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## **Regarding Production Design. A Neoformalist Approach to the Visual Design of Estonian Feature Films**

This PhD project is a research of the aesthetics of Estonian feature films made between 2000 and 2015 in order to analyse how it positions within Eastern and Western film industry and what could be regarded as Estonia's distinctive own legacy in that matter.

This dissertation, which will be written as a monography, is a combination of historical research of the production design as an artistic practise, that combines interviews with the production designers themselves and their working materials and visual analysis that is founded upon neoformalist theory.

This thesis addresses two research problems. Firstly, in which way could be film's production design analyzed? Secondly, what can be concluded when this analysis is applied to contemporary Estonian feature films made between 2000–2015?

Although there are a large number of literature about famous actors, directors, cinematography and film's overall history or philosophy; books and studies on production design tend to come short. Analysis about the aesthetics of production design has been done just by a handful of scholars, and it comes as something that is outlined by almost every writer on this subject in their book introduction.

Production design is a visual framework where cinematic perception is created. It provides to a film its distinguishable environment that consists of denotatively geographical, historical, social, and cultural elements. It remains to be indefinite field both as a profession and as a field of study. By being a creative terrain that incorporates both cinematic means and other cultural spheres like theatre, architecture and interior design, production design creates and evokes together with other film's devices an understanding of a dramaturgical atmosphere. On the one hand, production design is the only physical facet in the creation of a cinematic environment. However, for the most part, it lasts as long as the shooting of the film. This circumstance means for the historian and theorist of production design that studies of it have to rely upon and refer predominately to an visual analysis. Thereat this theses approaches the creative practice of production design in many ways from the inside out through the

interviews with the Estonian production designers themselves, while incorporating into this analysis their remaining sketches, drawings, and plans.

Even though filmmaking in its essence will always be a collaborative art, where it is quite difficult to draw the lines between the artistry of different creative individuals, it consists of numerous structural and technical facets. Splitting film art into mere crafts and in turn, separating production design as a key self-sufficient visual feature is not the goal. However, I do believe that better knowledge and appreciation about production design can significantly enrich both cultural and specifically film studies.

Production designers are largely responsible for the visual look of the film. Behind this title stands a creative person who is translating words from the script pages and vision conducted by a film's director into stylized images that are purposefully recorded through the eye of a cinematographer. By doing so, a production designer is shaping the film's visual experience; and it is something that is done with an aim on visually coherent and artistically distinctive outcome.

Neoformalist analysis used for writing this dissertation is a theoretical approach to aesthetic criticism that is rooted in the work of the Russian Formalist literary theory. Kristin Thompson developed neoformalist analysis in her book titled "Eisenstein's 'Ivan the Terrible': A Neoformalist Analysis," which was first published in 1981. Thompson constructs within this work a foundational terminological and principal structure for neoformalist analysis. Instead of being a grand theory, neoformalist analysis is created through broad assumptions about how artworks are constructed and how they lead an audience response. Neoformalist approach is used to analyze films by implying a two-way interchange between theory and criticism. Thompson defines this approach herself as a set of assumptions about traits that artworks have and assumptions of procedures that spectators go through while experiencing them.

Developing a neoformalist approach to analyse films is done by focusing on the cinematic traits of this art form, in other words, on cinematicness. This, in turn, needs an indication of devices, which can be any single element that is being used in the filmic system, including production design. It makes neoformalist analysis one out of many, yet truly far-reaching possibilities, that ables to examine film's different aspects on a par, as devices of one coherent artwork. Consecutively, neoformalist analysis locates production design in a position that is shaping the cinematic experience, which consecutively differs accordingly to specific cultural backgrounds and structural motives of interrelated devices. In this manner, it creates a possibility to explore and examine connections between production design and the socio-cultural codes.

This analysis could be done by also relying on structural analysis written by other theorists on production design, namely Charles Affron and Mirella Jona Affron, who have created a taxonomic system to classify different purposes of production design. Correspondingly to Affrons, one of the advocates of neoformalist approach David Bordwell differs four categories of cinematic style which resemble previous facets of production design. These theoretical structures allow to reposition production design in cinematic history from a predominately neglected object of research and this dissertation will try to create one out of many examples of that by investigating aesthetic concepts and socio-cultural context of contemporary Estonian films through stylistic functions created within the field of production design.