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On Versatile Terms: Film Style

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Abstract:

Filmic discourses are hardly imaginable without the usage of the term 'film style'. However, at second glance, the application of the term across disciplinary, temporal, and regional borders appears to be surprisingly versatile. *Filmstil. Perspektivierungen eines Begriffs*, edited by Julian, Blunk, Tina Kaiser, Dietmar Kammerer, and Chris Wahl is the result of a research network cooperation between Marburg, Potsdam, Zurich, and Vienna and successfully aspires to academically frame this versatility. In fifteen contributions that range from broad, introductory overviews to individual in-depth studies of particular stylistic devices, the researchers explore the various meanings and functions of film style from theoretical, historical, and methodological perspectives between film studies and the science of art.

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Blunk, Julian; Tina Kaiser; Dietmar Kammerer, and Chris Wahl: *Filmstil. Perspektivierungen eines Begriffs*. München: edition text + kritik, 2016. 364 pages, 39 EUR. ISBN: 978-3-86916-510-3

Abstract:

Filmic discourses are hardly imaginable without the usage of the term 'film style'. However, at second glance, the application of the term across disciplinary, temporal, and regional borders appears to be surprisingly versatile. *Filmstil. Perspektivierungen eines Begriffs*, edited by Julian, Blunk, Tina Kaiser, Dietmar Kammerer, and Chris Wahl is the result of a research network cooperation between Marburg, Potsdam, Zurich, and Vienna and successfully aspires to academically frame this versatility. In fifteen contributions that range from broad, introductory overviews to individual in-depth studies of particular stylistic devices, the researchers explore the various meanings and functions of film style from theoretical, historical, and methodological perspectives between film studies and the science of art.

Upon hearing the term 'film style' many scholars will have certain filmic concepts, characteristics or peculiarities in mind. Some will think of concrete stylistic devices and techniques such as the famous 'vertigo effect.' Some will think of individual directors and the way they leave their own stylistic signature marks on their film productions, such as the work of Martin Scorsese or Quentin Tarantino. Yet others will think of the stylistic specificities of certain film historical clusters such as the so-called 'spaghetti western.' As interesting as the multiplicity of the associations with the term might be, it also points to what is considered the greatest weakness of the concept amongst media studies scholars: despite its prominence in filmic discourses, film style remains a (yet) undetermined concept within today's academic study of film.

As the title already suggests, the anthology *Filmstil. Perspektivierungen eines Begriffs* shines a (spot-) light at the term. Arising from a DFG-funded research network cooperation between scholars from Marburg, Potsdam, Zurich, and Vienna ("Filmstil zwischen Kunstgeschichte und Medienkonvergenz," 2012–2013), the fifteen contributions to the volume strive to provide a variety of scholarly perspec-

tives on film style. While *Filmstil* decidedly professes to be an interdisciplinary approach towards the topic (p. 9), it clearly prioritizes the academic exchange between film studies and the science of art as one that is particularly fruitful for the discussion of style, on the one hand, and one that has been severely neglected by scholars, on the other hand (p. 8).

The introduction to the volume by Tina Kaiser and Dietmar Kammerer identifies film style as a significant 'point of intersection' between film scholarly traditions: "Diese Bemerkungen legen es nahe, Filmstil [...] als Schnittstelle zu begreifen, der zwischen Theorie, Analyse und Geschichte zu vermitteln vermag" (p. 7). This interesting proposition refers back to Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell's neoformalist tradition of the study of film, which seems to serve as a methodological and theoretical reference point for the majority of the critical discussions of the notion of style in the anthology. The volume does not rely on neoformalism to literally dictate the term(s) in question though, but suggests already via its structure that its main interest lies in opening up the discussion. The contributions are grouped according to the perspectives they provide: in the category 'Stil-Konzepte' the reader will find examinations of the term 'film style' from theoretical points of view, while 'Stil-Fragen' introduces historical approaches towards the definition of the term; last but not least, 'Stil-Mittel' provides profound analyses of stylistic devices and techniques, such as *bullet time* and soft focus.

Chris Wahl's contribution to the first part of the volume, "Eine kleine Geschichte des Begriffs 'Filmstil' und seiner Bedeutung," introduces the reader to film studies-related discussions of the term between the 1920s and today. He traces how the term has been changing meaning through the theoretical impact of much older disciplines in the humanities – "die Bezugssysteme Literatur und bildende Kunst" (p. 48). Especially interesting is Wahl's consideration of the attempt of critics to liberate film style from its imported canonical fetters and the accompanying struggle of the 'medium' film for independent artistic recognition. Wahl provides an appealing overview of texts that have significantly influenced discourses about film style throughout the years, such as publications by Béla Balász, Susan Sontag, and Marshall McLuhan. He concisely points out their development of the term 'film style' as well as their diverse systems of reference outside of filmic discourses.

In the third part of the anthology, Julian Hanich's "Komplexe Tiefeninszenierungen. Über die verborgenen Dimensionen im Filmstil Roy Anderssons" is an elucidatory example for the significance of the analysis of concrete film stylistic techniques regarding the theoretical development of the term. By means of Roy Andersson's deep focus cinematography, Hanich further develops insights into the functions of deep focus and adds to ongoing discussions of how it works in relation to the audience. Moreover, he integrates the notion of style as a matter of an individual director's work as well as argues for the inseparability of the latter with the content of a film – "inwiefern aus der Verflechtung von

Anderssons Stil mit dem Inhalt seiner Filme Bedeutung entsteht” (p. 301). The author’s contribution falls in no way short of his ambitious threefold goal: he manages to clearly convey his insightful, in-depth analysis of a selection of Andersson’s films in a manner that inspired the author of this review to take to the task to be a much more attentive spectator in the future.

Following its own definition of the term ‘film style’ as a point of intersection, *Filmstil* positions itself at the interface of film studies, art theory, and art history and successfully manages to entwine different points of view deriving from these disciplines. The multi-perspectival approaches of the contributions lead to interesting insights into, for instance, historically changing notions of the term in discourses from the early twentieth century (Köhler) or variations of the dualistic analytical approach towards film as separated into form and content (Kirsten). With this strategy, the anthology certainly provides leverage points for a variety of scholarly readers. A minor weakness of the volume seems to be the ultimately unsettled commitment of the contributions to the further development of the term ‘film style’. While some clearly aim at contributing to the theoretical discussion or take stock of theoretical discourses at hand, others generate bottom-up insights into film style that could have been presented, at times, with more emphasis on their wider implications. This minor criticism aside, *Filmstil* constitutes a valuable contribution to the field of film studies as it does not search for a single answer to the question what film style is but leaves its contributors space enough to speak for themselves and, eventually, to productively agree to disagree. The anthology is highly recommended to scholars who have been wondering where the term ‘film style’ comes from, where it seems to be residing at the moment, and where it is possibly going.

German Abstract:

Wandelbare Ausdrucksformen: Filmstil

Der Begriff des *Filmstils* ist aus filmischen Diskursen kaum wegzudenken. Auf den zweiten Blick jedoch wird deutlich, dass der Begriff über disziplinäre, zeitliche und örtliche Grenzen hinweg überraschend vielseitig anwendbar ist. Die Publikation *Filmstil. Perspektivierungen eines Begriffs*, herausgegeben von Julian, Blunk, Tina Kaiser, Dietmar Kammerer, und Chris Wahl, ist das Ergebnis einer Forschungsnetzwerkkooperation zwischen Marburg, Potsdam, Zürich und Wien. Ihr gelingt es, dieser Vielseitigkeit einen wissenschaftlichen Rahmen zu geben. In 15 Beiträgen, die von einführenden Überblicken bis hin zu tiefenanalytischen Einzelstudien filmstilistischer Verfahren reichen, untersuchen die Forscher_innen die mannigfaltigen Bedeutungen und Funktionen von Filmstil unter Berücksichtigung theoretischer, historischer sowie methodologischer Perspektiven aus den Film- und Kunstwissenschaften.

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