first of all from Jan Mukařovský – he declares many times adherence to the ideas of this Czech structuralist. Yet a closer look at Mukařovský's writings reveals that the ties between the two researchers are problematic. A small prelude to this complication is the fact that Bordwell originally referred only to a short, 8-page paper by Mukařovský (1977), and when he turned later to the Mukařovský's main text on norms, *Estetická funkce, norma a hodnota jako sociální fakty* published in English in 1970, he selected only those citations that were in accordance with what Mukařovský wrote in *The Aesthetic Norm* (Kokeš, 2020). This situation makes an analysis of the relationship between Mukařovský's ideas and their Bordwellian application more complicated, because it is not quite certain which of Mukařovský's texts we should refer to. I decided to base my analysis on the longer and more famous essay, firstly, because Bordwell also refers to it, in NiFF; secondly, because this is a complete display of Mukařovský's ideas.

When we take this path, it is evident that Bordwell left large parts of Mukařovský's legacy unaddressed. Two omissions are particularly significant: the justification of a norm and its changeability. The question about justification can be formulated in the following way: What is the basis on which certain styles achieve the status of a norm, while others do not? Mukařovský addresses this issue directly. He stresses that the aesthetic norm "exists as a law striving for unchanging validity" and mentions previous attempts at finding "universally binding conditions of beauty" (1970, p. 24). He also points out that in the majority of cases modern aesthetics is sceptical about the very existence and validity of norms (p. 24). Mukařovský seems to go against the current of modern aesthetics, and turns to anthropological premises, the basic properties of man, which justify the tendency of the aesthetic norm toward legal validity (p. 28). These properties are as follows: for the temporal arts – rhythm, based on the regularity of blood circulation and breathing; for spatial arts – vertical and horizontal lines, right angles and symmetry, which can be derived entirely from the structure and usual positioning of the human body; for painting – the complementarity of colours and several phenomena of colour and intensity contrast; and for sculpture – the law of the stability of the centre of gravity.

What is crucial is the relationship between aesthetic principles and aesthetic norms. Mukařovský rejects the idea that they should overlap, that the norms simply embody the principles. This, he claims, "would mean the negation of the history of art" (p. 28), where the principles are much more frequently violated than observed. So, the crucial importance of the principles

is different. The point is not that the norms adhere to principles, but that principles provide a natural point of reference, a background, against which works of art are perceived. "The great variety of aesthetic norms (…) always point to a single denominator, the psychophysical composition of man as a species. The principles are spontaneously functioning criteria for the conformity and discrepancy of concrete norms with regard to this composition" (p. 28). The aesthetic principle becomes in essence a mental tool used in the process of perception of works of art, a base for spontaneous evaluation of conformity or discrepancy of a concrete norm with the principle. Admittedly, in the course of his argument the position of the aesthetic principle is weakened, as, trying to explain a tension "between the requirement that the norm have overall validity – without which there would be no norm – and its actual limitation and variability" (p. 24), Mukařovsky ceases to refer to the aesthetic principle, and begins to refer to the relationship between an older and a newly-created norm. Still, the aesthetic principle based on anthropological premises provides a firm validation for aesthetic norms.

Actually, what seems to draw his attention in the first place is neither the norm per se, nor its stability and external validity, but rather changeability, variability, a multitude of norms. The bulk of the chapter on norms attempts to explain this. Mukařovský's explanation of changeability and variability of norms is of a sociological nature. The source and innovator of aesthetic norms is lofty art, which in turn is embraced by a dominant social stratum. The aesthetic norms established by the dominant class "leak" to the lower social strata, and are taken over by them. One must admit that this schema is simple and clear. This clarity becomes blurred, however, when Mukařovský introduces two complications. The first has to do with the category of newness. Mukařovský draws a hierarchy of the aesthetic norms and crowns it with "the newest canon, one that is the least automatic and the least involved with other types of norms" (p. 46). In order to maintain consistency in his reasoning, Mukařovský should claim that this newest canon is produced by the highest social class, a dominant or ruling one. Indeed, such a suggestion appears: "It may seem that the hierarchy of aesthetic canons is directly related to the hierarchy of social strata" (p. 46). Yet, in the very next sentence he weakens his claim and warns that although it is "not without some justification", it shouldn't be applied dogmatically, because it does happen that the newest form does not originate from the highest class, but, for example, from young people who belong to other classes. The second, vertical integration of social hierarchy and hierarchy of aesthetic norms is also disturbed by horizontal divisions into age groups, sex and profession, due to which "members of the same social stratum

will have different tastes, and (…) conversely, members of different strata (…) may have very similar tastes" (p. 46). In effect, this part of the book contains contradictory and mutually exclusive statements.

Bordwell declares his adherence to Mukařovský's work, but a reading of the latter's work reveals that the ties between the two researchers are rather weak. It seems that the only thing that was really borrowed was the notion itself, but this notion has been emptied of the content and context which Mukařovský gave to it and filled with things that the Czech structuralist never wrote about. Mukařovský links aesthetic norms tightly with aesthetic function and aesthetic value. For him these three notions denominate three aspects of an aesthetic unity. "A dissertation about one of them which would not take into account the other two would be incomplete" (1970A)[3]. Yet Bordwell writes nothing about aesthetic function (he writes about functions of various devices, but that is a totally different thing) and next to nothing about aesthetic value. Mukařovský devotes a lot of space to the issue of the justification of a norm's claim to absolute validity, Bordwell does not touch on this issue. The crux of the matter for Mukařovský is changeability, variability and the multitude of aesthetic norms; Bordwell practically leaves this issue aside. Mukařovský links the norms (together with functions and values) with sociological matters, which Bordwell doesn't do. At the same time, Bordwell links the aesthetic norm with two different contexts: the mode of production and perceptual habits and expectations of a virtual viewer. Neither of these contexts is present in Mukařovský's work. Moreover, Bordwell places norms within a three level structure of film aesthetics, with special stress on the second level, that of systems of narrative logic, cinematic time and cinematic space, which means that the norms refer to these particular systems. This way of thinking is also completely alien to Mukařovský. So, in fact, Bordwell's and Mukařovský's understanding of norms differ drastically.

To this objection one can answer that Bordwell had the right to take from Mukařovský what he wanted, and he didn't have to take all of Mukařovský's thoughts as they come. This is undoubtedly true. The problem is, however, that simply leaving aside the difficult matters that plagued Mukařovský does not make them non-existent. At least two of them should be considered in depth, because they help to verify the status of a norm and its usability as a general tool for the description of cinema, outside the context of Bordwell's studies. These two issues are justification and changeability of the aesthetic norm.

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[3] The quoted sentence belongs to the preface which has not been translated in the American Ann Arbor edition.

Justification of norms

As I mentioned above, Mukařovský sought the base and justification of an aesthetic norm in the anthropological equipment of a human being. Bordwell generally renounces the "Vitruvian"[4] idea, cherished by Mukařovský, according to which properties of man determine art. To some extent this idea returns with the notion of "canonic story format" as a natural way of telling/receiving stories, a "template" of narrative structure in contemporary Western cultures, which serves as "reference points for the identification of "less intelligible narratives (…)" (Bordwell, 1985, p. 35). Yet two important differences must be voiced: first, Bordwell does not link the canonic story format with the norm; secondly he does not plant it so much inside the human race as in "contemporary Western culture". The canonic story format is not innate, but "learned from one's experience of stories" (1885, p. 149). So, in spite of some superficial resemblances we can't say that Bordwell followed Mukařovský's path in seeking foundations for the norm.

If not a Vitruvian man, then what? In NiFF one reads that "[t]he notion of norm is straightforward: any film can be seen as seeking to meet or not to meet a coherent standard established by fiat or by previous practice" (p. 159). This "fiat" is interesting, but, unfortunately, Bordwell does not elaborate on it. One possibility is that this "fiat" is a decision of industry, as CHC is based on the idea of a systemic relationship of mutual influences between aesthetic norms and modes of film production. Yet, the arguments that support it are rather vague, in fact in many parts of this book we can find statements which show that the relationship is rather unidirectional, from style to modes of production, and not the other way round. 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: MP) (CHC, p. 142). Similar conclusions can be found in the chapter which summarises a description of evolution of production modes in Hollywood, where one reads that while "[T]here is no question that economic factors have strongly affected the development of the classical style", in the last analysis these are 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

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[4] I owe this reference to Vitruvian man to Thomas Elsaesser.

storytelling drawn from literature, theatre, music, and the visual arts" (CHC, p. 367). Many other statements of this kind can be found in CHC. If this is true with regard to American film which has been analysed in detail, it is even more true with regard to other styles, as Bordwell does not link them with "modes of production" at all, asserting that "[i]t would be naïve to think that alternative styles necessarily lead to alternative production procedures, still less fundamental shifts in the mode of production" (CHC, p. 383)[5].

So, if not "fiat", then previous practice is the source of norms. The norm is simply the most often used solution within the systems of narrative logic, time and space (CHC) or within the systems of style and syuzhet (NiFF). In other words, the norms are the most often used ways of constructing film narration, time and space, or, in another variant, film style and syuzhet. Strengthened by trade journals and manuals, they became the proper ways or solutions, measures of standards, quality and aesthetic values. Why these particular ways and solutions became the norms, and not other ones, Bordwell does not explain, but one can guess that what was decisive was the audience's approval. Why, in turn, the audience, or rather its majority, approved some solutions and rejected others, is also not specified, but one can guess again that what was decisive was a force of habit formed in contact with older forms of representational art, such as literature and theatre.

The genesis of norms is not a matter of principal interest for Bordwell, though. The stance he adopts is, so to say, archaeological. He excavates remnants of a past epoch and on their basis tries to discover which solutions were the most often employed, and consequently elevated to the status of norms. The basis for this was provided by 100 randomly selected films out of at least 15 000 films made in the USA between 1915 and 1960 (a so called unbiased sample, UnS). The findings were corroborated by analyses of almost 200 titles chosen basically "for their quality or historical influence" (CHC, p. 10), which made up the so called Extended Sample (ES). This procedure raised some doubts. Barry King questioned the reliability and representativeness of the unbiased sample, pointing out that it made up only 0,66% of the whole output (1986, p. 84). Bordwell replied that it was still better than to "generalise on the classical system on the basis of a single film" (1988, p. 74), which is undoubtedly true but does not solve the issue of

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[5] The issue of naivety with respect to a production/style relationship clearly plagued Bordwell, as in *Narration in the Fiction* 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." (NiFF, p. 154).

representativeness. The next doubt concerns the danger of petition principii fallacy. It was Mukařovský himself who warned against it, stating that "a tendency to preserve the overall force of the norm through empirical deduction of criteria from existing works presumed to be exemplary models (…) must confront either incomplete induction or petitio principii" (1970A, p. 24). This petitio principii fallacy can be phrased as follows: how can we choose exemplary works without a prior setting of the criteria on the basis of which the given works are regarded as exemplary? In other words, in order to choose exemplary works, we should know the criteria to begin with; but these criteria can only be deduced from exemplary works. The way to avoid the petitio principii fallacy was to select – as exemplary – 100 films out of around 15 000 films produced between 1916 and 1960. An adjective which determines this sample – called "an **unbiased** sample" – looks like a rebuttal of the petitio principii charge. And yet, this charge cannot be so easily dismissed. Barry King pointed out that the concept of the classical style was present in earlier Bordwell and Thompson works, namely, *Space and Narrative in the Works of Ozu* and *Film Art: an Introduction.* King concludes that analyses from CHC "can be considered as providing the ground of this earlier analysis" (1986, p. 76), but I would say rather that they can be considered as a way of corroborating a previously formulated hypothesis. If so, then even if the sample was unbiased, its scrutiny wasn't so. King states that this scrutiny was governed by "the criterion of aesthetic pertinence" (1986, p. 86), which means that the researchers looked for pertinent structures and devices, probably ones that correspond with the concept of the classical style.

Mukařovský's "exemplary model" takes on a rather peculiar form in CHC – that of "typical film", called also "the quietly conformist film" and "ordinary film" (CHC, p. 10). Bordwell openly acknowledges that it goes against the custom in film history of focusing primarily on masterworks and innovations. Yet, a masterpiece approach, with all its faults, had at least one asset: it referred to concrete works of art, and therefore any sort of generalisation had an easily identifiable base. In the case of typical film it is different, for "[N]o one film is the classical cinema" (CHC, p. 239), no one film is a typical film. Typical film is a model, a Platonic ideal. So, the norms in fact and in spite of the author's declaration, are inferred from some metaphysical model. All concrete works are just approximations, more or less imperfect hypostases. Also, the *petitio principii* fallacy reappears: the norms are inferred from typical films, but in order to know which film is typical one must know the norms beforehand.

The basic question, which should be answered, is this: to what extent is the notion of a norm binding? We expect of a norm to be something more impor-

tant, more fundamental than just being one style among many others. If so, the question of justification of norms returns. Is a norm based on any sort of "higher order", being that of ideals of beauty, or innate or learned capacities or features of the human race? Or is a norm simply based on statistics, "nothing other than consistency of application" (Elsaesser, 1985, p. 53)? And another name for the dominant style? And if the latter is true, how to construe a sample, and analysis of this sample, to avoid the *petition principii fallacy*.

Bordwell: norm…

The next question is this: what exactly are the norms which lie at the base of the whole Bordwellian project? In CHC some possibilities are mentioned. First, there is the level of Hollywood self-awareness, that is, how Hollywood of the classical era saw itself. It is based on an "enormous body of statements and assumptions to be found in trade journals, technical manuals, memoirs, and publicity handouts" and consists of six basic points: primacy of storytelling; stress on unity as "a basic attribute of film form"; realism; effacement, invisibility, transparency of film form; comprehensibility and unambiguity; emotional appeal that "transcends class and nation" (CHC, p. 3). This description of industry self-awareness is quite convincing, but Bordwell soon dismisses it, stating that Hollywood's own assumptions do not exhaustively account for its practice and that "the institutions' discourse should not set our agenda for analysis" (CHC, p. 4). This dismissal is not very firm, though. The Hollywood practice cannot be accounted for by the Hollywood assumptions exhaustively, which means that it can be accounted for inexhaustively, to some extent. Indeed, some of the above-mentioned points – like primacy of storytelling – have been directly transferred to the Bordwell system of norms; some have been borrowed [transferred]? in disguise, like transparency, which Bordwell puts in the rubric of self-consciousness. Bordwell often refers to some of them – like realism – in spite of the fact that they are not present among his norms. Moreover, Bordwell very often supports his arguments with quotes from the "enormous body of statement" from the era, which, by the way, has been generally appraised. So, dismissal is only partial, tentative, but still, if we are looking for the Bordwellian norm(s), we must look elsewhere. Other possible norms which are mentioned – but only briefly – are those connected with the notion of classicism. Bordwell mentions elegance, unity, rule-governed craftmanship, and concludes this chapter with the following remark: "Before the auteurs, there are constraints; before there are deviations, there are norms" (CHC, p. 4). Obviously, this brief remark cannot be called normative, but it does set a frame for the whole project. And, after all, unity is listed among the main features of the classical style.

The structure of norms and their place in an overall system of film aesthetics is different in each of the two books. In CHC, Bordwell states 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" (p. 6)." Apart from these three basic systems, a distinct chapter is devoted to "the continuity system" (pp. 194–213), without, however, establishing a structural link between it and the three other systems. Norms belong first of all to level number two (that of systems) and – to a lesser degree – to level number three (that of relations among systems). It means that they basically govern an organisation of filmic narration, time and space. And indeed, this is how it is described in subsequent chapters of Part One of the book.

In NiFF the situation changes, as it is stated that "filmic narration involves two principal formal systems, syuzhet and style", whereas the range of time and space seem to be downgraded, as they become merely "two stylistic aspects of the film medium" (p. 16). The relationship between these two classifications is far from clear. Theoretically we could, perhaps, assume, that each of them refers to something different. CHC encompasses "style", whereas NiFF is about "narration", so one could say that the latter book is narrower and discusses only one section of the former, namely narration. This would create a rather awkward structure though, in which a style encompasses narration (as one of its "systems"), which, in turn, encompasses a style ("filmic narration involves two principal formal systems, syuzhet and style"). Also, the line between narration and style is rather blurred (perhaps it is to some extent unavoidable), because if "style" simply names the film's systematic use of cinematic devices" (p. 50) and narration is "the process whereby the film's syuzhet and style interact in the course of cueing and channelling the spectator's construction of the fabula" (p. 53), then it is quite evident that narration also uses "cinematic devices", and that style "belongs" to the process of narration. And, indeed, in numerous, brilliant analyses that Bordwell carries out in both books, the two spheres constantly overlap and intermingle. So, if the option to "insert" NiFF into CHC (in other words – narration into style) fails, another option could be to prefer one of these methodologies over another. A natural candidate for this preference could be NiFF, as it was written later (although published in the same year) and can be, perhaps, treated as the "next step" in relation to CHC, but no reliable source (such as the author's statement) supports this idea.

After this short detour, let us return to the main track of my argument, that is a comparison of the place of norms in both books. As I mentioned before, in

CHC norms pertain to the level of systems and govern the organisation of filmic narration, time and space. In NiFF the situation is more complex. We can delineate at least three levels of norms. First, these are norms of the classical film. Its place in the system is dual. On the one hand, it is just a mode, on an equal footing with the three other modes delineated by Bordwell (art cinema, historical-materialist and parametric); on the other hand, however, the classical mode is special, because, apart from being a mode, it provides a template, against which other modes are foregrounded. Therefore "classical cinema" can be called the "ur-code", the mode of modes. The next level consists of modes (three or four, depending how we qualify the classical mode). "A narrational mode is a historically distinct set of norms of narrational construction and comprehension" (p. 150). Here, the abovementioned difference in statuses of norms is clearly visible. Bordwell, referring to Mukařovský, posits "an initial distinction between the reigning norm – the canonized style, the mainstream practice – and deviations from that. In fictional cinema, the split would correspond to the average viewer's distinction between ordinary movies and the offbeat stuff" (p. 150). Ordinary movies, as we have seen before, are "classical Hollywood films", the offbeat stuff are various alternatives. This offbeat stuff, however, can also be codified, along norms which Bordwell calls "extrinsic". "A deviation from the mainstream practice tends itself to be organised with respect to another extrinsic norm, however much a minority affair it may be" (p. 150). So, modes contain extrinsic norms, that is norms which are, so to say, external to individual films and common to all films which make up a mode, "however much a minority affair it may be" (sic!). Below this level another level exists, that of "intrinsic norms", that is norms that are specific to some individual films, or, to use a Bordwellian phrase, "the standards attained within the text itself" (p. 150). An intrinsic norm can be "rare or unique" to a given film, but it can also overlap with an extrinsic one, that of a mode, and also – that of a genre. Generally, Bordwell does not refer to norms other than modes as ways of grouping films, such as genres, historical currents or authorial styles (incidentally, they are the most common and popular ways of putting films together in film criticism and film studies). The only exceptions he makes are situations in which an extrinsic or intrinsic mode is transgressed; a possible explanation of this situation can be that a transgression is motivated by another norm, most often a generic one. A good example is a depiction of *Murder My Sweet,* which "restricts the syuzhet to what Marlowe knows; as one basis for our continuous hypothesis-forming activity, this constitutes an intrinsic norm of the film's narration. But the restriction of the syuzhet is a convention of the detective genre. (…). Here the norm that the film attains matches one already canonized extrinsically" (p. 151).

Now, after this reconstruction of the structures of norms in CHC and NiFF I come to the point which turns out to be unexpectedly difficult. What are the particular norms? Can we pinpoint each of them? Can we make a comprehensive list? It turns out to be very difficult, and in this point Bordwell continues Mukařovský's tradition, albeit in a slightly different form. Mukařovský, having briefly discussed several aesthetic principles, concludes that this list is far from complete, and "[E]ven if it were complete, it is certain in advance that its network would not be so vast and dense as to contain the equivalents of all possible detailed aesthetic norms" (170A, p. 30). In his essay Mukařovský avoids discussing particular norms and never analyses particular works of art, concentrating rather on fluidity of norms. Bordwell, on the other hand, devotes a lot of space to detailed analyses of films, and at first glance it seems that they are carried out with special attention to norms. However, a sharper look reveals that it is usually not easy to extract norms from the masses of detailed data and observations, the more so as Bordwell never pinpoints norms, and very rarely names them as such. He usually depicts various aspects of a film form within a given mode, leaving it to the reader to decide whether this or that aspect has a normative character. This is true even with respect to the classical style, which is far better described than other modes.

There are three systems in CHC: of narrative logic, cinematic time and cinematic space. The norms belong to these systems and make up a set of precepts, which determine what a Hollywood film should look (and sound) like. These precepts include many different things. For instance, the system of narrative logic includes such things as character-centred causality, moderate and changing self-consciousness, high knowledgeability, functions of musical accompaniment (e.g. it provides a continuity factor, expresses a character's mental state), "primacy effect" in building characters, stimulation of viewers' activity using gaps and omissions. The system of cinematic time concerns order of events (preference for chronology, flashbacks are rare, flash-forwards do not exist), duration (ellipses are commonly used), ways of marking ellipses until the 1950's (irises, fades, dissolves), deadlines, continuity (via match-on-action, eyeline-match cutting, sound), accompanying of dissolve on the image track by sound after 1928, subordination of time to causality ("Time in the classical film is a vehicle for causality, not a process to be investigated on its own", p. 47), preference for fast editing ("The audience never gets a chance to relax and think about the story holes", p. 48), a preference for cross-cutting (which signifies simultaneity) over parallel editing, where temporal relation between events is unspecified). The system of cinematic space includes such points as subordination of film space to narrative and its "realistic" character ("The screen might be likened to a plate-

glass window through which the observer looks with one eye at the actual scene", p. 50), centred, balanced frame composition, which imitates post-Renaissance painting (a human body, shown from the front, is the centre of narrative and graphic interest), careful representation of depth by set design, lighting, camera movements, sound (p. 54), personalisation of space (the classical film charges objects with personal meanings, p. 55), spatial orientation by means of continuity editing (analytical, eyeline, earline, shot-reverse short cuts), 180° and axis of action rule, redundancy of camera placements.

In *Narration in the Fiction Film* the structure is different. As already mentioned before, time and space lose their status of systems and become "stylistic aspects", whereas the status of "systems" is attributed to syuzhet and style. It can be assumed that time and space are, so to say, subsumed under the broader category of style. Consequently, the part on classical narration in NiFF consists of chapters about "Canonic Narration" and "Classical Style", and also about the "Classical Spectator". The features of "canonic narration" (without determining if all of them are "norms") include such points as:

- Character-centred causality.

- The plot consists of an undisturbed stage, the disturbance, the struggle, and the elimination of the disturbance.

- "In classical fabula construction, causality is the prime unifying principle" (p. 157).

- "Spatial configurations are motivated by realism (a newspaper office must contain desks, typewriters, phones) and, chiefly, by compositional necessity (the desk and typewriter will be used to write causally significant new stories; the phones form crucial links among characters)" (p. 157).

- "Causality also motivates temporal principles of organisation (The process is especially evident in a device highly characteristic of classical narration – the deadline)" (p. 157).

- Usually the classical syuzhet presents a double causal structure: one involving heterosexual romance (boy/girl, husband/wife), the other line involving another sphere – work, war, a mission or quest, other personal relationships.

- The syuzhet is always broken up into segments. In the silent era, the typical Hollywood film would contain between nine and eighteen sequences; in the sound era between fourteen and thirty-five (with

post-war films tending to have more sequences). The bounds of the sequence will be marked by some standardised punctuations (dissolve, fade, wipe, sound bridge)

- At least one line of action must be left suspended, in order to motivate the shifts to the next scene, which picks up the suspended line (often via a "dialogue hook"). Hence the famous "linearity" of classical construction.

- The classical syuzhet has the tendency to develop toward full and adequate knowledge. "The classical film moves steadily toward a growing awareness of absolute truth" (p. 159).

- The classical film is usually crowned with a happy ending. Out of 100 films from the unbiased sample, over 60 ended with "the display of a reunited romantic couple) and many more could be said to end happily" (p. 159). The ending either skilfully ties up all ends, or appears more like "deux ex machina", Brechtian "mounted messenger". The device of closing the film with an epilogue is used, a brief celebration of the stable state achieved by the main characters.

- The classical narration tends to be omniscient, highly communicative, and moderately self-conscious. This observation must be attenuated, though, in two respects. First, generic factors often create variations upon these precepts. Secondly, the temporal progression makes narrational properties fluctuate across the film, and these fluctuations are also codified.

- Gaps will seldom be permanent, but can also be mitigated by generic conventions.

- The suyzhet's construction of time powerfully shapes the fluctuating overtness of narration. When the syuzhet adheres to chronological order and omits the causally unimportant periods of time, the narration becomes highly communicative and unselfconscious. On the other hand, when a montage sequence compresses a political campaign, a murder trial, or the effects of Prohibition into moments, the narration becomes overtly omniscient.

- Figures are adjusted for moderate self-consciousness by angling the bodies more or less frontally but avoiding to-camera gazes (p. 161).

- Most important is the tendency of the classical film to render narrational omniscience as spatial *omnipresence*.

- Manipulation of *mise-en-scene* (figure behaviour, lighting, setting, costume) creates an apparently independent profilmic event, which becomes the tangible story world framed and recorded from without. Classical narration thus depends upon the notion of the invisible observer.

- Hollywood narratives are highly redundant.

- The classical film assumes clear distinctions among objective diegetic reality, characters' mental states, and inserted narrational commentary.

- The range of knowledge in the flashback portion is often not identical with that of the character doing the remembering.

These are the main points extracted from the chapter on "canonic narration". The text is unbroken, continuous, without any highlights or underlines, full of minor details and examples, so, perhaps, some slightly different interpretation and a slightly different list of features or "norms" is possible. The next chapter, "classical style", is ordered differently, as it contains three main points, numbered and highlighted in italics, namely:

On the whole, classical narration treats film technique as a vehicle for the syuzhet's transmission of fabula information.

1. In classical narration, style typically encourages the spectator to construct a coherent, consistent time and space for the fabula action.

2. Classical style consists of a strictly limited number of particular technical devices organised into a stable paradigm and ranked probabilistically according to the syuzhet demands.

Within these points a reader can find many observations which they have come across before, under different headings, concerning, for example, position of bodies and faces (which "become the focal points of attention", p. 162), editing ("as the characters interact, the scene is broken into closer views of action and reaction", p. 162), "hooks" between scenes ("the scene usually closes on a portion of the space (…) that provides a transition to the next scene", p. 162), and so on.

When we look at these lists and classifications more closely, some problems arise. Some points in CHC and NiFF overlap, some differ. For example, points about character-centred causality, levels of self-consciousness, knowledgeability and communicativeness, and deadlines overlap (although sometimes in slightly different phrasing). On the other hand, many points which can be found in one of

these books do not exist in the other one. For example, remarks about the narrative function of musical accompaniment, primacy effect, or highly probable and sharply exclusive hypotheses, present in CHC, are absent from NiFF. And the other way round: some points present in NiFF are absent from CHC, such as remarks about dramaturgy of classical film (the undisturbed stage, the disturbance, the struggle, and the elimination of the disturbance), realist motivation of spatial configurations, or clear distinctions between objective diegetic reality and characters' mental states. So, the question arises, which of these two lists is binding? Which of the abovementioned "points" or "features" have the status of norms?

The next thing: The lists above are heterogeneous, consisting of points which have different logical statuses. Some of them are very general (like those about high knowledgeability or moderate self-consciousness, or about time in the classical film as a vehicle for causality), some are very detailed, like remarks about the narrative function of music or punctuation marks which indicated ellipses until the late 50s. Most of them are textual, that is point to various features of film texts, but some concern rather an assumed viewer's activity or reaction (classical narration asks the viewers to form hypotheses, or encourages viewers to ask questions and provide answers), which are probably difficult to codify. Some points seem fairly obvious and apply to all kinds of feature films in history (e.g. the syuzhet is always broken up into segments); some resemble less a description of particular features, but rather a directional instruction to film-makers (classical narration treats film technique as a vehicle for the syuzhet's transmission of fabula information).

On the whole, what is clearly visible is that descriptive and normative aspects intermingle and it is very difficult, if not simply impossible, to separate them. Moreover, accumulation of details makes it very difficult do decide which of the numerous features and traits of films from the classical period are essential, and which are of secondary stature, even if they are often used, which of them are "norms", and which are just "aspects", "factors", "features", "devices", "principles" – to name some expressions which Bordwell uses interchangeably, without proper consideration of their difference.

If this is the case with the mode that was analysed and described most carefully, in the most minute details – the classical mode – then the same all the more can be said about other modes. The statistical base for each of them is incomparably smaller than for the classical mode – in the case of the parametric mode it is simply minuscule.

… And deviation

This leads us right to the crucial point in the whole two-book project: the dialectics of norm and deviation. In *The classical Hollywood Cinema* there are two short chapters on the styles that deviate from norms: "The bound of difference" and "Alternative modes of film practice" – altogether 21 pages in a 500-page book. This proportion is telling: it is the norm and various – economic, aesthetical, technological – dimensions of its implementation and consolidation which focuses Bordwell's attention. In *The Narration in the Fiction Film* the situation is different: the classical mode is juxtaposed with three possible alternatives, so one can say that there are various forms of deviation which focus Bordwell's attention in that case. Both books taken together illustrate two possible approaches to the dialectics of norm/deviation.

The chapter's very title from CHC – "The Bounds of Difference" – is meaningful. The difference in classical Hollywood cinema is bound, constrained, must be somehow squeezed into a predetermined format. Indeed, this is the conclusion of this chapter: "In Hollywood cinema there are no subversive films, only subversive moments. For social and economic reasons, no Hollywood film can provide a distinct and coherent alternative to the classical model" (p. 81). The reasoning which leads to this conclusion deserves attention, though. Bordwell takes into consideration three forms of possible subversion and deviation: borrowings from European avant-garde (avant-garde music, German Expressionist cinema, Soviet montage cinema); film noir ("the most deeply problematic group of films produced in Hollywood", p. 75); cinema of (American) auteurs. All these potential forms of subversion have been tamed by the classical form (the norm) by the following means:

selectivity (especially in the case of borrowings from European avant-garde): subversive styles were not taken by the classical style as they come. Hollywood picked up only those elements that it could use for its own purposes.

Motivation (especially in the case of "non-realistic" genres and film noir): According to Bordwell's description, motivation is "the process by which a narrative justifies its story material and the plot's presentation of that story material" (p. 19)[6]. In other words, motivation provides an explanation why this or that element was used in a given film. Bordwell enumerates four sorts of motivation: compositional, realistic, intertextual and artistic. It is

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[6] Ibidem, p. 19.

intertextual motivation – and its sub-class, generic motivation in particular – which proves to be especially effective in taming potential subversions.

Paradigmatic character of classical style (especially in the case of auteur cinema): As Thomas Elsaesser aptly summarised it, "different formal devices or techniques (for example, camera movement or lighting, music or color) can substitute for one another because they can fulfill the same role without breaking the norms and violating unity or coherence" (1985A, p. 55).

Out of these three forms of dealing with deviations, especially interesting is that of motivation[7]. Two of its four types (realist and compositional) support classical style; the main function of the remaining two (intertextual and artistic) is to tame and justify subversions, to explain why some films or parts of films which at first sight seem to blatantly break a norm in essence do not break it at all and can be easily reconciled with it. Especially prominent in this respect is intertextual motivation, and its sub-type – generic motivation. Intertextual motivation means that the usage of a given element in a film is motivated by the fact that similar elements are used in films of the same class, especially a genre. Exemplary cases are the genres of comedy, musical and melodrama, which are pitted against "a conception of the classical film as a "realist" text" (CHC, p. 71). These genres are characterised by a high level of stylisation or – in the case of the musical – blatantly unrealistic situations, which are difficult to reconcile with realism. Yet, although realism is regarded by Bordwell as an essential ingredient of the classical style (does it mean that it is a norm? that it belongs to the norm?), these blatantly unrealistic stylisations or inserts do not undermine the norm, because the "most 'radical' moments, are in fact codified through generic conventions" (p. 71). In the case of film noir, "the most deeply problematic group of films produced in Hollywood" (p. 75), intertextual motivation is of a different nature, because it refers not to the body of films, but to literature. "Every characteristic narrative device of film noir was already conventional in American crime fiction and drama of the 1930s and 1940s" (p. 76). A semi-documentary trend within film noir, which appeared after the war, is explained by reference to another literary trend – "the police-procedural novel in crime fiction" (p. 76) – and also by "wartime limits on set construction and the "realism" of combat documentaries" (p. 77).

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[7] I am not sure if in the remaining two cases we can speak about deviations at all; the paradigmatic character of classical style by definition does not violate the norm, as it means that various devices may fulfil the same function within a given norm; selectivity as a matter of fact can be regarded as a variant of a paradigm: other "devices" fulfil the same function, like, for example, expressing characters' mental states; that, for example, music used in a given part of a film is "avant-garde" does not make it less "pleonastic" or "self-effacing" (these are the terms used by Bordwell to describe "the norm" with respect to musical accompaniment), provided the strange sounds overlap with and express turmoil in a character's head).

An intertextual motivation seems to me a smart trick to bypass serious problems and contradictions which are inherent in the Bordwellian system. The norm is that Hollywood films are realistic. Yet, it is quite obvious that most Hollywood films rather resemble various sorts of fantasies, and many basic Hollywood genres are non-realist by definition (musical, sci-fi, horror). At this point intertextual motivation gives a hand: yes, these genres break the norm, but it is motivated generically. A norm has it that classical style is "invisible", "self-effacing"[8]. Yet some films and genres blatantly break this rule: musicals, melodramas, some types of comedies overtly flaunt their un-selfconsiousness. Here, again, the notion of motivation helps: yes, they break the rule, but it is motivated generically; simply, these genres are like that. One norm of the classical style is high knowledgeability. Yet some films and some genres, like detective films or – more prominently – films noir – suppress knowledge, flaunt mystery and uncertainty, and use even – especially the latter ones – permanent gaps. What can be done about that? Here, like in previous cases, generic motivation comes to the rescue: yes, the classical style is characterised by high knowledgeability, but some genres within Hollywood cinema are exempt from this rule. As Elisabeth Cowie aptly pointed out, the very definition of classical Hollywood narrative includes "virtually all possible deviations, so that every exception therefore proves the rule. The church is so broad that heresy is impossible. (…) As a result, it is argued, as viewers we are not at all disturbed when Judy Garland bursts into song, since we expect her to sing in films; audiences read such elements in relation to the star-image and/or generic conventions. Nor is the unity of film disrupted, it is claimed, since it is premised on the inclusion of such elements. Such elements do, however, disrupt classical narrative" (Cowie, 1998, p. 178, 183).

A problem with this explanation and justification is that most classical Hollywood films are generic productions. That means that a great number of classical films do not obey the rules of classical cinema. Or, if we are attached to thinking in terms of norms, we can phrase it differently and speak about the conflict between norms of modes and norms of genres. Generally speaking, the notion of mode, essential to Bordwellian thinking, as a matter of fact borrowed by Bordwell from Noel Burch (1991; see also: Bordwell, 1998), deserves more space and attention than I can devote to it here. Undoubtedly the relationship between modes and other ways of grouping films (such as genres, auteurs, national or international "schools" or "currents") is far from clear and demands elaboration.

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[8] Bordwell dismisses these terms and instead of them he speaks about a low or moderate level of self-consciousness, but in essence these are the same things.

Theoretically, intertextual motivation can abolish distinctions between the classical style and any other kinds of films, even those which Bordwell distinguished as different modes. Do art films break the rule of character-centred causality? Yes, they do, but it can be justified by intertextual motivation: these films are like that. Do historical-materialist films break the rules of spatial continuity? Yes, they do, but that can be explained with reference to other films from the period, and also experience of the PROLETKULT theatre. And so on, and so forth.

Yet, we must do Bordwell justice: he does not do that. On the contrary, in NiFF he employs quite the opposite tactics: not so much to dilute differences, to absorb them in the classical system by means of motivation, but rather to stress differences, in order to sharply delineate alternative modes. This is plain when he describes an analytical strategy of "prominence" which "refers to the perceived highlighting of a narrational tactic with respect to an extrinsic norm. In art cinema, for instance, shifts between "objective" action and "subjective" moments are often not signalled by the narration. This creates a suppressed gap which we retrospectively try to fill (…). These suppressed gaps leap into prominence against the background of the classical mode, which provides explicit signals for the transitions between objectivity and subjectivity. Jancso's use of the long take in *The Confrontation* is an instance of stylistic prominence, since it deviates sharply from normal decoupage practice" (NiFF, p. 150). It is evident here that alternative aesthetic solutions gain prominence against the background of "the classical mode" or "normal decoupage practice". In addition, the double meaning of "extrinsic norm" stands out here too. It refers to the classical style here, but theoretically extrinsic norms make up other modes too, so it would be more precise to say that the aforementioned transition breaks the extrinsic norm of classical cinema, but is perfectly in accordance with the extrinsic norm of the art mode.

So, alternative stylistic modes gain prominence against the background of the classical mode, because they deviate from "normal" film practice of "ordinary film. Admittedly, Bordwell himself dismisses such an analytical proceeding, finding it insufficient. In CHC, one finds the following passage: "The historical hegemony of Hollywood makes acute and urgent the need to study film styles and modes of production that differ from Hollywood's. But a great deal more needs to be done in order to specify the salient differences involved. Theorists usually discuss alternatives to the classical cinema in general and largely negative terms. If the classical style is "invisible", we will then praise films that show the camera. To the pleasure of the classical style, critics have countered a cinema of "unpleasure" or frustration or boredom; to a representation of depth, a cinema of flatness or "materiality". Working with such mighty opposites, it becomes easy

to claim that the favoured filmmaker (Godard, Vertov, Stan Brakhage, whoever) "subverts" or "deconstructs" the dominant style. One task of this book has been to show that such polarities lack nuance and precision. Moreover, one cannot simply oppose narrative or pleasure; one must at the same time show how films can construct systematic alternatives" (p. 379).

It is evident here that Bordwell is fully aware of the confines inherent to an approach based on simple comparison of "the norm" (the classical style) and "deviation" and is trying to overcome them. Yet, his success in this respect is rather modest. It seems that the American scholar is unable to break away from the structure he himself created, from the prison he himself designed and erected with such great effort. This is plainly visible in the description of all three alternative modes described in NiFF (although I fully agree with Andras Balint Kovacs, who stated, that in fact there are only two modes in NiFF – classical and modernist, as the differences between the three alternative modes are much less important than the similarities, which are unified in their opposition to the classical cinema) (Kovacs, 2007, pp. 52–55; 57–60; Ostaszewski, 2018). Let us take as an example the description of the art mode from this book. It begins with a reservation which resembles the one quoted above: "We could characterize this mode by simply inventorying our theoretical categories. We could say that the suyzhet here is not as redundant as in the classical film; that there are permanent and suppressed gaps; that the narration tends to be less generically motivated" (NiFF, p 205). Yet, Bordwell claims, such an atomistic list would not get at "the underlying principles" (is this a synonym of norms?). So far so good, Bordwell seems to be trying to construct systematic alternatives, a set of extrinsic norms proper to art cinema, which would not come down to simple negatives of the classical mode. Yet, in his next moves the repressed returns, and a background of the classical mode is ever-present, giving "the underlying principles" of the art mode strength and distinctiveness. To give just a few examples: the three "underlying principles" – called in the very next sentence "procedural schemata" – are "objective" realism, "expressive or subjective realism, and narrational commentary" (NiFF, p. 205). The first of these "principles" or "schemata", "objective" realism is pitted against "traditional" realism rooted in XIX century literature and theatre and characteristic to the classical cinema. "For the classical cinema", Bordwell states, "reality" is assumed to be tacit coherence among events, a consistency and clarity of individual identity. (…). But art-cinema narration (…) questions such a definition of the real: the world's laws may not be knowable, personal psychology may be indeterminate" (p. 206). In what follows, this background is present, sometimes overtly. ("In the name of verisimilitude, the tight causality of classical Hollywood construction is replaced by a more tenuous linking of events" (p. 206). "We have seen that the classical film focuses the specta-

tor's expectations upon the ongoing causal chain by shaping the syuzhet's dramatic duration around explicit deadlines. But the art film typically lacks such devices" (p. 207), sometimes in a more subtle and clandestine way, when the classical style seems to be a default value. For instance, when an example of a new verisimilitude of time in art cinema narration is *temps mort* in a conversation (p. 206), we understand that it is meaningful in comparison with the classical style, where there are no *temps morts*. An identical situation is with the two remaining "underlying principles". "Subjective realism" means that art cinema focuses more on characters than on action. It is explained and foregrounded in a series of overt or covert juxtapositions. When we read that "art film relies upon psychological causation no less than does the classical narrative", but "the prototypical characters of the art cinema tend to lack clear-cut traits, motives, and goals" (p. 207), it is quite plain that it gains prominence against a background of the classical mode, in which the main characters have clear-cut traits (primacy effect) and strive to reach well-defined goals. Then we learn that when "the Hollywood protagonist speeds toward the target, the art-film protagonist is presented as sliding passively from one situation to another" (p. 207), and that whereas "classical film resembles a short story by Poe, art cinema is closer to Chechov" (p. 207). And so on, and so forth. General tactics of juxtaposition, of presenting an alternative mode against the background of the classical one, is ever-present, also in presenting the third principle, overt narrational commentary, where "[s]tylistic devices that gain prominence with respect to classical norms – an unusual angle, a stressed bit of cutting, a striking camera movement, an unrealistic shift in lighting or setting, a disjunction on the sound track, or any other breakdown of objective realism which is not motivated as subjectivity – can be taken as the narration's commentary" (p. 206).

One can ask what is wrong with that. Well, this is a binary system, so all fierce attacks which have been levelled at binarism in recent years also concern it (Przylipiak, 2020). In addition, a point of reference sets the limits of vision, and the vision established by a norm/deviation model can be very confining. When we take into account the question asked at the beginning of this paper – whether the concepts and categories worked out and launched in the mid-80s are still relevant, whether they can be used for describing contemporary cinema – one more doubt comes to one's mind. All reservations voiced above notwithstanding, one must admit not only that the Bordwellian system meant a great leap forward in conceptualisation of film aesthetics, but it was also intuitively right, because a common feeling was (and perhaps still is) that films dubbed "classical" were characterised by a high level of uniformity, that cinema in the era of the classical Hollywood cinema was indeed standardised. Today, in the era of changeability and variability, this feeling of standardisation is much weaker, or perhaps even

non-existent. To use an accurate phrase of Elizabeth Cowie, in contemporary American films "[s]tylistic norms have changed, and perhaps no longer exist as a consistent group of norms" (Cowie, p. 188). Research into film aesthetics must stand on its own feet.

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On the notion of norm in David Bordwell's system

The paper scrutinizes a notion of norm in David Bordwell's system of film aesthetics. It concerns such issues as: a relationship between Jan Mukařovský's concept of norm and the use Bordwell is making of it; procedures of establishing norms on the basis of sample analysis; justification of norms; list of norms and their status; a dialectic of norm and deviation as a tool for film analysis.

Keywords: Norm/deviation, film structuralism, typical film