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Depicting Subjectivity in the Film Adaptation of Tarjei Vesaas' Novel *Fuglane* (*The Birds*)

Han (Vesaas) er på mange måtar ein "visuell" forfatter, og med det kulturpolitiske sett tunge namnet har ein kunna lokke tilskodarane til norsk "kunstfilm". Dessverre har ikkje filmarane alltid vore like flinke til å gjendikte det språklege materialet til Vesaas og gjere det til film.¹

Most of the Norwegian film adaptations of Tarjei Vesaas' novels have been, to say the least, unsuccessful. Six of his novels have been adapted for the screen. Vesaas himself took the initiative to arrange the first production in 1951, which was of *Dei svarte bestane* (*The Black Horses*), published in 1928. The only non-Norwegian Vesaas film production until now is *Życie i Matyszu* (*The Life of Matthen*), which was made in Poland in 1968 and is based on the novel *Fuglane* (*The Birds*). The film version of *Brannen* (*The Fire*) premiered in 1973, and the film version of *Kimen* (*The Seed*) was released the following year. In 1976 *Vårnatt* (*Spring Night*) was made into a film and in 1987 the film based on *Islottet* (*The Ice Palace*) appeared. Several of Vesaas' short stories have also been made into films, such as '21 år' (*Twenty-one Years*) in 1990 and 'Det rare' (*The Strange Thing*) in 1991. The Norwegian films

¹ Gunnar Iversen, 'Frå bygderealisme til filmpoesi', *Syn og Segn* 3/1988, p. 221. In this passage Iversen explains why Vesaas' novels in particular have attracted so many Norwegian filmmakers.

have been, for the most part, realistic, concrete and unambiguous. Only *Kimen* and *Is-slottet* come close to Vesaas' literary expression. Is it possible to transfer Vesaas' lyrical novels to the screen and without the Vesaasian spirit evaporating? This question hinges on whether it is possible to recreate, or at least evoke, literary lyricism using the tools and effects of cinematic art. In the case of Vesaas, the challenge is to translate the lyrical mood of his books, the symbolic and stylized (Vesaas' prose modernism), and the wordless communication between people, to the language of film. Until today, only the adaptation of *Fuglane*, *Żywot Mateusza*, made by the Polish director Witold Leszczyński, is considered to have come closest to doing just this. The film is different from the novel in very many ways. Yet this is by no means a weakness, as the film must be judged as a work of art in its own right. For example, the film has a different composition from the novel, the title has been changed and by and large there are many details and repetitions in the book that have not been included. After thoroughly sifting through the novel, Leszczyński took only key elements thereof to create his own, freestanding work, his own interpretation of the novel *Fuglane*.

In this article I want to look more closely at how Leszczyński has managed to depict subjectivity in his film, something that the Norwegian directors seem not to have succeeded in. That means asking what cinematic discursive strategies Leszczyński has employed to expand, for example, cinematic reality so as to capture the protagonist's subjective experiences and visions. In his film adaptation of *Fuglane* Witold Leszczyński has not merely transferred quite freely a story from a literary *Vorlage* to film. He has also recreated and cinematically refined the discursive characteristics of the narrative events by means of a unique use of camera and editing techniques. It is important to look at how Leszczyński has managed to filter the narrated story in the film through Mattis' subjective understanding and to convey a similar message to that of the

novel and in this way is the only director to come close to the spirit of Vesaas.

Before we begin the analysis of the *Fuglane* adaptation, it is appropriate to point out a number of general features that make Vesaas difficult to adapt to film – and that make an adaptation of any Vesaas novel a major challenge to the serious filmmaker.

The problems posed by Vesaas' diction

In the course of nearly fifty years of writing, Tarjei Vesaas published thirty-eight works, including novels, plays, short stories, and poetry collections. His last collection of poetry, *Liv ved straumen* (*Life by the Stream*), was published after his death in 1970. Among the first things one notices in Vesaas' books is his 'magic' with words. His personal, unique mode of expression makes Vesaas a stylist of rare ability.² His style is bare, abrupt, and concentrated. Though the author seems to have a predilection for imprecise modes of expression, these same modes of expression conjure up images that are fresh and original. By choosing words rich with nuance and connotation, he creates a range of associations. His combinations of simple, ordinary words resonate poetically, create associations, and produce a suggestive effect. Vesaas's use of impersonal forms is also extremely common, as is his use of the passive voice. The frequent use of impersonal constructions and the passive voice creates a generalizing effect. The reader is made to feel that what is happening in the work might just as well happen to him or her. In his early writing Vesaas describes reality in such painstaking detail, that it becomes almost tangible. Later on, Vesaas reduces descriptions to the bare essentials. This reduced form of expression is emotion-

² Several critics have written about Vesaas's style. Among the more important are: Harald Næss, 'Et forsøk over Vesaas' prosastil', *Edda* 62, 1962, p. 148-175; Harald Hellum, 'Pregnans i pronomenbruk i en Vesaas-roman', in *Språket i bruk*, 1975, p. 103-126; and Kjell Venås, 'Språkleg konsentrasjon', *Maal og mine*, 1974-75, p. 129-169.

ally charged, evocative, and rich with connotations. Vesaas's technique allowed him also to recreate ambiguous moods, halfway between dream and reality. Indeed, the great variation and richness of expression in Vesaas' fiction is revealed by comparing such novels as his romantic debut work *Menneskebonn* (*Children of Man*) (1923), the realistic *Dei svarte bestane* (*The Black Horses*) (1928), the symbolic *Kimen* (*The Seed*) (1940), the allegorical *Signalet* (*The Signal*) (1950), and the intensely lyrical *Is-slottet* (*Ice Palace*) (1963). The concentrated, profound, emotionally charged and suggestive style, already present in his earliest works, has become a trademark of his art.

In all of Vesaas's writings there is a strong lyrical element. One might claim that he was first and foremost a poet, although it actually took a long time before he began to publish poetry. Still, I must agree with Torben Brostrøm's observation that Vesaas's most significant contribution to modern European literature are his lyrical novels.³ The style of Vesaas' poetry is not essentially different from the language of his lyrical novels. Kenneth G. Chapman has made the following observation:

Even his prose style is highly lyrical in nature and reflects a basically poetic attitude toward the use of language as an expressive medium. In his best works, instead of telling a story in the traditional sense he creates atmospheres and moods through the use of images and evocative language, and it is at times difficult to distinguish between prose and poetry in his books. His short stories and novels often contain passages which are in reality poems, and in his most recent books some of these passages have been set in type in such a way

³ Brostrøm writes the following in his article 'Tarjei Vesaas', in *Fremmede digtere i det 20. århundrede*, 1968, vol. 3, p. 268: "Gennem flere stadier når Vesaas frem til den poetiske roman, der er hans særprægede bidrag til moderne europæisk fortællekunst."

that they resemble poems.⁴

The poetic element in Vesaas' prose gradually acquires an important function within the work as a whole as it merges with the dialogue and description. When he did publish his first collection of poetry in 1946, poetic technique had been long familiar to him. By combining this style with a symbolic language uniquely his, he has introduced something new into the Scandinavian novel.

Though written in an intensely lyrical style, there is much of the dramatic in many of Vesaas' novels. Indeed, several of them had been written as plays before they finally were reworked into novels. It is not surprising, then, that some of these have been adapted to film. There is, however, some doubt whether the results were worth the effort, and the reactions to these film adaptations were mixed. However dramatic they may seem, Vesaas' novels are, of course, not screenplays; anyone who sought to adapt one of them to the screen would have to come to terms with Vesaas' unique prose style, one that makes the successful adaptation of his novels difficult.

Vesaas portrays the human interior landscape, so to speak, more than he focuses on the action. He often uses nature, the exterior landscape, to depict this inner psychological landscape. When reading Vesaas, one does not find the essence until one has peeled away the outer layers and has read between the lines. So although at first glance Vesaas may seem simple because his books are full of visual situations that appear easy to adapt to the screen, this is, however, not the case.

Although often highly allegorical, Vesaas' narratives are straightforward. Much of the *content* of Vesaas' writing can be expressed by means of well-known cinematic conventions, such as flashback and dream sequences. However, the depiction of what is unique about his writing, i.e., its *form*, would not necessarily come through in a

⁴ Kenneth G. Chapman, *Tarjei Vesaas*, 1970), p. 95.

film version of the plot alone. Vesaas' lyricism, which sets the mood, would have to be simulated somehow. Therefore, any attempt to adapt Vesaas' stories or novels to film would have to deal with this essence of Vesaas' prose style, namely its lyricism.

The presence of so much meaning and symbolic power in the linguistic expression presents in itself great challenges to filmmakers who seek to be as true to the literary text as possible. Furthermore, the utterances of the characters in Vesaas' books cannot simply be reproduced as dialog. They have to be transformed before they can be used as spoken lines that work on film. Indeed, dialog in adaptations of Vesaas novels is something that has been strongly criticized. It is very difficult to transform the utterances and thoughts of the characters into film dialog, without rendering them stylized and contrived. Take for example Per Haddal's criticism of Erik Solbakken's film adaptation of *Vårnatt*:

den [*Vårnatt*] setter enda større krav til dramatisering og regi, for her er det tale om et subtilt kammerspill. Rett nok altså med en bevegelig ytre handling, men også med et lyrisk drag som krever noe av en poet bak kameraet som kan fange inn alle over- og undertoner. Dersom det ikke skjer, er vi over i noe som kan virke litt sært og kunstig...men man kan altså godt se hva som har tiltalt Solbakken og andre filmfolk hos Vesaas – handlingsmønsteret som røper dramaturgen, knappe og enkle replikker med dobbelt bunn, mengder av opplegg til rammende bilder, de visuelle elementene står til tider i kø [...] men selve hovedproblemet for regien er at Vesaas ofte beveget seg i nærheten av det uutsigelige – bortom alt som seiest.⁵

Erik Solbakken's *Vårnatt* was made in 1976 and is a typical example of a Norwegian adaptation that did not manage what the

⁵ From a review by Per Haddal, entitled 'Litt sært og kunstig etter Vesaas' in *Vårt Land*, February 27, 1976.

Polish adaptation did.

According to Audun Sjøstrand, Erik Solbakken wanted to transpose Vesaas' novel to film in the most faithful manner possible. But his desire to be true to both the book and the requirements of the cinema came up against Vesaas' peculiar lyrical prose style.⁶ To be sure, there is in *Vårnatt* clearly defined action; there are, however, lyrical passages that take place inside the mind. Because these thoughts express the lyrical mind of the narrator, they can only be expressed in words. Thus, the novel is at the same time concrete and abstract, narrative and lyrical. The task before Solbakken was no small one, to be sure. Yet, in his film, Solbakken has chosen to reduce (and even eliminate) just those aspects of the novel, namely Hallstein's inner life, that create the mood in the novel, and to expand (and even add to) the other more concrete aspect of the book. Solbakken's omissions involve the most significant aspects of the novel: Hallstein's experiences in his fantasy glade show most clearly what nature means to him; his dream-girl Gudrun serves as a compensation for the kind of life he longs for; it is, moreover, a significant element of Hallstein's character that he does not differentiate clearly between reality and fantasy. When important parts of the novel, such as these, are omitted, the lyrical basis for Hallstein's motivations are lost: he becomes an unmotivated, superficial character. Furthermore, Solbakken's additions do not make up for his omissions. His attempt to play up the action was doomed from the start. The actions in the novel are meaningless outside the context of Hallstein's poetic vision. Solbakken has paid twice for his alterations: once for his decision not to portray Hallstein's lyrical point of view, and a second time, for his decision to overemphasize the action in the novel and to make concrete action only alluded to in the novel.

Even if Erik Solbakken had managed to include Hallstein's per-

⁶ Audun Sjøstrand, *Vårnatt – roman, drama og film*, 1977, p. 101-102.

spective (perhaps by including Hallstein's voice, à la *The Tin Drum*, though Hallstein does not tell a story but thinks to himself), there would have remained the problem of Vesaas' lyrical prose, with its jarring imagery, imprecise modes of expression, and impersonal and passive verb forms. Vesaas' diction, halfway between prose and poetry, is as important a reason for his continued appeal as his psychological acumen is. Diction, as we know, is just the sort of thing that is very difficult to translate to the screen. We are now going to take a look at why the Pole Witold Leszczyński succeeded where others like Solbakken did not.

The Film Adaptation of *Fuglane* (*The Birds*).

In his book *Filmfortelling og subjektivitet*, The Norwegian Lars Thomas Braaten analyzes among other works Henning Carlsen's adaptation of Knut Hamsun's *Sult*, a film that was called a breakthrough for the subjective film in Scandinavia, and says:

At en persons subjektivitet har muligheter til å prege og kontrollere den filmatiske diskurs, er en forutsetning for at filmen skal kunne behandle de tema og erkjennelsesmåter som er sentrale i modernistisk kunst, som er sentrale når det gjelder å beskrive og utforske det moderne menneskets virkelighetsopplevelse, så som for eksempel opplevelsen av diskrepans mellom indre og ytre realitet, mellom jeget og omverdenen. [...] I den modernistiske fortelling [...] blir derimot *personene* og deres subjektive opplevelser det sentrale [...] og vi får et *indre* drama som avløser handlingen på det ytre plan.⁷

In what follows I shall apply a similar method that Braaten describes and uses on Carlsen's film in my analysis of Leszczyński's film in order to show how the Polish director has succeeded in de-

⁷ Lars Thomas Braaten, *Filmfortelling og subjektivitet*, p. 33.

picting subjectivity.

Witold Leszczyński's adaptation of *Fuglane, Żywot Matenszka*, premièred in 1968. Film critics as well as Vesaas himself were quite pleased with the result. A critic in *Dagbladet* wrote:

Franciszek Pieczka og Anna Milewska som spiller Mattis og søsteren Olga går gjennom enkle replikker, gjennom sin stille atferd i de sparsomt utstyrte rom, filmen et preg av klassisk drama. Også "lydkulissen" om man får trekke inn en slik profan betegnelse, er av sterk virkning: summende sommer og fjerne gal av gjøk, saksende slag av fuglevinger og helt besettende orkestrale utsnitt av Corellis "Concerto Grosso"⁸.

In January 1968 both Tarjei and Halldis Moren Vesaas were present at the premièred of the film in Poland. Vesaas had always been interested in film. He was an avid filmgoer when he was out traveling and Ingmar Bergman was one of his favorites. Halldis Moren Vesaas has said that the film he liked best was Bergman's *Tystnaden*.⁹ Vesaas had also actively participated in cinematic circles at home in Norway, where he sat on the board of the production company Norsk Film A/S for many years. And as mentioned above, he himself initiated the first film adaptation of his books (*Dei svarte bestane*). At the premièred Vesaas gave a speech in which he said the following:

Eg må seia at eg kjende igjen min nære venn Mattis så det fór både kaldt og varmt etter ryggen. Mattis hadde då òg ein meisterleg gjenskarar i Franciszek Pieczka. Det er underleg med stor kunst: den kraftige, høgreiste Pieczka kunne ein tru ikkje var den rette til å framstille den hjelpelause Mattis – men tvert imot – kjempekaren var heilt borte, tilbake var den

⁸ A. H., 'Vesaas-filmatiseringen – lavmælt polsk seier', *Dagbladet*, December 27, 1968.

⁹ Iversen, 'Frå bygderealisme', p. 221.

verkelege Mattis, upraktisk og forkommen i det effektive liv, men med fine fugle-trekk både inni seg og over seg, med poetens syner og vakre håplause draumar, og med poetens ord-dyrking og nyanse-rike indre liv. Det er berre eit slikt menneske som treffer den underfulle fuglen på vegen – og som misser den same fuglen så brått og brutalt.¹⁰

There was only one thing in the film Vesaas reacted to. In the film Mateusz drowns himself intentionally, whereas in the book, fate decides whether Mattis drowns or not (we shall return to this point below). The book deals with the story of Mattis.¹¹ Although in people's eyes he is a pitiful creature, perhaps retarded, he has a vividly imaginative and emotionally sensitive mind and an intimate contact with nature. This close contact with nature means a great deal to him, since, in many ways, he feels isolated from the so-called 'normal' people around him. Much of what happens to Mattis takes place inside him and is therefore not expressed directly. It is the story of the poet and dreamer who cannot find his way in the

¹⁰ Olav Vesaas, *Løynde land. Ei bok om Tarjei Vesaas*, 1995, p. 312.

¹¹ The mentally retarded thirty-seven-year-old Mattis is the main character in *Fuglane*. Mattis lives with his forty-year-old sister Helge in a remote location. She provides for both of them by knitting for other people. For the most part, Mattis stays at home with his sister. Only occasionally does he find work on one of the neighboring farms, and then it is usually his sister who suggests it to him. Mattis is, however, incapable of completing any task in a satisfactory manner. In the eyes of society he is a *stakkar*, a "poor fellow," a useless person, incapable of work, a burden others must take responsibility for. Mattis is like a child, helpless in an adult world full of strong and clever people; he compensates by dreaming, his way of escaping defeat in the practical world. Dreams are something he has all to himself, and in them he finds comfort. As he becomes more self-aware, he begins to see himself as a representative of other values, with which the people around him are unfamiliar. The man-child Mattis lives in a magical world of imagination; his way of thinking links him to primitive people. Like primitives, Mattis 'interprets' reality; he experiences his surroundings in symbols.

practical everyday world: “*Fuglane* kan lesast som ei enkel realistisk forteljing, men det er ei forteljing med store uverkelege og poetiske botnar under.”¹²

Leszczynski divides his film into seven parts: 1. *Dom* (The House), 2. *Wies* (The Village), 3. *Ptak* (The Bird), 4. *Wyspa* (The Island), 5. *Drzewo* (The Tree), 6. *Jezioro* (The Lake) and 7. *Kamien* (The Stone). In this way he emphasizes the elements that he believes to be essential to the story he tells. No room is made for repetitions and details from the book. Hence, Leszczynski's film is more generalized and simplified than the novel.

The film has a classical structure, but the tempo and the use of the camera deviate from classical dramaturgy, and it is Mateusz' (Mattis') inner conflict that propels the film.

The film begins with a camera pan along a beautiful river, low sun in the middle of the frame, and trees along the riverbank. In the background we hear the melancholy strains of violin music. In the initial main sequence, entitled ‘The House’, we meet Mateusz and his sister Olga (Hege) in their environment and learn something about their relationship as well as the conflicts brewing between them. The composition of the first sequence is almost naïvistic in its stylization. In the first image the director uses a long shot that gives the house a lonely appearance.

The camera zooms in on Mateusz and Olga and stops at a medium shot, thereby giving us sufficient time to observe them. They are sitting outside the house winding yarn into skeins. The house is surrounded by a fence, even though there are no other houses nearby. This is intended to reinforce the atmosphere of loneliness and isolation, key themes of the film. Olga is introverted and has reserved body language, as opposed to Mateusz, who has vivid facial expressions and intense body language. Through his utterance (quoted from the Norwegian subtitles): “Har eg fått auge som ein

¹² Olav Vesaas, *Løynde land*, p. 307.

hawk?” (“Have I got eyes like a hawk?”) Mateusz’ identification with nature is established. An important means of depicting the condition of Mateusz’ mind is having him talk to himself aloud. Leszczynski chose not to use a voice-over, which seems to be a quite suitable way to solve the problem of handling Mateusz’/Mateusz’ interior dialogue, which corresponds with our perception of Mateusz as an emotional and mildly retarded person.



[Norsk Filminstitutt]

Let us look more closely at the key occurrences in this sequence, namely Mateusz’ first encounter with the bird and the enormous significance this has for him. Mateusz remains seated on the bench after Olga finished with her skeins of yarn. He gets up, starts to go, saying to himself that it is no fun knowing that he has made Olga gray.



[Norsk Filminstitutt]

A traveling shot follows him past the corner of the house, and he continues toward the lake behind the house. An establishing shot shows the glistening lake with the forest reflected in it beyond the small pier. It is an open, lonely image. Distance creates the expectation that something is about to happen. The soundtrack consists of the chirping of birds. When Mateusz arrives at the pier the chirping is replaced by a more doleful birdsong, which is intended to underscore both the evening mood and change. Mateusz goes out along the pier, but stops suddenly at the same time as a sequence of Correlli's *Concerto grosso* cuts into the soundtrack. The momentous violin music emphasizes the tension between him and nature, or rather, his interpretation of it. The music fades, but Mateusz remains listening in close-up. As if on impulse, he jumps down into the boat and pushes it out, while remaining upright and attentively on the look-out. Then the music begins, a slow, almost sacral sequence from the same concerto, a gentle, melancholy vio-

lin piece. Accompanying the music, the large bird comes gliding across the sky. A close-up taken in a low-angle shot follows Mateusz' face as he follows the bird with his gaze and is used to show how Mateusz is intensely affected by his surroundings.

He stands as though lifted, perceiving nature around him. Through Mateusz' gaze we follow the bird's gliding flight in a slow pan-shot, at the same time as a traveling shot around the boat shows us Mateusz standing at rapt attention and watching the bird until it has passed overhead. Another significant effect here is the use of light and shadow. Eclipsing the light from the camera, the bird appears in dark shadow, as does Mateusz, taken in a long shot as he stands in the boat. This might be seen as creating an image of connection and shared fate. After this experience nothing can be as before for Mateusz. Witold Leszczynski expresses the importance of this event in the way he conveys it. This is the first time we see what is happening through Mateusz' eyes. He is utterly alone with nature and we experience the way he relates to the totality of it. As viewers we have taken part in something that no others in the fictional universe have access to and have become acquainted with Mateusz.

Before describing various aspects of Leszczynski's technique for portraying subjectivity on the screen, especially the depiction of Mateusz' mental state and his subjective reality, I would briefly like to discuss the content of the other sequences.

The second main sequence, entitled 'The Village' gives us a deeper understanding of Mateusz' conflicts, as it presents us with society's view of Mateusz. Mateusz emerges from the forest and looks down on the farm where he intends to seek work. Here the director cuts to an extreme close-up of his eyes and nose. Moving his head from side to side creates an image reminiscent of a bird in that his nose resembles a beak. Mateusz is allowed to help with the tree planting, which does not go well. The entire time the camera is centered a great deal on him in order to bring out his feelings of

hopelessness and desperation. At the end of this sequence we get a distinct impression of Mateusz' fear when he realizes that a storm is near.

In the sequence 'The Bird' the conflicts escalate, and Mateusz' identification with nature is further reinforced, and the first plot point occurs. Olga is crying, and Mateusz tries to console her, but she rejects his consolation, telling him that her emotional state is not his problem. His dread of being abandoned by Olga is expressed in a vision: The jarring, dissonant music begins, and outside the window Olga is walking, carrying two bags. On the soundtrack Mateusz asks whether she is leaving. Olga says yes, and Mateusz retorts in despair, "You cannot!" Mateusz goes into the forest. The menacing atmosphere is emphasized by filming the pine forest in a low-angle shot. Mateusz is viewed at a distance along the edge of the forest of high, dark pine trunks in the background. The melancholic violin music we have heard stops. In the distance dogs are heard barking, an omen of what is about to happen. Mateusz catches a glimpse of a large bird sitting on a tree stump, and he stares at it in fascination. He approaches the bird, saying "The bird and me, me and the bird." Long takes and cuts between them are intended to create Mateusz' identification with the bird. When the bird takes wing, it has a dark shadow over it, and on the soundtrack a dog is heard barking – again, in preparation of what is about to happen. Mateusz reacts spontaneously, he turns around horrified and cries, "No!" and runs toward the forest. A shot is heard, and Mateusz stops at once. This becomes the second plot point or conflict peak. From a close-up of Mateusz, the film cuts to an extreme close-up of the bird's eye. It is blinking and the bird's artery is beating furiously, then its eye shuts slowly. Profoundly shaken, Mateusz repeatedly strokes the bird (and the hunter goes on his way empty handed).

The scene in which Mateusz buries the bird is simple, yet powerful. There is an open landscape. The site is located on a hill with a

wide view over the forest and lakes. There are dark clouds in the sky, and on the soundtrack a strong wind is blowing.



[Norsk Filminstitutt]

Mateusz rolls the stone over the grave, and then the film cuts to a high-angle shot, and loud violin music begins as Mateusz gets up. He walks around the stone, stops with his back to the camera and stands there. The music stops. The predomination of sky and ground in the shot might be seen to emphasize his powerlessness. The music has a strong impact on the viewer, which together with the high-angle shot is intended to convey Mateusz' deep emotions.

The fourth main sequence, 'The Island', shows Mateusz' attempt at self-assertion. We see this clearly in his encounter with two girls on the island, and when they row him to the pier near the country grocery store. The pier scene, in which Mateusz comes ashore, is the only one in the film with a crowd of people gathered.

But even here, the others are in the background, with all attention focused on Mateusz.

The next sequence, 'The Tree', contains the storm, and the conflict reaches its climax in the next plot point. Mateusz has sought shelter in the outhouse, and is clearly very afraid. The film cuts to a shot of a wheat field bending in the wind, quickly wiping from there to two spindly birch trees, called by the locals 'Mateusz and Olga'. The storm and the wiping are intended to emphasize Mateusz' fear. When Mateusz later discovers that one of the two trees has been hit by lightning, the violin music rises and the camera zooms quickly in on his face. This creates a shock-effect, intended to emphasize Mateusz' violent reaction. A close-up of Mateusz' hand, which is pressed down into the bog, resembles a claw and is intended to allude to a bird's foot. This is amplified in the next shot, where he talks to the bird, saying, "Here we sit in the bog."

In the last two main sequences, 'The Lake' and 'The Stone' we experience catastrophe and catharsis. Olga has suggested to Mateusz that he should start rowing people across the lake. And his first passenger is the woodsman Jan, whom he brings home and who moves in with Mateusz and Olga. Jan and Olga fall in love, and Mateusz becomes jealous and frightened. Jan wants to teach Mateusz to chop down trees so that he can be more independent, which Mateusz refuses to do. He does not want to lose Olga. Mateusz is sitting inside in the dark. Jan comes and lights the lamp, and Olga comes into the room. She is dressed nicely, and tells Mateusz that someone has called from the lake. Mateusz is skeptical but goes out anyway. The cut from Mateusz in the boat to Olga in the house happens suddenly, emphasizing Mateusz' sudden conclusion. The camera is centered on Olga and her visible change, among other changes, her let-down hair. The next morning Mateusz tells Jan and Olga that he is going out rowing again. In this last scene the same means are used as before: sudden movements simultaneous with the music. Having made up his mind, Mateusz

goes out to the pier, throws off his jacket into the lake. Jarring music. As he picks up the stone that moors the boat, the violin music starts. He drops the stone and turns suddenly. He runs inland and bites marks into a slender birch tree. The sap flows, and the music stops. The shot is held on the flowing sap, almost a visualization of Mateusz' inner pain. Then Mateusz rows out onto the lake, and we hear only the sound of his oars. He throws a feather into the air, to show that he still identifies with the bird. The jarring music starts again. He kicks a hole in the boat and the water rushes in. Mateusz stands up, shapes his mouth to call to Olga, but decides not to. His face disappears from the shot as the boat sinks. Bubbles in the water, and on the soundtrack Olga is heard calling "Mateusz!" The forest is reflected in the lake and the image fades out completely.

As I mentioned above, Vesaas did not like the change that Leszczynski made in the final sequence. Vesaas says:

På slutten (i boka) overlet Mattis det til skjebnen om han skal drukne i vatnet eller ikkje. Dette er tatt bort i filmen, der drukner han seg med klart forsett. Eg ville likt at had gav seg sjølv den vesle sjansen til å komme til lands.¹³

In the novel, the final scene becomes a test, a struggle with fate. The conclusion of the last part of the book is therefore not clear and unambiguous. Mattis knows, of course, what results this test may have, which is why he waits for fair weather and calm, since then he would have a better chance of surviving. In the film, the final scene is clear. Mateusz dies (a suicide). Mateusz does not wait, but goes to the lake without waiting for a nice day. The scene is not foreshadowed in any way. The film's conclusion is highly simplified, but for that reason is also more dramatic, gripping and moving.

Witold Leszczynski's film is the depiction of the subjective real-

¹³ Olav Vesaas, *Løynde land*, p. 312-313.

ity of the protagonist, Mateusz. It is his subjectivity that characterizes and controls the cinematic discourse. Unlike Norwegian filmmakers, Leszczynski managed to expand the cinematic reality to capture a person's subjective experiences and visions. In his book *Filmfortelling og subjektivitet*, L.T. Braaten says the following:

Synsvinkelproblemet og subjektivitetsproblemet er, som fortellerteoretiske problemstillinger, sider av samme sak. Spørsmålet om subjektivitet og ulike typer av subjektivitet må i vår sammenheng betraktes i forhold til synsvinkelproblemet.¹⁴

I understand the term subjectivity as, among other things, certain narrative-technical means of approaching this inner drama. This term is used to describe how filmmakers present film discourse, e.g. through various choices of camera angle and other discursive stratagems.

Typical for Vesaas is how often and how suddenly the narrator in this novel changes his point of view. The narrator has a flexible position relative to the protagonist in the story. He employs three positions relative to Mattis: He can see Mattis from outside, he can see inside the world of Mattis' thoughts and he can also hand over the point of view to Mattis, so that we apparently get Mattis' perspective on the world and events. These positions interchange constantly, which results in the protagonist's inner life being illuminated in varying degrees of closeness. This narrative technique, in which the distance to the fictional character varies, provides the reader with a strange dual-attitude towards Mattis. The reader approaches him very closely, yet identification is constantly interrupted by the presence of the narrator's voice. Through brief commentaries the narrator's voice provides a full overview of the Mattis and Hege's living situation and conflicts. The narrator con-

¹⁴ Lars Thomas Braaten, *Filmfortelling*, p. 27.

veys insights at a level that Mattis does not possess, even when Mattis has full control in narrative-technical terms.

L.T. Braaten has three categories for film reproduction of a character's subjectivity, resembling what Leszczynski does when he transfers the narrator's three positions in the novel to the screen. When Mateusz is seen from outside, he is, for example, shown in a long shot as part of his environment. The camera settings that record the world seen from the outside always include Mateusz or show images that are in direct relation to his experience. The use of a so-called 'point-of-view' or subjective camera setting is very common in the film *Żywot Mateusza*. Point of view has a fixed structure: first a close-up of Mateusz, then a shot of what he is looking at, and then a reaction shot showing the effect on Mateusz of what he has just seen. Here we have what Braaten calls a "perceptual subjective camera setting." The perceptual subjectivity (the external sensation) is furthermore linked to what happens in the mind of the protagonist, which Braaten calls "conceptual subjectivity". The external sensation may reveal, or be a symptom of, an internal condition. The perceptual image of an object forms the transition to a conceptual image, e.g. fantasy or memory images. The dream in the first main sequence ("The House") and the vision in the third main sequence ("The Bird") are examples of conceptual subjective representation, which are markedly different from the film's external action, because of slightly overexposed shots and sound effects. Conceptual subjectivity is as we see in Mateusz' dream and vision an expression of his compensation for, and confrontation with, external reality. In the dream, which is introduced by jarring music, a woman's voice is heard saying "We are coming, we are coming. You're there, aren't you?" Mateusz is standing in the doorway in a white light.



[Norsk Filminstitutt]

He then flexes one of his arms, tears his shirt and smiles contented. He looks around and calls out, "What are you?" From Mateusz' gaze the scene cuts to a crowd of girls standing around in the grove with horses grazing in the background. They all say "Tell us who is coming." Mateusz closes his eyes and answers "Will you come, you, the one I mean?"



[Norsk Filminstitutt]

One of the girls comes up to him. He asks her to do something. She raises her arm, and on the soundtrack we hear the twittering of birds. "You were born among the birds. You have had all my thoughts for a long time," says Mateusz. Then he repeats his muscle-flexing display with the other arm; the girl is clearly impressed. We see how Mateusz' self-image is contrasted through this dream scene, but also in his daydreams he is identified with nature.

In the third main sequence it is Mateusz' fear of being aban-

done by Olga that is expressed. The jarring music begins, and outside the window Olga is walking carrying two bags. On the soundtrack Mateusz asks her whether she is leaving. She answers yes. "You cannot!" says Mateusz in desperation.

When the narrator hands over the point of view to Mateusz, so that the audience apparently gets his perspective on the world and events, the film may be using what Braaten calls "indirect subjectivization."¹⁵ This position is expressed, for example, by having the camera (the entire time) 'centralize' Mateusz, looking over his shoulder, and conveying his reactions and facial expressions. In this way we will be tied to Mateusz' world and to a certain degree share his experience of it. This type of expression of closeness to the protagonist Mateusz provides the filmmaker with yet another set of effects to express subjectivity (In other words, it is the alternation between the various expressions of subjectivity that is one of the controlling devices of Leszczyński's film).

We have seen that through Leszczyński's camera style, Mateusz' presence has a strong impact on the audience's perception of the subject-object-relationship in the cinematic space, and the narrative identification which is created with a consistently 'centralized' protagonist will function as discursive control and color our perception of the film's story line. However, this is not static and monotonous, because Leszczyński alternates between the use of distance shots, various degrees of close-ups, sometimes almost microscopically focusing on Mateusz' gestures and body language, magnifying them and thereby making them explicit and dramatizing them as symptomatic expressions of an inner state. The movement and dramatic rhythm of the entire film is set in relation to and gets its pulse from Mateusz.

Besides camera style, Leszczyński avails himself of other cine-

¹⁵ Lars Thomas Braaten, *Filmfortelling*, p. 81.

matic effects to portray Mateusz' subjective reality.¹⁶ By using nature to represent and symbolize Mateusz' feelings, Leszczyński exploits the inherent iconographic possibilities of the cinematic idiom, such as the use of music. The use of music and sound effects helps to indicate (and elaborate) Mateusz' subjective experiences. To underscore Mateusz' emotional nature, the director uses brief sequences of Corelli's *Concerto grosso*, for example, as we have seen, when Mateusz sees the woodcock flying above the house. It is when Mateusz perceives something as frightening or disturbing, or when he has an exhilarating experience of nature, that the audience hears sequences from the concerto. In this way the soundtrack functions as an auditory supplement to the visual iconography, and the audience interprets the accompanying music as a description of Mateusz' psychological state. In a way, the somewhat sacral character of this concerto helps to give Mateusz elevated status, i.e. he is connected to something essential that even "the clever people" are not able to understand. Thus, a well-calculated combination of live images and music establishes a strong rhetoric.

Something else that Leszczyński employs quite skillfully is a stylized use of black and white, which has the function of indicating Mateusz' subjective relationship to events. The use of black and white, light and shadow, lends an ambiguity to the film images; thus, rather than purely denotative depictions of reality, they connote Mateusz' inner mental state. It emphasizes not only Mateusz' condition, the melancholic and fatalistic, but also society's view of Mateusz (which is also 'black and white').

Strict stylization is apparent in many ways. The action is simpli-

¹⁶ Leszczyński uses weather, natural conditions, the seasons and different times of the day and night to connote mental states as projections or reflections of Mateusz' inner life. Indeed, this attempt to find psycho-physical equivalents, to use the reality of natural phenomena as a correlated point of reference for the psychological description is one of the most profound aspects of this film.

fied with some episodes pared to the essentials. The composition is simple and stylized. The film version of *Fuglane* makes no attempt to recreate a Norwegian environment, but in just this way it illustrates what is universal regarding Vesaas' characters and the existential crises they find themselves in, regardless of time or place. Just as in the novel, the portrayal of the surroundings creates a certain mood, a certain atmosphere. At the same time it contains a depiction of inner states. The parallels between the depiction of the surroundings and the theme are an obvious device in the film as well. The stylization of the visual expression leads to a simplicity that along with the use of intertexts helps to create a tautness that is nearly poetic. Although the film image greatly resembles what it represents, Leszczynski at the same time has altered and simplified reality. This stylization of the cinematic discourse has an expressive, subjectivizing and connotative effect.

Also the director's use of editing techniques and montage are important for bringing out the depth of Mateusz' inner life. In the first main sequence, 'The House', we first see a long shot of Mateusz and Olga on the bench in front of the house. Moving the camera in towards Mateusz and Olga in a medium shot creates a sense of unease. The director then cuts immediately from medium to long shot again. This is then repeated until the camera then pans to the side to track Mateusz along the fence in a long shot. The combination of these pans and the relatively abrupt cuts between them create narrative tension. The cuts and pans show the fracture in the apparently idyllic relationship between Mateusz and Olga. In general, the scenes are cut at a slow pace in this film, which creates a quiet, subdued effect. In the course of the first six minutes of the film, the shots are cut only twelve times, an average length of half a minute per take. The many long takes and the way in which the various elements in the film's images and soundtrack are edited help give the film a feeling of slowness, ease and depth. Nor are there any disturbing elements other than objects focused on. The

audience has ample time to study and interpret the images.

Leszczynski's strict stylization, his unique use of camera and sound effects, his skillful editing techniques, only to mention some of the most important cinematic stratagems, have yielded an excellent result, a beautiful film with an original idiom that manages to convey the essence of novel on the cinema's own terms.

Leszczynski is the only director who has really managed to give Vesaas' lyrical novel a suitable cinematic form. It is typical of Vesaas' lyrical novels that it is just the spare language and what is left unsaid which brings out what cannot be expressed in words. An expansion of meaning also takes place where objects and phenomena in nature acquire an altered, independent significance within the epic universe, becoming the object of a symbolification process. Use of symbols and stylization, the spare formulation of the depictions of reality, are key elements of the poeticization of the novels' image space. It is exactly this that Leszczynski has managed to do. Its scenes and use of symbols may be interpreted in many ways, which makes the film convincing. Leszczynski has managed to retain the 'empty spaces' that create a potential for interpretation and provide free rein for various interpretations. These 'empty spaces' have exactly the same function in the film as they have in Vesaas' text.

Conclusion

In his book *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* Seymour Chatman makes the following comment:

A lot of ink has been spilled in recent years on the film adaptations of novels. But too much of the discussion has confused the questions of story content, with particular respect to "fidelity," as if the source were some sacrosanct object whose letter as well as spirit the film had to follow. This approach often leads to an unproductive prescriptivism that

finds the film inadequate because it does not “read” like the novel.¹⁷

Opinions differ over the value of adaptations of well-known literary works, and the views of how film and literature ought to relate to each other vary considerably. The main criticism leveled at adaptations from a literary standpoint has been that they do not reproduce the book the way it ‘really’ is. On the other hand, skeptical film critics have said that adaptations weaken the authority of film as an independent esthetic expression. With his narratological studies of literature and film, Seymour Chatman, who is a worthy advocate of Eisenstein’s views, is one of the most important theoreticians in the field today. His works have created interest in adaptations and contributed to cinema studies’ view of film as a narrative medium, with films judged as independent narratives.

Literature creates one experience, and the film must necessarily create a new experience. The potential of film lies in the use of just those cinematic tools that are denied the novelist: casting, montage, composition of shots, camera angle, etc. Therefore, the intention behind a film adaptation of a book cannot be to reproduce it. There will always be the question of the discrepancy between the literary original and the adaptation. Very often we see that the filmmaker is trying to be as faithful as possible to the literary text. However, frequently the most successful method is the free adaptation, of which the adaptation of *Fuglane* is a good example. But making a film of a successful novel is usually very difficult. It is often said that it is easier to make a good movie from a bad book. The audience is accustomed to the fact that the film almost never corresponds to the vision the novel has created. Witold Leszczyński has dealt freely with the text of the novel. We have seen how he has taken ideas, a few select episodes and characters from the

¹⁷ Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, 1990, p. 163.

novel, giving them his own structure, which enables him to exploit the tools of the cinema to the maximum. He does not reproduce Vesaas' text, but uses the camera and its potential to create visual poetry. The result is sensitive film poetry, which stands on its own, and can be judged on its own terms. In a Vesaas novel, the language, style and atmosphere are more important than the action, and Leszczynski has succeeded better than the other filmmakers in bringing out the Vesaasian intentions on the screen, by transcribing some of them to the cinematic expression and by finding cinematic equivalents to capture the protagonist's subjective experiences and visions. Leszczynski's film gives the novel a new dimension. It is a necessary film because it interprets the novel in an intriguing way and in many ways is a novel understanding of the material.

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