

ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE
FILM AND TELEVISION FACULTY

Cinema and Digital Media
Directing

MASTER'S THESIS

**TECHNIQUES OF BEGINNING IN SELECTED FILMS OF ANDREY ZVYAGINTSEV:
ELENA, LOVELESS, THE RETURN**

Eilat Ben Eliyahu

Thesis advisor: Zdeněk Hudec

Examiner:

Date of thesis defense: 18.09.20

Academic title granted: MA

Prague, 2020

**AKADEMIE MÚZICKÝCH UMĚNÍ V PRAZE
FILMOVÁ A TELEVIZNÍ FAKULTA**

Cinema and Digital Media
Režie

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

**TECHNIKY ÚVODNÍCH SCÉN VE VYBRANÝCH FILMECH
ANDREYE ZVJAGINCEVA:
JELENA, NEMILOVANÍ, NÁVRAT**

Eilat Ben Eliyahu

Vedoucí práce: Zdeněk Hudec

Oponent práce:

Datum obhajoby: 18.09.20

Přidělovaný akademický titul: Mgr.

Praha, 2020

D e c l a r a t i o n

I declare that I have prepared my Master's Thesis independently on the following topic:

TECHNIQUES OF BEGINNING IN SELECTED FILMS OF ANDREY ZVYAGINTSEV:
ELENA, LOVELESS, THE RETURN

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

Prague, date:

.....

Signature of the candidate

Warning

The use and public application of the findings of this thesis or any other treatment thereof are permissible only on the basis of a licensing contract, i.e. the consent of the author and of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

User's Log

By signing below, the user attests that he/she has used this thesis solely for study purposes, and he/she declares that he/she will always cite the thesis appropriately among the sources used.

[illegible]

Abstract

This thesis examines the techniques of beginning in three films by Andrey Zvyagintsev—*The Return* (2003), *Elena* (2011), and *Loveless* (2017). Typical to art-house films, the beginning in Zvyagintsev's films is usually dialogue-concise; it relies mostly on visual storytelling, prioritizing atmosphere over action. Yet, it manages to engage the viewer very effectively. This work intends to define what makes those beginnings so effective and powerful by analyzing film-narration and film-style devices in them. The term *beginning* is used in this work to indicate the whole first part of the film. The role of the beginning within the overall narration is examined and defined based on the "viewer's activity" theory in Neoformalism. The process of hypothesis testing, central to analyzing the narration of the beginning, is the focus of the film analyses in this thesis.

Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce zkoumá techniky úvodních scén ve třech filmech Andreje Zvjaginceva - *Návrat* (2003), *Jelena* (2011) a *Nemilovaní* (2017).

Jak je typické pro umělecké filmy, úvodní scény Zvjagincevových filmů jsou obvykle stručné v rovině dialogů; opírají se především o vizuální vyprávění, upřednostňují atmosféru před akcí. Přesto se režisérovi daří diváka velmi emocionálně zainteresovat.

Tato práce si klade za cíl analyticky postihnout, jaké techniky na rovině stylu a filmového vyprávění činí začátky Zvjagincevových filmů tak účinnými a emocionálně silnými. Práce se metodicky opírá o stylový rozbor a naratologické postuláty neoformalismu, které jsou dale doplněny odbornými poznatky Noëla Carrola, Jasona Gendlera a dalších autorů. Termín „začátek“ (Beginning) se v této práci s ohledem na jeho ukotvení v odborné literatuře používá k označení celé úvodní části filmu.

Table of Content

1. Introduction	7
2 .Theoretical Basis	11
2.1 Theoretical frame – Neoformalism	11
2.2 First Role – Information Delivery	12
2.3 Neoformalism and Viewer Activity	13
2.4 Beginning as the First Part of Narration	16
2.5 Film Style as Part of Narration	18
3. Minimalism	22
3.1 Zvyagintsev: art-house film style, classical narration	22
3.2 Analysis: Delivery of information in <i>Elena</i> 's beginning	25
3.3 Universal stories with minimal storytelling	32
4. Atmosphere and World	34
4.1 Feeling over Action	34
4.2 Film Style Analysis of <i>Loveless</i> opening sequences	35
5. Dramatic Situations and Visual Images	42
5.1 “Show, Don’t Tell”	42
5.2 Visual Analysis of beginning in <i>The Return</i>	44
6. Conclusion	52
Reference List	54

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Superior movies provide within the first few minutes the thematic and stylistic components that will be developed throughout the film.”¹

—Anette Insdorf

You enter a movie theater. It is dark, and you stumble over people to find a seat. As you organize your things comfortably enough, preparing yourself for the two-hour journey ahead, you become aware of the existence of the viewers around you, each one with their own popcorn bucket. The hall is tense with anticipation. The film begins. At first, there is just a single image or sound, with no context; then, shot after shot, your mind starts to collect information and construct meaningful figures out of those colors and sounds. You begin to identify characters, actions, causality; and step by step, you assemble a story in your mind.

To accept it as a “proper” story, though, you first need to identify the protagonist and understand their main problem. What is their goal? Why can’t they get it? Once you have realized these two main aspects of the story, you can sit back and follow the rest of the film. Until then, you won’t be able to tell what the story is about.

Hence, the first part of any narrative must demonstrate the most basic facts of the story. If we were to name the action that the film performs at this stage, it would be “to introduce”—to introduce story information, of course, but also style, rhythm, atmosphere, genre conventions, point of view, and motifs. In short, the complete “contract” between the film and the viewer is established during the first part of the film.

In the past, this part has been called “introduction” or “exposition”. For example, in Gustav Freytag’s analysis of dramatic structure from the late 19th century². Today,

¹ Anette Insdorf, *Cinematic Overtures: How to Read Opening Scenes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 1.

however, the term *exposition* is used to define only the “presentation of story events that antedate the start of the film’s plot”³, in other words—background information and past events. Expositional information, although usually more dense in the first part of narration, may appear in any part of the plot, even towards the ending. *Exposition* is a function of certain scenes (or parts of scenes), not the whole essence of them. Scenes that contain *exposition* would usually contain other functions as well.

To describe the first part of a film, and any narrative work, I will use the term “beginning”. Although not widely common in film theory, the term does appear in certain works that are relevant to this thesis, and I believe it is the accurate one.

Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, defines a beginning in a rather intuitive way, as “that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be”.⁴ Aristotle refers both to the events antedating the beginning, and to those that follow it. The former, which undoubtedly exist, are somewhat less relevant to the narrative, and therefore will be told through exposition. The following events, however, have great significance to the beginning itself, for without them there is no beginning. Jason Gendler notes that “narrative beginning is a forward-looking epistemological concept, in that it involves our expectations about what is to come.”⁵ Those expectations, as we shall later see, play a central part in engaging the viewer with the film, and will be one of my main points of analysis. Further use of the term *beginning* can be seen in the writings of James Phelan on literary works. Phelan

² Gustav Freytag, *Freytag’s Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, trans. Elias J. MacEwan (Chicago: S. C. Griggs & Co., 1985), 115 and 195.

³ Jason Gendler, “The Narration of Beginnings in Classical Cinema” (PhD diss., University of California, 2014), 149.

⁴ Aristotle, “Poetics”, in *Classic Writings on Poetry*, ed. William Harmon (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 40.

⁵ Jason Gendler, “Where Does the Beginning End? Cognition, Form, and Classical Narrative Beginnings.” *Projections*, no.6 (2012): 16.

provides numerous definitions of the term⁶, including his original theory of “instabilities” that will be elaborated in Chapter 2.4 as part of a discussion on the role of the beginning as part of the overall narrative.

To conclude, in this work the term *beginning* will refer to the whole first part of a narrative work, in our case—a film. As a side note, I would like to make a comment on act division. When thinking in terms of script theory, the definition of *beginning* could be parallel, in some cases, to what is known as *first act*. However, since I will not go into act division in this thesis, the question of whether or not the beginning of *Elena*, *Loveless* and *The Return* represents the first act is irrelevant to our topic.

This thesis studies the works of Andrey Zvyagintsev, a contemporary Russian art-house director. His films have been awarded prominent prizes in Cannes, BAFTA and Palm Springs, gaining worldwide recognition. His work is quite dark, often inspired by biblical or religious archetypes; recurring themes are faith, family, betrayal⁷, moral corruption and loss. Some film critics have referred to him as Andrei Tarkovsky's successor.⁸ In terms of form and style, there is no doubt of the influence⁹, but while Tarkovsky's late films are known for their non-narrative structure¹⁰, Zvyagintsev's films actually fit within the classic narrative structure. This is not to say his stories are plot-driven; they are rather what Robert McKee calls “miniplots”. This kind of film reduces the classic narrative structure to a minimum, while leaving more space for observational

⁶ James Phelan, “The Beginning of Beloved: A Rhetorical Approach.” *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, ed. Brian Richardson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 196.

⁷ Julia Vassilieva, “Russian *Leviathan*: Power, Landscape, Memory,” *Film Criticism*, Vol.42, no.1 (March 2008): 1-15.

⁸ For example, see Anais Cabart, “Andrei Zvyagintsev's *The Return*: A Tarkovskian Initiation,” *Close Up: Film and Media Studies*, Vol.1, No. 2 (2013): 51-62.

⁹ Terence McSweeney, “The End of Ivan's Childhood in Andrei Zvyagintsev's *The Return*,” *International Journal of Russian Studies*, no.2 (2013): 1.

¹⁰ Nariman Skakov, *The Cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time* (London: Bloomsbury publishing, 2012), 102.

moments. Finally, as most art-house films, Zvyagintsev's are slow-paced, rich in visual symbolism and often scarce in dialogue.

Of the five films he has directed so far, I have chosen to focus my attention on three, analyzing a single aspect of beginning within each film. *Elena* (2011) is one of Zvyagintsev's most "realistic" films¹¹—a social drama dealing with class struggle. I will look at the minimalism of information given in its beginning. Then I will discuss the opening sequence of *Loveless* (2017) to show how atmosphere is prioritized over action. Lastly, I will look at Zvyagintsev's first film, *The Return* (2003), and how it introduces the story with dramatic situations and visual storytelling.

The beginning is known to be an especially difficult part of the film to write and direct successfully. Since so much depends on the first few sequences, every little moment and every stylistic device bears great significance in shaping the viewer's first impression of the film. When I watched Zvyagintsev's films, I often found myself in awe, admiring his mastery of the art and craft. I have chosen to analyze the beginnings in his films because, in my opinion, they are skillfully crafted and highly effective. When watching them, it was always clear to me what the film was about, and this effect was achieved with very little background information and very few dialogues. As a young director myself, I wish to be able to create films that engage and move the viewers. I hope delving into techniques of beginning will deepen my understanding of narrative structure and film style, thus honing my film directing skills.

¹¹ Călina Părau, "Through the 'Eye of the Machine': Poetics of the Inhuman in Andrey Zvyagintsev's films", *Ekphrasis: Extreme Storytelling*, no.1 (2016): 135.

Chapter 2: Theoretical basis

This chapter is dedicated to two main goals: first, to define the different roles of a beginning; second, to develop a set of criteria for analyzing Zvyagintsev's beginnings.

When defining the roles of the beginning, I would ask how it should function as the first part of a film, and how it contributes to engage the viewer with the story. Later, I will use these definitions to examine how Zvyagintsev's beginnings operate. The last part of this chapter will discuss film style, which is the main focus of my film analysis — including camera work, editing, sound and music.

2.1 Theoretical frame—Neoformalism

I rely on Neoformalism as the main framework of my thesis. It is a fairly modern approach to aesthetic analysis, based on the Russian Formalist literary theory from the 1920s, and developed mainly by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson¹². The main advantage of applying the perspective of Neoformalism to my analyses is that it emphasizes film form. It aims at examining the unique ways in which each film is constructed, and how it affects the viewer. Unlike other theories, Neoformalism wasn't borrowed from other fields of study, such as psychology or linguistics; it was exclusively developed for the purpose of film analysis. As such, it does not look into films in order to prove a larger theory, but rather the opposite: it allows the researcher to modify the approach and the methods in order to suit the study of any film. As Kristin Thompson puts it: "Neoformalism as an approach does offer a series of broad assumptions about how artworks are constructed and how they operate in cueing audience response. But

¹² Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 6.

Neoformalism does not prescribe how these assumptions are embodied in individual films. Rather, the basic assumptions can be used to construct a method specific to the problems raised by each film.”¹³ Hence, the goal of this chapter is to establish specific methods for analyzing Zvyagintsev’s beginnings.

One fundamental assumption of the Neoformalism is the unity of form and content. While other film theories might sometimes ignore film style, focusing their attention on story information, Neoformalism looks at these two elements as inherent components of narration. Thompson indicates that film style carries meaning as well; it is therefore impossible to separate the two things. “Meaning is not the end result of an artwork, but one of its formal components.”¹⁴ Neoformalism may thus allow me to regard the whole first part of the film as one unit, without separating film style from story information.

2.2 First role—information delivery

Although narrative theory comprise a variety of story structures and act divisions, the principles of the *beginning* are often defined quite similarly across different narrative models. These principles include: 1) to provide the viewer with the necessary background information; 2) to intrigue and engage the viewer; and 3) to introduce the main conflict and the theme, defining “what the story is about”.¹⁵

One of the main roles of the beginning is to deliver expository information. Meir Sternberg elaborates on what kind of information is usually conveyed in literary expositions, dividing it into three areas—world, characters and relationships. “[The

¹³ Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 6.

¹⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹⁵ Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2005), 90. See also Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 36.

reader] must usually be informed of the time and place of the action; of the nature of the fictive world peculiar to the work or, in other words, of the canons of probability operating in it; of the history, appearance, traits and habitual behavior of the *dramatis personae*; and of the relations between them.”¹⁶

In certain film genres, the amount of expositional information might be larger than in others—for example, science fiction often requires more explanation about the nature of the fictive world. However, it is reasonable to expect that, in most stories, more information needs to be delivered in the beginning than during the following parts of the narrative. The reason for this is the viewer’s utter lack of knowledge during their first encounter with the story. This lack of knowledge forces the viewer to seek answers to basic narrative questions, such as “Who is the protagonist or the center of interest in the work? What is the relative importance of the various characters, incidents and themes? And how do they combine with the center?”¹⁷

This question-and-answer process is called “viewer activity”. The next few pages will be dedicated to elaborating it. The main interest of this thesis is to determine how beginnings can be effective and engaging—in other words, how they activate the viewer. Understanding the viewer’s activity is central for analyzing Zvyagintsev’s beginnings and the way they function on the viewer’s mind.

2.3 Neoformalism and viewer activity

A fundamental assumption of Neoformalism is that the viewer is active. During the whole watching experience, the viewer must construct and re-construct the story in their head, based on information they retrieve from the film. If we go back to my

¹⁶ Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

description of how we enter a cinema hall and begin to watch a film, we can intuitively grasp the meaning of viewer activity by imagining the film being watched by a two-year-old toddler. Clearly, the story perceived by his mind will be a very different one. It is simply because a two-year-old hasn't had the chance to gain sufficient life experience in order to understand the story as an adult does. He can't decipher most of the situations that make up the scenes; he can't comprehend the interpersonal relationships that make the story; and he is probably not able to establish the causal links that are essential for one to understand the narrative.

Based on the constructivist and the cognitive theories, David Bordwell considers the process of human perception to rely on inference-making. "Sensory stimuli alone cannot determine a percept, since they are incomplete and ambiguous. The organism constructs a perceptual judgment on the basis on non-conscious inferences."¹⁸ Some inferences are built "from the bottom up", such as color or movement perception. On the other hand, processes that are more complex, such as face recognition and story comprehension, operate "from the top down": "Here the organization of sensory data is primarily determined by expectation, background knowledge, [and] problem-solving processes."¹⁹ A central term here is *schemata*—the human brain's system of organizing information into patterns and identifying elements based on past experience. While watching a film, we use these *schemata* to determine what is happening on the screen; then, we create hypotheses regarding the story. This is an ongoing process. Kristin Thompson actually describes the viewer's activity as serial instances of hypothesis testing:

¹⁸ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

We are able to understand such aspects of most films because we have had vast experience in coping with similar situations. Other artworks, everyday life, film theory and criticism—all provide us with countless schemata, learned mental patterns against which we check individual devices and situations in films. As we watch a film, we use these schemata to form hypotheses continually—hypotheses about a character's actions, about the space offscreen, about the source of a sound, about every local and large-scale device that we notice. As the film goes on, we find our hypotheses confirmed or disconfirmed; if the latter, we form a new hypothesis, and so on.²⁰

Going back to my example about the toddler, we can now define his inability to comprehend the story using this new term. Since his life experience is still little, he does not have the *schemata* to recognize and identify all the sensory information the film presents. Not only can't he identify basic elements such as characters, locations and actions; he probably does not even have a well-developed *schemata* for the story itself.

This large-structure story *schemata*, called *template schemata*, is “an abstraction of narrative structure, which embodies typical expectations about how to classify events and relate parts to the whole.”²¹ The existence of *template schemata* has been scientifically researched and proven to play a major role in story comprehension.²² Apparently, when the film begins, the viewer is already equipped with specific expectations on how the story will be constructed.

The beginning is when the viewer has the least amount of information and context for understanding the narrative. Therefore, this part of the viewing requires a higher intensity of schemata employment and hypothesis testing. In order to engage with the story, the viewer must find meaning in it. In a narrative art form, meaning is

²⁰ Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 30.

²¹ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 34.

²² Ibid.

based on finding causality, unity, and coherence.²³ If the viewer is not able to construct a coherent story based on causality, they will probably lose their interest. For example, if the opening scene describes an action which is unfamiliar to the viewer, or if the representation of the action does not correlate with the viewer's experience or knowledge, he will not be able to employ appropriate *schemata* and is likely to miss crucial information. This might even cause them to misunderstand the whole plot. When any crucial information is not clear or is missing, the viewer finds it hard to form hypotheses which will keep them engaged in the viewing, and might lose interest in the film.

Hence, we can define one of the main roles of the beginning as to engage the viewer by encouraging story comprehension, and by properly establishing the story in the viewer's mind.

2.4 Beginning as the first part of narration

I would like to define the beginning's role even more precisely now, by looking at it as part of the overall narration of a film.

What is narration? While the general use of the word describes the action of narrating a story in oral or in written form, Neoformalist film theory expands this definition to include also film form and style. David Bordwell defines narration as "the activity of selecting, arranging, and rendering story material in order to achieve specific time-bound effects on a perceiver".²⁴ In this broader sense, a film's narration would include all the different elements of film style and form. Even in films where there is a

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, xi.

distinct narrator who tells the story in words, this is never the only form of narration. The film itself—camera angles, editing, music, dialogue, etc.—tells us the story.

The narration is an ongoing process with certain structure and tactics. Its main objective is to keep the viewer engaged throughout the whole duration of the plot. Therefore, the narration must create expectations and raise questions, arousing curiosity in the viewer's mind. These questions are central to our understanding of the beginning's role as part of narration.

Noël Carroll, in his analysis of narrative closure, makes a connection between the beginning and ending of a narrative by examining the questions that drive the plot forward. The scope of the majority of these questions is rather limited, meaning they will be answered during the beginning itself, or during the middle part of the narration. Yet one wider question remains open throughout the whole plot, constantly pushing it forward, before finally being solved at the end. This question embodies the main conflict of the story. Carroll calls it “the presiding macro question”²⁵. For example, in romantic stories, it might be “Will the lovers end up together?”; and in a detective story, “Will the murderer get caught?”

Jason Gendler has written about the same subject, in his attempt to locate the transition between the beginning and the middle. Gendler offers a concept quite similar to Carroll's, but using different terms, and with some further applications. The concept is based on James Phelan's notion of “instabilities”, which are any tension or conflict revealed in the story (somewhat equivalent to Bordwell's idea of “gaps”) ²⁶. Phelan

²⁵ Noël Carroll, “Narrative Closure.” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, no. 135 (2007): 5.

²⁶ James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots - Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 15.

suggests that the beginning ends as soon as the viewer discovers the first set of global instabilities. By “global”, Phelan means long-term instabilities that will continue throughout the rest of the narrative, sustaining and driving audience interest ²⁷. As we have previously seen, the viewer's cognitive process during the beginning is focused on creating hypotheses. Some of those hypotheses are rather simple—such as those about character motives and the nature of relationships—while others are more complex, having to do with the developmental direction of the narrative itself. Gendler adopts Phelan’s idea and suggests that the beginning ends once the viewer is able to “make a long-term or global hypothesis about the direction of the rest of the narrative.”²⁸ We should note how the concept of the global hypothesis is similar to Noël Carroll’s presiding macro question. Once the viewer is able to form a global hypothesis regarding the rest of the plot, it means they have gathered all the relevant information regarding characters, settings, and main conflict, and they are now ready to move on to the second act.

Thanks to this model, we can now define the beginning’s role with more accuracy: it guides the viewer to understand the main direction of the plot. By the end of the beginning, the viewer should be able to form a presiding macro question—a long-term global hypothesis that will be the driving force of the plot, as well as the main motivation for the viewer to continue to watch.

2.5 Film style as part of narration

The motion picture medium has an extraordinary range of expression. It has in common with the plastic arts the fact that it is a visual composition projected on a two dimensional surface; with dance, that it can deal in the arrangement of movement; with theater, that it

²⁷ Jason Gendler, “Where Does the Beginning End?”, 69.

²⁸ Ibid.

can create a dramatic intensity of events; with music, that it can compose in the rhythms and phrases of time and can be attended by song and instrument; with poetry, that it can juxtapose images; with literature, generally, that it can encompass in its sound track the abstractions available only to language.²⁹

— Maya Deren

Neoformalism looks at film style as an array of devices that together build a filmic system. “The word *device* indicates any single element or structure that plays a role in the artwork—a camera movement, a frame story, a repeated word, a costume, a theme, and so on.”³⁰ Identifying the devices and their operation in the film is the analyst’s main concern. Since Neoformalism considers film style to be inseparable from content and meaning, the analysis will always focus on style—even when discussing narrative or expository information. When Adrian Martin says “style is not a supplement to content; it *makes* content”³¹, he suggests that any choice of film style bears meaning, and it is part of the overall content of the film.

According to Thompson and Bordwell, every device has at least one function, which “is the purpose served by the presence of any given device”³². A similar device could serve different functions in a film, as well as different functions in different films, according to context and story. For example, low-pitched music in a drama film might indicate a worsening of the protagonist’s emotional situation, while in a detective film it might function as a warning of upcoming danger.

Function and device will be my main focus in the next chapters. When analyzing Zvyagintsev’s beginnings, I will ask what devices were used to achieve what effect on

²⁹ Maya Deren, “Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality.” *Daedalus* 89, no. 1 (1960): 152.

³⁰ Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 15.

³¹ Adrian Martin, *Mise en Scène and Film Style: From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 20.

³² Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 15.

the viewer. As we have seen, the main roles of the beginning are: to deliver information, to engage the viewer, and to assist them in understanding the direction of the plot. It makes sense, then, that most of the devices and their functions in the beginning will serve these roles: “Any film's first task is to engage our attention as forcefully as possible, and many, if not most, of its motivations and functions will serve that purpose.”³³ The question is: *How it is done?*

When we look at the variety of devices the film medium offers, we soon realize that a film can begin in a million different ways. Film style allows the director to use images, sounds, music, and words in so many ways—probably more than any other art form. The beginning may include various techniques, all of which are equally legitimate in film style: dramatic situations, dialogue, visual imagery, voice-over, narration, flashbacks, montage, written titles and captions, sound effects, and music. Some techniques are associated with a certain genre (e.g., the classic voice-over opening a film noir), and might be considered “less cinematic” if applied to another type of film—all according to genre, context, and conventions.

Some of these techniques, such as a quick montage, are often used as a “compression tool” for delivering a large amount of information in a very short screen time. Other techniques, such as voice over and captions, are especially convenient for introducing historical facts, which include numbers and facts. These techniques are widely acceptable in genres in which the beginning is usually burdened with a great deal of information. Drama and art-house films would mostly refrain from using such techniques—which are considered artistically “lower” among film professionals—and would rather open with a dramatic situation or with visual imagery.

³³ Ibid., 36.

Needless to say, each opening technique has a different effect on the viewer's emotion, perception, and comprehension of the narrative. Some beginnings are plot-oriented, while others emphasize character, or atmosphere. This would correlate, of course, with the overall style of the film.

In the next chapter, before analyzing the films, I will attempt to define Zvyagintsev's overall film style, based on Robert McKee's notion of *miniplot*. Only then I will examine the specific film style of the beginnings. Each of the next three chapters will discuss a different element of beginning: scarcity of information (chapter 3), prioritizing mood over action (chapter 4), visual storytelling and the use of dramatic situations instead of dialogue (chapter 5).

Chapter 3: Minimalism

“Introduce the strict minimum of information needed for the story to be comprehensible. It is surprising how quickly the spectator can work out the essentials of a situation from only a few story elements.”

— Yves Lavandier ³⁴

The first part of this chapter will attempt to characterize Zvyagintsev's overall film style. In the second and third parts I will focus on the film *Elena* (2011) to analyze the minimalism of the plot information delivered in the beginning, and its effect on the viewer.

3.1 Zvyagintsev: art-house film style, classical narration

Although Zvyagintsev is generally considered to be an art-house director, I would point out that he belongs to this tradition mostly due to film style, and not so much in terms of narrative structure.

Bordwell characterizes art-house narration by its divergence from classic narration. Art-house narration, he claims, derives from a postmodern world view, in which “the world's laws may not be knowable, personal psychology may be indeterminate” ³⁵. The main characteristics of art-house narration, according to Bordwell, are (1) a loosening of cause and effect in the plot, which might lead to an episodic structure; and (2) a relativistic notion of truth, favoring ambiguity over certainty

³⁴ Yves Lavandier, *Writing Drama: A Comprehensive Guide for Playwrights and Scriptwriters* (Paris: Le Clown & l'Enfant, 2005), 360.

³⁵ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 206.

and creating more permanent narrational gaps than what would be acceptable in a classical film ³⁶.

Looking at the plot structure of Zvyagintsev's films, it is always a linear, three-act story, based on clear causality. Although a few events or details may go unexplained, the structure is never episodic; the chain of cause and effect can thus be traced throughout the whole story. There's not much ambiguity either. Zvyagintsev refrains from dream sequences or highly subjective scenes, and at no point does the viewer find himself wondering whether what happened on screen is real or not. Gaps are a matter for an analysis deeper than what this thesis should include; it is sufficient to say here that narrational gaps in Zvyagintsev's films do not impede the process of story comprehension in a way that would not be acceptable in classical cinema. Why, then, are his films considered to be art-house?

An important key can be found in Paul Schrader's book *Transcendental Style in Film*, in which he examines certain elements of style in films by Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer (all considered to be major art-film directors). Although I am not sure if Zvyagintsev's films would fit into Schrader's definition of *transcendental*, some of the elements Schrader mentions undoubtedly correlate with Zvyagintsev's style. Schrader says: "By delaying edits, not moving the camera, forswearing music cues, not employing coverage, and heightening the mundane, transcendental style creates a sense of unease the viewer must resolve." ³⁷ Most of these devices can be found in every Zvyagintsev film, as well as a feeling of uneasiness that is often shaped by story questions and mysteries that are only solved much later in the plot.

³⁶ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 206.

³⁷ Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 3.

Schrader describes in detail another kind of art-house film style: “slow cinema”. He discusses Andrei Tarkovsky as the main influencer that has inspired this kind of style. Again, Zvyagintsev’s films do not fit within Schrader’s definition of slow cinema; yet some of the techniques Schrader mentions certainly appear in them. These would be: long takes; wide camera angles; static frames; minimal coverage; images preferred over dialogue.

Schrader says “there is a fundamental difference between being slow to create mood” (as in transcendental films) “and being slow to activate the viewer” (as in slow cinema).³⁸ Zvyagintsev’s films usually correlate with the former. While mood is emphasized over action, the most fundamental aspect of the film is still the sequence of story events.

To complete this brief overall analysis of Zvyagintsev’s film style and plot structure, I would like to cite Robert McKee’s model of plot design. McKee points out distinctions between three types of narratives: archplot (classical three-act structure), miniplot (reduced structure), and antiplot (goes against the classical narrative rules).

Archplot is the most basic story form, which is fundamental for understanding the other two. “Classical design means a story built around an active protagonist who struggles against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his or her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change.”³⁹ This is the classic, commercial, mainstream story design.

What Bordwell describes as art-house film style correlates with McKee’s definition of antiplot. This type of story expresses a different view of reality. Denial of

³⁸ Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 9.

³⁹ Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 45.

causality and changes in the plot convey the idea that life is meaningless and unpredictable. These films reject and oppose the classical design.

Miniplot, however, is the category most relevant for us, as Zvyagintsev's films fit in it quite accurately. This kind of plot design is called "mini" because it reduces the classical elements of narrative, "shrinking or compressing, trimming or truncating the prominent features of the Archplot ... Minimalism strives for simplicity and economy, while retaining enough of the classical that the film will still satisfy the audience."⁴⁰

In miniplots, we would expect to see considerably fewer events and "action points" than in classical films.⁴¹ This naturally slows down the pace of the editing, and might leave more room for atmosphere and observational scenes. It also means the overall amount of information in the film would be smaller than in a classical narrative, and therefore, the burden on the beginning to deliver a large amount of background information might be reduced too.

To sum up this analysis, we can say that Zvyagintsev's films are considered to be art-house because they follow some stylistic techniques of slow and transcendental cinema. At the same time, their miniplot structure conforms to the classical three-act structure, allowing the viewers to comprehend and engage with the story more conveniently.

3.2 Analysis: delivery of information in *Elena's* beginning

The film analysis of *Elena* will discuss how little information is given during the beginning. First, I will focus on the details we learn and on the order in which they

⁴⁰ McKee, *Story*, 46.

⁴¹ For a definition of the term "action point", see Linda Seger, *Making a Good Script Great* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1987), 48.

appear. Next, I will evaluate how it may affect the viewer's watching experience, and the meaning of this kind of beginning to the overall narration.

Elena is the story of a middle-lower class woman married to a rich man. She needs his money to support her jobless son, and her grandson, who will otherwise be drafted into the army. When her husband tells her of his intent to cut her out of his will, she uses her knowledge as an ex-nurse to kill him without leaving any incriminating evidence.

All of the important details we need to learn during the beginning appear in the first two sentences of the summary above. To understand Elena's motivation, we must be aware of her financial situation, and of the nature of her relationship with her husband, Vladimir. We also need to become aware, a bit later, of her former occupation as a nurse—which explains both the balance of power in her relationship with her husband, and her ability to kill Vladimir in such an elegant way.

Let us see how and when we learn these details. The film opens with a silent sequence presenting the apartment where Elena lives. It is a spacious well-furnished and well-designed place—in other words, a luxury home. Elena wakes up alone, and we naturally assume her to be the owner of the place. Soon after waking up, she opens the curtains throughout the apartment, makes coffee, wakes Vladimir up, and takes the trash out of his room. After he leaves the room, she makes his bed.

Such a morning routine is highly unexpected for a rich woman and, combined with the fact that they sleep in separate rooms, challenges our hypothesis of her owning the place. We might wonder whether she is Vladimir's spouse or his employee.



Figures 1-4: The first sequence of *Elena*—Elena wakes up in a spacious wealthy apartment.

A moment later, they kiss, and we realize they are a couple. Yet, she seems to serve him in a manner that resembles more a housekeeper than a wife—and she will continue to do so during breakfast. Their relationship appears to be odd, and we sense some tension in it. In fact, this is the first hint of their unbalanced relationship, which is highly interrelated with the film’s main conflict.

We are eight minutes into the film; let us look at what we have learned so far. We have identified the two main characters, their place of residence, and the basics of the balance of power in their relationship. However, we have not learned anything too specific, exceptional or unique about them. We know nothing of their past, of their profession and passions, and of other relationships in their lives.

Yet, we should note how these eight minutes manage to activate questions and tensions which make us immediately engaged in the story. We have witnessed a relationship that resembles our modern notion of marriage, but something about it is weird and unexplained. We want to understand it better; therefore, we begin to create hypotheses regarding the origins of the askew balance of power. When I refer to

minimalism and the effectiveness of the beginning, I mean exactly this: with only little information presented in a short span of time, this beginning manages to engage viewers in a high degree of activity.

The next couple of minutes reveal a few more missing details, but not all of them. Elena tells Vladimir about her plan for the day. She is going to collect her monthly pension payment and take it to her son. We understand that this is not Vladimir's son, which indicates that their relationship is a second marriage. We also learn that Vladimir is not fond of Elena's son. Then, we follow Elena in a very long sequence in which she exits the building on foot, takes a bus, then a train, and finally walks again, on the way to see her son. Again, this is unexpected for a woman who lives in such an expensive apartment so we begin to sense a problem. The narration emphasizes the length of the trip, and the effort it takes Elena to make it (bus, train, walking in rural areas). We can't help but wonder why she does not drive or take a taxi. Does Vladimir deny her these options?



Figures 5-8: Elena in her long way to her son's place.

The long way also indicates that Elena's son lives in a distant, much poorer area. We would probably assume that prior to her relationship with Vladimir, Elena used to live in such a place too. The distance and the appearance of the neighborhood both imply the huge financial gap between Elena and Vladimir.

This is the kind of hypothesis that the viewer might formulate while watching, and later it will be checked against the development of the events. We can spot another element of minimalism here. While in classical narration (archplot) all hypotheses will eventually be confirmed or disconfirmed, in a miniplot not all questions will be answered. In this story, we will later find out more about Elena's current financial situation, but at no point will we get to know what her life was like before her marriage.

Fourteen minutes into the film, Elena arrives at her son's apartment, and it is the exact opposite of the place we saw in the film's opening—it is tiny, messy, noisy and crowded. Elena's son acts like a child, and his wife scolds him, as well as their teenage boy, who treats Elena impolitely. It looks like the three of them are poor, unemployed and uneducated. A conversation in the kitchen reveals that Elena's son and his wife need Vladimir's money in order to get their teenage son off the draftees list.



Figures 9-12: The financial gap widens—lower class apartment, large family.

The next morning, at breakfast, Elena discusses her family issues with Vladimir. He is reluctant to help Elena's family. Apparently, he does not see them as relatives, nor does he feel empathetic about their difficulties. It looks like he is going to refuse to help, but after Elena's repeated pleading, he promises to consider it.

Here we get to fully comprehend the main conflict of the film. Elena needs the money; Vladimir won't give it. We can understand it clearly now because we have received all the relevant information to fill in the *template schemata*—the story details that build the conflict. We are familiar with the film's world; we know exactly who the central character is, who the supporting character is, and what their relationships are. We know what the protagonist wants, and why she can't get it.

We are also able to form a global hypothesis about the direction of the rest of the narrative: we assume Elena will try to find a way to get the money. The presiding-macro-question is: "Will Elena get the money from Vladimir to save her grandson from the army?"

However, we discover another central detail a few minutes later. When Elena visits Vladimir at the hospital after his heart attack, he tells her: "Remember, this is how we met." Apparently, ten years ago Vladimir was hospitalized, and Elena was his nurse. This "missing piece of the puzzle" is essential for our understanding of their unequal relationship, and indeed it explains a lot. It also means Elena has medical knowledge, which enables her lethal action later in the film.

The beginning ends here, once we have learned all the necessary details and are able to form a global hypothesis. Yet, the amount of information we have gathered up to this point is minimal. We know Vladimir is rich and has a daughter. We know that Elena used to be poor, and that her son is unemployed and in need of money. We know

that Elena's relationship with Vladimir is unequal, that she lives off his credit card, and that he is not fond of her family. This knowledge is quite limited when compared to the amount of information provided in classical films. We know nothing of the characters' passion, hobbies, preferences, past, friends, and occupation. How is it, then, that this beginning is still engaging?

There are three reasons for that. First, nothing is missing. All the details that are necessary for understanding the main conflict are clarified and well-established. If any of these details were to be unclear—for example, if the reason why Elena's son needs the money was ambiguous—the viewer's ability to comprehend the essence of the story and to create a global hypothesis would be impaired.

Second, Zvyagintsev roots his story in social and cultural archetypes. We have seen and internalized this kind of man and woman and their relationship in endless stories, both fictive and real. The equations "man = property owner" and "woman = propertyless" are based in the very historical definition of marriage. The rich man who marries a lower-status wife and becomes concerned about his money and about her poor family who plans to take advantage from her marriage is a classical theme in numerous plays and books. Therefore, when we watch the film, these archetypal *schemata* help us understand and infer much more about the story than what is displayed on the screen. We grasp the nuances of the conflict faster because we already know them. As a result, we need less detail and explanation, and we immediately recognize the opposing forces that drive the story forward.

Last but not least, another reason why this beginning is so engaging is the nature of the relationship between Elena and Vladimir. As I have mentioned before, the balance of power between them is not unique, but exceptional. In our modern times,

inter-class marriage with a poor woman is no longer a common arrangement for an educated person such as Vladimir, especially if the bride is not young and pretty. Given Elena's older age, and how Vladimir seems to appreciate her as a person, their unequal relationship surprises and intrigues us. We want to solve this, and understand why they are in this relationship, what is important for them and what their motives are.

3.3 Universal stories with minimal storytelling

We have looked at how the beginning manages to engage the viewer despite providing very little information. Now I would like to discuss another effect of minimal storytelling, which has to do with the universality of the story.

Film critics often mention Zvyagintsev's tendency to frame his stories in no-place and no-time.⁴² This is more evident in his other films, especially *The Return* and *The Banishment*,⁴³ but we can notice it in *Elena* too—there is no clear mention of time, and we have no idea in what city they live. This correlates with the minimalist nature of the story and the characters. The fact that we know almost nothing about them, especially no cultural characteristics, makes the story more universal.

We call a story universal when people belonging to different cultures can relate to it. Universal themes deal with remarkable life experiences—love, death, coming of age, dealing with trauma, etc.⁴⁴ In this sense, *Elena* is a universal story, without a doubt. What I claim here, is that its minimalist design enhances the feeling of universality. Stripping the characters of any cultural characteristics, and, in general, of any excess

⁴² For example, Gregory Freidin, "Russia's Two Souls: Andrei Zvyagintsev's Film 'Elena,'" *Arcade.Stanford.Edu.*, Published October 6th, 2013, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/russias-two-souls-andrei-zvyagintsevs-film-elena-2011>

⁴³ Lusin Dink, "Andre Zvyagintsev: *The Return*, *The Banishment*, *Elena* – How Fathers Exile Their Children" (Thesis, Istanbul Bilgi University, 2014), 36.

⁴⁴ "Universal Theme: Definition & Examples", In *Comprehensive English Course*, Study.com, accessed July 2020, <https://study.com/academy/lesson/universal-theme-definition-examples.html#transcriptHeader>

information, makes it easier for the viewer to apply his or her *schemata* (built on previous experience). The hypothesis-creation process is directed more towards deciphering story events, than towards understanding culture-specific structures. It makes it easier for the viewer to connect with the story by relating it to their personal context.⁴⁵

To summarize this chapter, I have analyzed the beginning in *Elena*, focusing on the details learned by the viewer, and following the learning process step-by-step. We have seen how the narration raises questions that keep the viewer engaged and push the story forward. We have also noticed how the amount of information in the film is minimal, and yet the beginning is still engaging and clear. Finally, we have looked at how the lack of excess information makes the story more universal.

45 Julia Vassilievna has addressed the same issue in her article "Russian *Leviathan*: Power, Landscape, Memory", 2., in which she cites an interview with Zvyagintsev's artistic director: "At the centre of the film were people who were not too burdened with unnecessary social attributes – profession, nationality, citizenship."

Chapter 4: Atmosphere and world

“We are basing practically everything on mood, on atmosphere. In my film there has to be the dramaturgy of image, not of literature.”

— Andrei Tarkovsky ⁴⁶

4.1 Feeling over action

In this chapter, I will discuss how Zvyagintsev opens his films by presenting a feeling rather than a story, giving priority to atmosphere over information. I will analyze the film style in the beginning of *Love/less* (2017) in order to determine what devices are used and their functions. Finally, I will describe the effect this has on the viewer, and on the overall narration.

Atmosphere is an elusive term, mainly related to mood, tone and an overall feeling. “Atmosphere—the pervading tone or mood of a place, situation, or creative work.” ⁴⁷ Tone and mood are subjective terms, which bear different meanings to different viewers, so it might be difficult to define a specific atmosphere in words. Nonetheless, we can make a clear distinction between atmosphere and information. While atmosphere is all about general feelings, information consists of actual and specific facts. While some kind of atmosphere is present in every film, we are mostly interested in the ratio of screen time dedicated to creating atmosphere, versus time dedicated to distributing story information. Looking at Zvyagintsev’s films, it seems he dedicates his beginnings almost entirely to creating atmosphere at the expense of delivering story information.

⁴⁶ “Andrei Tarkovsky’s First Film: ‘The Steamroller and the Violin’ from 1960”, Dangerous Minds, last modified January 9, 2011,

https://dangerousminds.net/comments/andrei_tarkovsky_the_steamroller_and_the_violin

⁴⁷ “Atmosphere”, Oxford English Dictionary, accessed July 8, 2020

<https://www.lexico.com/definition/atmosphere>

In Zvyagintsev's films there is a close connection between creating atmosphere and presenting the film's world. As we have seen before, the three main subjects of expository information are world, characters and relationships. The term "world", although not very popular in film theory, is defined by Meir Sternberg as "the canons of probability operating in [the story]" ⁴⁸. It describes the physical environment of the story and the social, political and cultural contexts in which it takes place. Zvyagintsev uses the presentation of the film's world to create an emotional atmosphere, allowing the viewer to slowly enter a different state of mind.

4.2 Film style analysis: *Loveless* opening sequences

Loveless is the story of a couple who goes through a vicious divorce. After a harsh argument, they spend the night with their lovers and fail to notice when their twelve-year-old son disappears. The boy is declared missing, and searches are carried out by the police and the local community. After a long time, a body is found, but we cannot be sure whether it is the boy's or not. A few years later, both parents seem to be happy in their new lives.

The film opens with a silent sequence, displaying a few snow-covered trees and a small pond. We should note how similar it is in style to the opening sequence of *Elena*, which presents her spacious apartment. In fact, Zvyagintsev employs a consistent style of opening sequences in all of his five films: a long, slow-paced sequence revealing natural or urban surroundings, with no human in frame, often accompanied by dramatic music. These sequences create a powerful feeling right at the beginning, and serve to set the overall tone of the film.

⁴⁸ Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*, 1

The opening sequence of *Love/less* lasts 1 min and 45 s, consisting of ten almost-static shots. This is a relatively slow-paced sequence, especially due to the lack of movement within the frames. At this point, an unfamiliar viewer might even mistake it for “slow cinema”, except for the music, which indicates otherwise.



Figures 13-21: The opening sequence of *Love/less*—static shots with strong shapes.

These images create a feeling of a cold, gloomy, and lonely environment, in which nothing can grow or change. The absence of human beings contributes to the feeling of dreary natural surroundings, where one would struggle to survive. Later in the film, we discover this is exactly the kind of world the boy lives in, not due to natural circumstances, but because of his parents' relationship. The music adds a dramatic feeling that can even be interpreted as a warning.

We should note that, while this opening creates a very strong atmosphere, it does not provide any plot-related information. At this point, we are given no clue as to what this place is, and whether it has any importance to the story. Hence, the function of

this sequence is merely to create an atmosphere and to put the viewers in the right mood for the story about to begin.

The next sequence, however, takes us to the school, from which the boy will eventually exit. Only then the first sequence acquires meaning in the story: we realize that, on his way home, the boy crosses the dreary place shown before. At this point, we begin to explore the film's world.



Figures 22-27: Second sequence—getting familiar with the film's world.

Slow camera movements follow the boy as he walks away from school and among the trees. The movements are mostly horizontal, revealing the space as in the perspective of a person looking around. It looks like the camera movements are more committed to telling us about the film's world than about the boy. While the camera

undoubtedly follows him, in some moments it feels like he is just an excuse to reveal more of the surroundings.

We follow the boy as he wanders through the deserted area of the pond and into the neighborhood where he lives. We get acquainted with the socio-economic context through small details—like the appearance of the school building and the general appearance of the neighborhood—and by the fact that the boy plays with a red-and-white police tape he found on the ground. We learn a little bit about the boy, as well. We know he is a loner due to the fact that he spends time by himself near the pond, and because he does not join the kids who play soccer in the neighborhood. We also know he has a friend at school.

Yet, by the end of this sequence, and five minutes into the film, we barely know any facts, and we have not developed any hypothesis regarding the direction of the story. We know there is a boy in the story, and that he might be lonely. Other than that, we have absolutely no idea what the story is about. The first five minutes are focused primarily on creating general atmosphere, leaving the story and characters to be developed later on.

In the following scene, the focus of the film shifts. It is no more atmospheric and slow-paced. We see the boy in his room when potential buyers arrive to have a look at the family's apartment, which is to be sold soon. We learn about the divorce, and quite a lot about the relationship between the boy and his mother. However, I would like to concentrate my analysis on the opening sequences we have already mentioned, and on how they create atmosphere. I will examine what film style devices are in use, in terms of visual images, editing, pace, and music.

Visually, the prominent elements in both opening sequences belong to nature—trees, water, and snow appear in the first, while trees and dry leaves on the ground are shown in the second. Nature has always meant a lot for humankind, even in the current urban era. The presence of nature connects us to our most primitive roots, and affects us on an unconscious level. This is the reason why these images of trees and water imbue the opening with such a powerful feeling and create a strong atmosphere.

The trees appear to be large and strong, towering over the frame in sharp angles. This is emphasized by the high contrast between their dark color and the white snow, and by the doubled shapes created by the reflection of the trees on the water. The pond, serving as a mirror, generates a cold, glass-like sensation. Due to the snow and the water, the image is almost monochromatic. All of this creates a freezing, gloomy, harsh feeling.

Brown is the prominent color in the second sequence. As the boy walks over the fallen leaves and among the leafless trees, we get the feeling that this area is dull, dry, and unfertile. The water is brown-gray now, as well as the ground. The boy is seen alone among the sharp angles of the trees, and we get the notion he is all alone in the world. The fact that he spends time by himself; the visual surrounding; framing; editing; and music are all stylistic devices whose function is to create this lonely feeling and harsh atmosphere.

Let us speak a little about music. *Love/less* begins with a short theme music, which starts to play during the opening titles, culminates as the first shot appears, and ends a few seconds later. Although brief, it is quite dramatic and strong. It consists of one-note repetitive beats, which change over time only by increased volume. This kind of intense but repetitive music creates a feeling of uneasiness, and adds to the harsh

and gloomy feeling we get from the image. A somewhat similar theme music can be found in *Elena*, when she is traveling to see her son.

Another central device in Zvyagintsev's openings is the slow pace. It is usually regarded as a matter of editing, but actually pace is created both by the duration of each shot in the scene, and by the inner pace of the shot itself. By inner pace I mean the movement of objects within the frame, as well as camera movements.

As we have seen before, the opening sequence in *Love/less* is slow paced mainly due to the stillness of the shots and the lack of camera movements. The second sequence is slow-paced as well, but in a different way. Although it contains camera movement, the average duration of each shot is much longer (30 seconds), and since the camera follows the boy as he walks, the movement is not so apparent. By using a slow pace, the opening sequences allow the viewers to organically sink into the film's world. The viewers are invited to observe calmly and wander around, as if they were visiting the place themselves, absorbing the sights and sounds of the area. These sequences resemble the techniques of slow cinema in how they allow the viewers to drift in their minds while watching. Paul Schrader says, "Time allows the viewer to imbue the image with associations, even contradictory ones."⁴⁹ The relative inaction in the frame opens mental space for the viewers to recall memories and include their own thoughts in the watching experience.

Schrader discusses one more aspect of the art-house film style, described by Gilles Deleuze as the shift from "movement-image" to "time-image". Deleuze claims that, in "time-image" films, screen movement is subordinate to time. "It means that a film edit is determined not by the action on screen but by the creative desire to associate

⁴⁹ Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 5.

images over time.”⁵⁰ We can see it in the second sequence, when, although the boy is leading the camera, many of the shots continue to run for a few seconds even after the boy leaves the frame. This draws the viewer’s attention to the world surrounding him, rather than focusing only on the boy’s actions. Even if mainly symbolic, this technique broadens the film’s scope, implying the existence of events and characters outside the film plot. Likewise, the choice to open the film with images of the natural surroundings bears a similar message. It communicates the existence of other people and stories, which might be equally important.

In this chapter I have analyzed the opening of *Love/less*, with the purpose of showing how Zvyagintsev gives priority to the film’s world and atmosphere over story. By presenting slow sequences with very little information in them, the first five minutes of the film are entirely dedicated to creating atmosphere and establishing the film world. To do so, Zvyagintsev uses a few film style devices: visual elements of nature, slow-paced editing, dramatic music, static shots and slow camera movements.

⁵⁰ Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 3.

Chapter 5: Dramatic situations and visual images

“Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”

— citation attributed to Anton Chekhov

5.1 “Show, don’t tell”

“Show, don’t tell” was originally developed as a literary writing technique. It means “to have the reader experience the story through actions, words, thoughts, sense and feeling”⁵¹ rather than through summarization or description. In films, a visual medium, the concept has adapted into the general preference for using images and actions rather than spoken language. Telling the story through visual imagery and dramatic situations is considered to be more “cinematic” and more suitable for the filmic medium than prolonged dialogue scenes. In the beginning, this is especially emphasized, for historical reasons. Greek plays were traditionally opened with a chorus that directly reviewed all the relevant background events.⁵² Since then, theatre has continued to embrace this type of direct exposition. “The classic illustration of blatant exposition is that of the ‘well-made play’ of the late nineteenth century. Such a play might open with a maid and a butler ... [they] gossip together - and thereby inform us about everything we need to know”.⁵³ When film theorists sought to establish film as an independent art form and distinguish it from theater, they emphasized its visual nature. Hence, the consensus among film critics today is that a visual or dramatic exposition is

⁵¹ Samantha Simmonds-Ronceros, “Filmmaking – Show Don’t Tell”, Noho Art District, Published July 20, 2016, <http://nohoartsdistrict.com/industry-art/independent-filmmaking/item/3600-filmmaking-show-don-t-tell>

⁵² David Howard, *The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer's Guide to the Craft and Elements of a Screenplay* (London: Souvenir Press Limited, 2011), 61.

⁵³ William Miller, *Screenwriting for Narrative Film & TV* (London: Hastings House, 1980), 57.

superior to one that is based on dialogue or voice-over—superior in the sense that it utilizes the uniqueness of the art form more efficiently.

In this chapter I will examine how the beginning in *The Return* (2003) is conveyed by dramatic situations and visual imagery, with very little dialogue. By “dramatic situations” I mean scenes that contain action and conflict—situations in which at least one character wants something and confronts an obstacle to achieve it. For example, a father and a son in a car is not a dramatic situation, unless the son wants to stop for lunch and the father disagrees. Situations of conflict make the viewer more involved, as they raise questions and call for different possible solutions.

Visual storytelling is a broad term, and my focus, in this chapter, will be on images themselves. In other words, the art of cinematography—color, composition, camera movements, and any visual information in the frame. In Neoformalism, these are all considered to be devices of film style. As in every film analysis, I will describe each device and its function within the narrative. By doing so, I will be able to presume the effects on the viewer and to examine the techniques used by Zvyagintsev to achieve these effects.

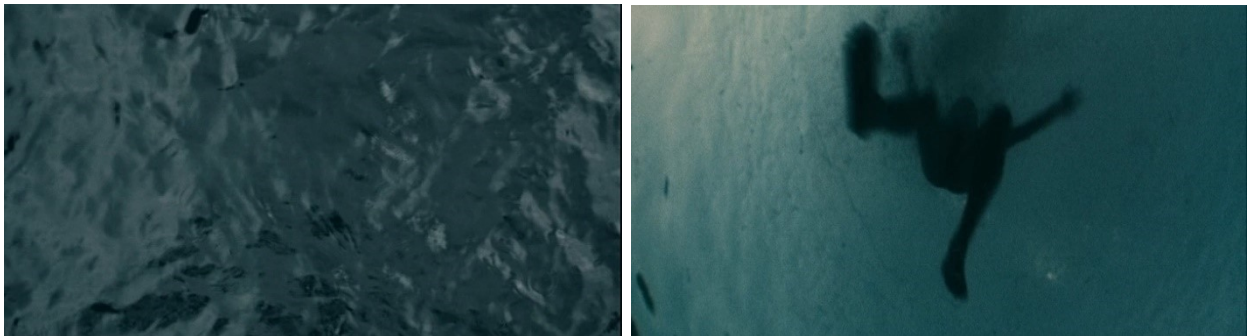
I’d like to make an important remark, though, before we begin. When talking about function and effect, I’m neither saying that the director has necessarily planned it specifically this way, nor that every viewer will be affected the same way. “The analyst’s task becomes to point out the cues and, based on them, to discuss what responses would reasonably result, given a knowledge of backgrounds on the part of the viewer.”⁵⁴ The only thing I intend to do is describe the filmic devices in use and discuss what would be a reasonable response to it by an average, fairly-knowledgeable viewer.

⁵⁴ Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 30.

5.2 Visual analysis of beginning in *The Return*

The Return is a story of two teenage boys and their father, whom they barely know. After many years, the father reappears in their house and takes them on a trip to an isolated island. They both struggle with accepting their father and with their conflicting emotions towards him. The film can be read on two levels: as a family drama, and as a religious parable. In the second reading, the father represents God, and the doubts and mistrust of the boys are the struggles of faith.

I would like to break down the beginning into six sequences, and to discuss each one separately. The first sequence consists of just a few shots. The camera wanders underwater, over a wreck of a small boat. The opening sounds are very low bass pulses. This sequence opens the film with a strong atmospheric feeling, but no clear information. Yet we definitely expect water to be of certain importance in the story. Later, we will discover it indeed has a central role.

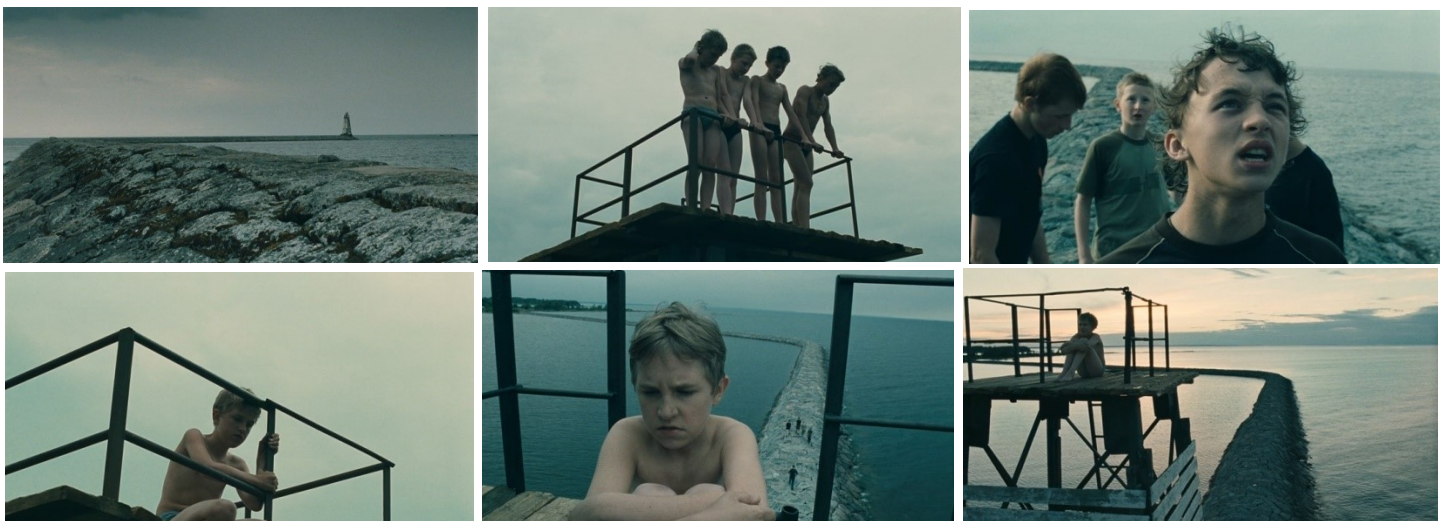


Figures 28-29: First sequence of *The Return*—above and under the water.

The second sequence introduces the two brothers—especially the younger one, Ivan, who is the protagonist. Still from underwater, we see the legs of a boy who jumps into the water, then a view of a lonely pier and a lighthouse. We know it is an isolated

place. A group of boys stand on the top of a high tower and dare each other to jump into the water. The young boy isn't brave enough and finally chooses to stay on the tower while the others leave. Later, his mom comes and persuades him to get down.

Following the opening scene, this sequence also presents water as the main motif of the film. The sea appears large, filling almost the whole frame. Other parts of the frame are filled by the sky, thus creating two large bodies of water, one above the other. As expected, the dominant color of the film is blue. Many frames in this sequence, as well as later in the film, are composed of gray and blue. This becomes significant when we meet the father, whose associated color is red.



Figures 30-35: Second sequence of *The Return*—introducing the theme of manhood.

The jumping scene is a classic situation of young men trying to prove their manhood. As we soon see, manhood is the prominent theme of the film. When the father returns, he challenges his sons in many more ways like this. Ivan will object to his father again and again, just like when he refuses to jump in this scene. Although his friends threaten to call him “chicken” and “stupid”, he still refuses to participate. Andrei, his older brother, encourages him to jump, and tries to defend him against the criticism

of the other boys. At this point, we still don't know they are brothers, but we get the feeling they have a close relationship.

The third sequence happens the day after. Ivan wishes to join the other boys in playing soccer, but they call him “chicken”. He begins to hit Andrei and fight him, telling him, “Mom will kill you.” Now we have evidence that they are brothers. We see the relationship between them, which includes some kindness too. Although Andrei is older and stronger, he does not beat Ivan too hard. Instead, Andrei teases Ivan into trying to catch him. While they run home, we get to see the neighborhood. We notice the sea again, a harbor in the background, and some old houses.



Figures 36-41: Third sequence of *The Return*—revealing the fact that they are brothers through conflict.

We should note how most of the beginning until now was composed of visual images, with the help of dramatic situations. The streets of the neighborhood were revealed while the boys were running, because they had a fight. We understood they are brothers thanks to their closer communication in the jumping scene and their fight in the third sequence. The theme of manhood was conveyed through the actions of the boys (jumping from a high tower), and by the inaction of Ivan.

Next comes a short scene containing the most important piece of expositional information. The boys reach home and see their mother standing outside. As they begin to shout their complaints, she orders them to be quiet because “father is sleeping”. Both brothers are shocked: “Who?” And when she repeats, “Father”, they both turn to look at the red car parked outside.



Figures 42-45: Inferring the father's absence from the boys reaction.

In order to understand the whole premise of the film, we must realize the boys do not know their father. In a different film, this could be a huge source of backstory information—how and why the father left, how their lives went on without him, why he returned, etc. Here, we don't get any of these details whatsoever. Nevertheless, we understand everything we need to know from Ivan's and Andrei's reactions.

It is surprising how much insight we can get from such a brief moment. Probably, we have sensed the absence of the father unconsciously, when the boys spoke of how “mom will kill you”, and when she was the one to rescue Ivan from the tower. The

existence of the father had not been brought up in the film yet. When Andrei and Ivan hear the word “father”, they are dazed. They ask “Who is sleeping?” as if they had not been able to hear it correctly. From that we immediately infer that the father does not live with them. Even more so, we realize they have not seen him in years, and were not expecting to meet him anytime soon. This hypothesis will be confirmed in the next sequence.

Another visual element in this scene is the homage to Zvyagintsev’s “spiritual father”—Tarkovsky. The frame of the mother, smoking and looking at the view, evokes a famous frame from the opening of Tarkovsky’s *The Mirror* (1975). There, too, the mother character struggles to raise her two children all by herself.



Figure 46: Tarkovsky's *The Mirror*.



Figure 47: Zvyagintsev's *The Return*.

The next sequence follows the brothers' first glimpse of their father. They open the door quietly and stare at him. The camera frames the father in a reconstruction of Andrea Mantegna's painting *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*. This framing is a clear analogy between the father and God.



Figure 48: The father in *The Return*.



Figure 49: *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*.

Next, Ivan rushes upstairs to the attic, to search for a photo that seems to be the only one they have of their father. Ivan looks for the photo desperately, and we see how tremendously moved he is by the arrival of his father. The boys recognize their father only thanks to the photo, not by memory. Ivan himself is just a baby in the photo so our hypothesis regarding the length of the father's absence is confirmed. When they look at the photo, Andrei smiles and Ivan does not. In a simple visual way, we witness their differences in attitude regarding their father's presence.



Figure 50: Different face expression of the brothers.



Figure 51: The only photo of the father.

The last sequence is a family dinner. The boys, their mom, and their grandma (who lives with them), gather at the table. Only then the father enters, takes his place at the center of the table, pours the wine and serves the food. We see the passive state of

the women, which indicates the father's authority. The compositions in this scene are symmetrical, creating a sense of order, which enforces the father's authority. As he passes the food, the camera withdraws back in a dolly-out movement that reveals the whole table. In a way, this frame resembles Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, with the father as powerful as Jesus at the very center of the frame. Again, we see the boys' reactions on their faces; without the aid of dialogue, we can clearly understand what stance each one of them takes on their father's reclaim of authority in the family.



Figures 52-57: Camera angles establish relationships during the family dinner.

To summarize this chapter, we have seen how Zvyagintsev conveys expositional details—such as themes, background story, and relationships—mostly by visual storytelling and dramatic situations. The dialogue is short and concise, and is not the major carrier of information. Colors, compositions and visual references contribute much more to introduce the story and the characters.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Beginnings are an extremely important part of narration. Representing the first meeting of the viewer with the film, the beginning bears an enormous weight. Are the viewers going to engage with the story and continue to watch? Will they understand the background and the circumstances of the protagonist's life? Will they get in the mood of the film and connect to it emotionally? The beginning creates an initial contract with the viewer, spelling out what he should and shouldn't expect from the film. It gets the viewer familiarized with the characters and the story world, as well as with genre conventions, film style, point of view, editing pace, music and all other formal elements. It introduces symbols, motifs and themes; it defines the film's scope and clarifies the main conflict.

When I watched Andrey Zvyagintsev's films, I felt how they carry me directly to the heart of the story. The opening scenes in his films were powerful, effective, and generally more engaging than those in other art-house films. I have written this thesis with the intention to study the specific techniques that make these beginnings so effective.

In *Elena*, we have followed the process of information delivery and hypothesis testing within the viewer's mind. We have seen that the amount of details the viewer actually learns about the characters is very small. Yet, we do learn what is necessary to create a long-term global hypothesis regarding the rest of the narrative. We have looked into the ways the beginning arouses curiosity in the viewer's mind by introducing an unequal relationship between Elena and Vladimir, and how it engages the viewer in the main conflict, presenting a clear question: "Will Elena get the money for her family?"

As a side note, I have mentioned that the lack of cultural-specific information contributes to make the story more universal, and possibly easier to comprehend. There are traces of this tendency towards a universal story in *Loveless* too. We have seen how camera movements and “time-image” editing expand our gaze beyond the plot, encouraging a broader look on the film’s world.

By analyzing the opening of *Loveless*, we have seen how Zvyagintsev prioritizes atmosphere over action. The first five minutes of the film, opening with strong dramatic music and presenting mostly natural elements, hardly provide the viewer with any information. Rather, they slowly immerse the viewer in the world of the story, by setting the mood and letting the viewer discover the surrounding.

In *The Return*, we have seen how visual images and dramatic situations are employed in telling the story without relying on dialogue. For example, the camera movement in the dinner scene establishes the father’s authority; and we realize the length of his absence by means of a family photo found in the attic. In a film that avoids the traditional “direct exposition” (originated in the theater), dramatic situations provide a suitable frame for information to be revealed through conflict.

As an aspiring director, I am interested mostly in the practical aspects of film making. Hence, this study of beginnings has proved an invaluable tool to guide me through the process of creating strong and effective openings in my future films. I hope the reading has been insightful for the readers as well.

Reference list

Sources

Elena, dir. Andrey Zvyagintsev, Russia: Non-Stop Productions, 2011.

Leviathan, dir. Andrey Zvyagintsev, Russia: Non-Stop Productions, 2014.

Loveless, dir. Andrey Zvyagintsev, Russia: Non-Stop Productions, 2017.

The Banishment, dir. Andrey Zvyagintsev, Russia: Ren-TV, 2007.

The Return, dir. Andrey Zvyagintsev, Russia: Ren Film, 2003.

The Mirror, dir. Andrei Tarkovsky, Soviet Union: Mosfilm, 1975.

Literature

Aristotle. "Poetics (CA. 350 B.C.)." In *Classic Writings on Poetry*, edited by William Harmon, 33–62. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

Cabart, Anais. "Andrei Zvyagintsev's *The Return*: A Tarkovskian Initiation," *Close Up: Film and Media Studies*, Vol.1, No. 2 (2013): 51-62.

Carroll, Noël. "Narrative Closure." *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, no. 135 (2007): 1-15.

Dangerous Minds. "Andrei Tarkovsky's First Film: The Steamroller and the Violin from 1960". last modified January 9, 2011.

https://dangerousminds.net/comments/andrei_tarkovsky_the_steamroller_and_the_violin

Deren, Maya. "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality." *Daedalus* 89, no. 1 (1960): 150-67

Dink, Lusin. "Andre Zvyagintsev: *The Return*, *The Banishment*, *Elena* – How Fathers Exile Their Children." Thesis, Istanbul Bilgi University, 2014.

Freidin, Gregory. "Russia's Two Souls: Andrei Zvyagintsev's Film "Elena," Arcade—Literature, the Humanities, & the World, Published October 6th, 2013.
<https://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/russias-two-souls-andrei-zvyagintsevs-film-elena-2011>

Freytag, Gustav. *Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Beginning of Dramatic Composition and Art*. Translated by Elias J. MacEwan. Chicago: S. C. Griggs & Co., 1985.

Gendler, Jason. "*The Narration of Beginnings in Classical Cinema*." PhD diss., University of California, 2014.

Gendler, Jason. "Where Does the Beginning End? Cognition, Form, and Classical Narrative Beginnings". *Projections*, no. 6 (2012): 64–83.

Insdorf, Annette. *Cinematic Overtures: How to Read Opening Scenes*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

Lavandier, Yves. *Writing Drama: A Comprehensive Guide for Playwrights and Scriptwriters*. Paris: Le Clown & l'Enfant, 2005.

Martin, Adrian. *Mise en Scène and Film Style: From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014.

McKee, Robert. *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*. New York: Harper Collins, 1997.

Păraù, Călina. "Through the "Eye of the Machine": Poetics of the Inhuman in Andrey Zvyagintsev's films", *Ekphrasis: Extreme Storytelling*, no.1 (2016): 129-138.

Phelan, James. *Reading People, Reading Plots – Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Phelan, James. "The Beginning of Beloved: A Rhetorical Approach." In *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, edited by Brian Richardson, 195–212. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008.

Schrader, Paul. *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.

Seeger, Linda. *Making a Good Script Great*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1987.

Skakov, Nariman. *The Cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time*. London: Bloomsbury publishing, 2012.

Sternberg, Meir. *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.

Study.com. "Universal Theme: Definition & Examples." Comprehensive English Course. Accessed July 2020. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/universal-theme-definition-examples.html#transcriptHeader>

Thompson, Kristin. *Breaking the Glass Armor*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.

Vassilieva, Julia. "Russian *Leviathan*: Power, Landscape, Memory," *Film Criticism*, Vol.42, no.1 (March 2008): 1-15.