

When A Story Hides The Story On narrative Aspects of Dust

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In this paper I will present my own reading of the film. I will try first to say something about how the film could be analysed and then what such an analysis would lead to.

As a feature film, *Dust* does not comply the standards of conventional Hollywood style movies. More than that, I argue that *Dust* through its composition deliberately challenges standardised film narrative conventions. In this sense, this film is not a movie. Therefore, this film should not be judged according to standardised measures used when conventionally analysing a Hollywood style movie. In the presentation, for this reason alone, I have first to sketch a model according to which *Dust* can be analysed, and then apply that model on *Dust*. When doing this I will at the same time critically revise the standardised measures of film criticism. The aim of this presentation can therefore be said to be dual; on the one hand will try to say something about the narrative aspects of *Dust* and on the other hand use *Dust* as a point of reference when saying something about narrative aspects and film conventions in general.

In order to develop such a model I take my point of departure in David Bordwell's notions of how to analyse film narratives. A film can be analytically divided into the story, or "what the film is about", and the plot, or "how the film is told/shown". By viewing, reworking and reflecting the plot, the spectator makes up the story. In his model for analysing film, Bordwell has being much inspired by the Russian Formalists of the 1920s and has taken up some of their terminology in order to gain precision. He first suggests a distinction between the film as a whole and the narrative of the film. He then concentrates on the analysis of the narrative. Bordwell calls the meaningful narrative made up by the spectator the *fabula*. In other words, the *fabula* is the story that the viewer makes up on the basis of the viewed film. The basic element used, when the spectator is constructing the *fabula* is the plot-line of the narrative, or the *syuzhet*. Or put differently, the *syuzhet* is the plot that structures and composes the narrative. The shape of the *syuzhet* can be differently composed according to different modes and means of style. Style is therefore the means forming the *syuzhet*, which in turn is the basic element of the *fabula*.

The main point here is that the narrative takes place in an ongoing exchange, or interactivity between *syuzhet* and style. When watching this interactivity or exchange – which makes up the duration of the film – the spectator conceptualises the *fabula*. However – and this condition I will again underline since Bordwell has a tendency of playing it down – when conceiving the *fabula*, the viewer uses not only information that is provided by the film, but also personal experiences of different kinds as well as general film conventions that are central to the act of interpretation, although they are not necessarily put forward in the actual film.

According to the "classical Hollywood cinema", as Bordwell and his colleagues have analysed it, a "good" Hollywood style movie should be outlined as follows:

The classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. In the course of this struggle, the characters enter into conflict with others or with external circumstances. The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of

the problem and a clear achievement or nonachievement of the goals. The principle causal agency is thus the character, a discriminated individual endowed with a consistent batch of evident traits, qualities, and behaviours. [...] The most "specified" character is usually the protagonist, who becomes the principal causal agent, the target of any narration restriction, and the chief object of audience identification.

According to my reading of *Dust*, that film evades this pattern more or less altogether. The syuzhet of *Dust* only superficially present characters that are psychologically defined and who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. The characters of this film, instead, are rather functions of a critical revision of narrative structures than psychologically defined individuals. Who is Angela? The syuzhet does not provide us spectators with information enough for producing a fabula according to which she becomes a psychologically defined individual. On the contrary, the way for example old photographs in Angela's apartment change appearance during the duration of the film hinder us spectators from turning this character into a psychologically defined individual. Who is Edge? Here we spectators are provided with more information. We can identify him as an individual living in New York around the turn of the century 2000, but we are not provided with enough information to make him psychologically defined as a fully fledged individual. Why, for example, he has chosen Angela's rather shabby apartment in the first place? That we will never know. Neither will we know why he has a fear of flying or why he starts identifying himself with Angela's story. All other characters in the film are either narrative functions of Angela's story or too briefly presented to become psychologically defined individuals, let alone protagonists of the film. The one struggle presented in the film is the one for gold, although the syuzhet is full of references that one should not strive for gold. Hence, the film does not reach any clear-cut decision concerning that struggle. Whether Angela, who says that she wants to be buried where she is born, really is born in Macedonia we will never know, although the syuzhet indicates that Edge thinks that she is. In short, as spectators we cannot identify either a clear-cut protagonist or a clear-cut struggle, let alone psychologically defined individuals or motives for the actions taken in the film. *Dust* is in other words not following the standards of a standardised Hollywood movie.

Does this turn *Dust* into a cinematic failure? Not necessarily. The film could only regarded a failure if it tried to comply the standards of a conventionally Hollywood film. But obviously, it does not. According to these standards a film should try to use mimetic and diegetic means to produce a logically coherent narrative that corresponds with "reality". The narrative of a film should, according to this convention, be "about" something "real", something that corresponds with our conventional notion of reality. When the syuzhet/style interaction produces a narrative, the spectator is enabled not only to produce the fabula but also to create a narrative universe in which the fabula is staged. Such universe is called the diegesis, and the elements in the narration that are used when composing this universe are diegetic. Claudia Gorbman has defined the diegesis as the spatial-temporal world of actions and persons that is produced by the narration. According to the norms of realism, the diegesis should correspond and resemble the notion of the (extra-diegetic) "real universe" in order to make the narration realistic. In a "realistic film" the diegesis is supposedly a mimetic depiction of reality. When audiences identify what they see on the screen with what they already possessed as common knowledge, a "reality-effect" is collectively perceived. Since the prevailing belief-structure of the audience is reinforced through this effect, the individual spectators collectively think that they have gained knowledge of real events and of reality as such by watching the film.

According to Bordwell, the story within classical narration embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field so that, by the end of the plot-line, all story events can be fitted into a single pattern of time, space and, causality. Hence, following the rules of classical film narration, a good syuzhet should be composed in such a way that it at the end has uncovered a story, which is held together as a diegesis in which time and space could be integrated into a causal whole by the active audience. This whole would then be the ideal standardised fabula.

Dust fulfils none of these requirements. Judging from the composition of the film, it appears as if it was not even intended to fulfil these requirements. Rather, the film seems to be consciously composed as a critical response to the conventional standards of classical Hollywood film aesthetics.

So, when applying on Dust the analytical approaches that have here been sketched, what would the outcome be?

According to the syuzhet Edge has broken into Angela's apartment in his hunt for gold. He is desperate since some personas are demanding money from him, money that he does not own. Angela caches him in the apartment and forces him to hear her story. When Angela collapses, Edge takes her to the hospital. He continues to hear her story through, since he hopes that that will render him her hidden gold treasure. Back in the apartment Edge eventually finds the treasure. When he tells Angela that he has found it, she dies – apparently happy after having been reconciled. Edge takes her ashes to burry it in Macedonia and on the flight he concludes her story in his own manner. Dust ends in a scene in which this frame narrative is blended into the story told first by Angela and then by Edge.

The story told by Angela hints that she would be the biological daughter of a turn-of-the-century Macedonian rebel, "the Teacher", who fought the Ottoman empire. She also hints that she was adopted by a man called Elijah and taken to New York where she was brought up. The protagonist of her story is however neither her allegedly biological father nor her stepfather – neither "the Teacher" nor Elijah – but Elijah's brother Luke, who has come to Macedonia as a bounty hunter in order to catch and hand over "the Teacher" to the Ottoman officials. This is somewhat remarkable. Why does Angela put such an emphasis on Luke? And how come that she dies right after having told Edge about the death of Luke? When I have tried to make a fabula out of this syuzhet I have come to the conclusion that Luke should be seen as Angela's alter ego.

How Angela has come in possession of the gold treasure that she has hid in her apartment, we spectators do not know. But we do know that Luke, according to Angela's story, has one sole motive for action, and that is getting hold of the gold. From her story we know also that Luke betrays everyone that is close to him, yes that he also eventually betrays himself – which causes his downfall and death. Luke also lets his pursuit for the gold treasure justify his notorious behaviour. However, according to Angela's tale, when Luke finally gets hold of the gold, he dies alone. It should be noticed that when Angela tells about Luke's death, she lets Elijah be there in the Macedonian wilderness together with his dying brother. Elijah says three things. First he informs his brother that Lilith has committed suicide after Luke's betrayal. Then he wants to know the truth. And finally he says to Luke: "You never were!"

This final line is a clue, I think. Luke never was. He never was, except for being an invention made up by Angela. Angela has then used this invented character as

an alter ego when she construed a fiction story with which she could cover up for her own life story – and life failure. If that would be the case, Angela has notoriously betrayed everyone throughout her life. She has got hold of a valuable gold treasure, which she hides as a secret inside her apartment where she is living – and dying – alone. From the syuzhet it is clear that Angela does not hesitate to lie. For example, at the hospital she first tells Edge that she says “nothing but the truth, cross my heart”. Then she acts like had she a heart attack. When Edge believes that she is actually dying, she looks calmly at him and then says with a wide grin: “April fool”.

From this information provided by the syuzhet one could make up a plausible fabula according to which Angela has made up her entire story. This fiction of hers would then serve the purpose of hiding her own life betrayal and the actual story about how she got hold of the gold in the first place.

What has Angela done? It is not possible to tell from the syuzhet. It is possible, however, to suspect that she accuses herself of having caused the death of her stepfather. In a dream sequence at the middle of the film, Angela dreams that Liliith brings Luke to New York in 1945. In the dream Luke sees Elijah in a room together with Angela, at the time being around forty years of age. When the aging Elijah senses the presence of his long since dead brother, he suffers a heart attack. If Luke is to be regarded Angela’s alter ego, this dream sequence could mark the guilt complex that Angela carries. The scene in which Sigmund Freud appears supports this interpretation of the film’s syuzhet. Luke glances at Freud’s notebook in which he can read “the ego and the id” also emphasises this connection between psychoanalysis, dreams and the film’s syuzhet.

Hence, according to this proposed fabula Angela is letting the story that she tells Edge hide her own actual life story. Or in other words, Angela’s story is a lie, but that lie is told as were it a kind of cipher or code with which another story than the one told could be sensed, i.e. the story told is thus used to cover up the story that actually should have been told.

Now, of course, Angela is a fictive character and not a physical person. What does that fact imply on the narrative structure of *Dust*? In standardised Hollywood style movies the syuzhet/style interaction is used to visualise the narrative of the film so that spectators can produce their fabula based on the information that is to be seen. In this sense, *Dust* confronts and challenges standard filmmaking conventions by forcing the spectator to do the opposite: the fabula has to be constructed by the narrative information that is not presented visually. This narrative aspect of *Dust* would then bring standardised film-conventions up-side-down. The visual aspects of the film would obscure the story rather than illuminate it.

A consequence of this is that although many of the film’s scenes allegedly depicts Macedonia and Macedonian history, as a spectator you would not be informed about Macedonia or Macedonian history since these scenes would be obscuring rather than illuminating the issue of Macedonia or Macedonian history. Seen from that perspective, you would not learn anything about Macedonia or Macedonian history – or for that matter New York or contemporary history – by watching this film. Instead, when reflecting the narrative structure of *Dust*, you would end up experiencing Macedonia and Macedonian history (or New York and contemporary history in general) as enigmas, as open-ended questions.

The motto of the film, which is also a line, pronounced by Angela in the hospital, is: “Where does your voice go when you’re no more?” A new element is here

brought to the centre of attention: the voice. Even if Angela would be lying when telling her story, there would nevertheless be something in her voice with which this lie could be detected as such. Even if a person would be lying about his or her biography, that person would nevertheless have a life story – i.e. even if that life story would deviate substantially from the biography told.

How would an audience manage to differ the actual life story from the told biography? Of course, audiences would be depending on reliable sources. The voice would be one such source, but one could think of others too. The crucial question put forward by *Dust* is, I think, this about voices, sources, the past, and history. Just as we as contemporary audiences cannot be sure that the told biography is identical with the actual life story, we cannot take for granted that the told history is identical with the past as such. So where does your past go when you are no more? You cannot be too certain that it will go down in history. The difference between the past and history is too complex to guarantee any such connection. In my reading of *Dust*, the lasting importance of this film is its ability to challenge standardised film conventions and thereby putting forward this complex question about the relationship between narratives, the past, and history.

How are we today to critically revise the presented history so that we would be able to grasp the past? For example, how would it be possible to grasp the past of Macedonia, the Wild West, or New York City, etc. through the thick layers of presented history of Macedonia, the Wild West, or New York City, etc? This is, I think, the question that *Dust* provokes. And a film that can provoke such a question could not and should not be regarded a cinematic failure.