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# Boredom on the Beach: Triviality
# and Humor in *Les Vacances*
# *de Monsieur Hulot*

He is capable of filming a beach scene simply to show that the children building a sandcastle drown the sound of the wave with their cries. He will also shoot a scene because just at that moment a window is opening in a house away in the background, and a window opening—well, that's funny. That is what interests Tati. Everything and nothing. Blades of grass, a kite, children, a little old man, anything, everything which is at once real, bizarre, and charming. Jacques Tati has a feeling for comedy because he has a feeling for strangeness.

—Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard*, 1972

## THE DOMINANT

In Chapter 1, I suggested that the dominant is one of the neoformalist critic's most important tools. The basic definition of the term is simple enough: the dominant is a formal principle that controls the work at every level, from the local to the global, foregrounding some devices and subordinating others. As Tynjanov put it, "A system does not mean coexistence of components on the basis of equality; it presupposes the preeminence of one group of elements and the resulting deformation of other elements."[1] In practice, however, the dominant can be a difficult concept to apply; using various statements on the subject by the Russian Formalists and later commentators. I shall attempt in this chapter to provide a more clear-cut view of how the analyst can go about formulating a dominant for a work.

At first, the dominant would seem to be simply another word for unity, for a structure that pulls together all the devices of a work into an organic whole. But, except in its earliest formulation, this was not, in fact, its meaning. According to both Victor Erlich and Peter Steiner,

[1] Quoted in Victor Erlich. *Russian Formalism: History—Doctrine*. 3d ed. (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), p. 199.

Eikhenbaum first borrowed the idea from Broder Christiansen's *Philosophie der Kunst*; wrote Eikhenbaum:

It happens only rarely that the motive factors of an esthetic object participate equally in the effects of the whole. On the contrary, normally, a single factor or a configuration of them comes to the fore and assumes a leading role. All the others accompany the dominant, intensify it through their harmony, heighten it through contrast, and surround it with a play of variations. The dominant is the same as the structure of bones in an organic body; it contains the theme of the whole, supports this whole, enters into relation with it.[2]

Steiner argues that although Eikhenbaum occasionally used the term this way, and it was picked up by Soviet scholars studying morphology, Eikenbaum soon departed from this organicist usage. His later conception was the one employed by the Russian Formalists.

He saw the work not as a harmonious correlation of parts and wholes but as dialectic tension among them. "The work of art," Eikhenbaum argued, "is always the result of a complex struggle among various form-creating elements; it is always a kind of compromise. These elements do not simply co-exist and 'correlate.' Depending upon the general character of the style, this or that element acquires the role of the organizing *dominant* governing all the others and subordinating them to its needs."[3]

This view, formulated as early as 1922, is an attractive one, for it suggests that the work of art is dynamic, and that its form challenges the spectator into an active viewing—not into a contemplation of a unified, static whole.

Other Formalists elaborated this idea. Roman Jakobson's discussions are perhaps the best known, though his definition retains a touch of the initial, relatively static, organicist concept; he considers the dominant to be "the focusing component of a work of art; it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components."[4] A more dynamic version was worked out by Tynjanov; writing in 1923, he declared (the translators substituted the term "constructive principle" for "dominant"):

This dynamism [of form] reveals itself in the concept of the constructive principle. Not all factors of a work are equivalent. Dynamic form is not generated by means of combination or merger (the often-used concept of "correspond-

ence"), but by means of interaction, and, consequently, the pushing forward of one group of factors at the expense of another. In doing so, the advanced factor deforms the subordinate ones. The sensation of form is always the sensation of the flow (and, consequently, of the alteration) or correlations between the subordinating, constructive factor and the subordinated factors. It is not obligatory to introduce a *temporal* nuance into this concept of flow, or "unfolding." Flow and dynamics may be taken as such, outside of time, as pure movement. Art lives by means of this interaction and struggle. Without this sensation of subordination and deformation of all factors by the one factor playing the constructive role, there is no fact of art. ("The co-ordination of factors is a type of negative characterization of the constructive principle." V. Shklovsky) If this sensation of the *interaction* of factors disappears (which assumes the compulsory presence of *two* features: the subordinating and the subordinated), the fact of art is obliterated. It becomes automatized.[5]

This passage suggests that the dominant is bound up with the defamiliarizing properties of the work. Ann Jefferson's commentary on the Russian Formalists argues that this was indeed Tynjanov's view.

A given work will include passive or automatized elements which are subservient to the defamiliarizing or "foregrounded" elements. The term "foregrounding" was developed (chiefly by Tynjanov) as a necessary consequence of the view of the literary text as a system composed of interrelated and interating elements, in order to distinguish between *dominant* and automatized factors. . . . Both sets of elements are formal, but the work's interest for the Formalist (or rather, the specifier) will lie in the interrelationship between the foregrounded and subservient elements. In other words, the active components of a work are now differentiated not only from practical language but also from other formal components which have become automatized.[6]

The dominant, then, has come to mean the concrete structures within the work of foregrounded, defamiliarized devices and functions, interacting with subordinated, automatized ones. From the spectator's perspective, we might say that the dominant governs the perceptual-cognitive "angle" that we are cued to adopt in viewing a film against its backgrounds.

The dominant is thus crucial in relating an artwork to history. According to Tynjanov:

A work enters into literature and takes on its own literary function through this dominant. Thus we correlate poems with the verse category, not with the

[2] Erlich, *Russian Formalism*, p. 178n. Peter Steiner, "Three Metaphors of Russian Formalism," *Poetics Today* 2, no. 1b (Winter 1980-81): 93.

[3] Steiner, "Three Metaphors," p. 93.

[4] Roman Jakobson, "The Dominant," trans. Herbert Eagle, in *Readings in Russian Poetics*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), p. 82.

[5] Yuri Tynianov, *The Problem of Verse Language*, trans. and ed. Michael Sosa and Brent Harvey (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981), p. 33.

[6] Ann Jefferson, "Russian Formalism," in *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Ann Jefferson and David Robey (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1982), p. 22.

prose category, not on the basis of all their characteristics, but only of some of them. The same is true concerning genres. We relate a novel to "the novel" on the basis of its size and the nature of its plot development, while at one time it was distinguished by the presence of a love intrigue.[7]

Put another way, the dominant is a guide to determining saliency, both within the work and in the work's relation to history. By noticing which devices and functions are foregrounded, we gain a means of deciding which structures are the most important to discuss. Similarly, in comparing the work to its context, we can determine through the dominant its most salient relationships to other works. Without some such notion, we would be condemned to study every device in a film with equal attention, for we would have no way of deciding which were the more relevant. Of course, most critics *do* make the intuitive assumption that some elements or structures are more important in a work than others. But the dominant as a tool allows us to examine such relations explicitly and systematically. As we have seen, it also enables us to perceive a dynamic rather than a static interaction between the subordinating and subordinated devices.

As this Tynjanov passage suggests, the dominant as a concept can be applied to individual works, to authors, and even to general artistic modes, such as poetry or the novel. The foregoing discussion of the dominant has been abstract, and it would be helpful now to look at some actual examples of dominant structures discussed by the Russian Formalists.

Shklovsky analyzes Dickens's *Little Dorrit* as a mystery story, even though the one line of action in the novel that we usually would consider to be a conventional mystery constitutes only one subplot among several. Yet, according to Shklovsky:

It is interesting to note that in *Little Dorrit* Dickens extends the device of mystery to all the parts of the novel.

Even the facts which are placed before our eyes at the beginning are presented as mysteries. The device is extended to them.

He mentions specifically the love of Little Dorrit for Clennam and of Clennam for Pet—especially the latter, with the novel's persistent presentation of Clennam as *not* being in love with her, primarily through the expedient of referring to him as "Nobody" (e.g., in Book

the First, Chapter XXVI, "Nobody's State of Mind").[8] One might add that this dominant governs the remarkable first chapter of Book the Second, the narration of which describes a large group of travelers gathered in an Alpine convent as if they are all being introduced for the first time, even though it is perfectly apparent to the reader that the group is made up of many of the main characters from the first half of *Little Dorrit* (e.g., Mr. Dorrit is referred to as "the Chief" and Little Dorrit as "the young lady"). At the end of the chapter, one minor character glances into the register book and reads all the names, an elaborate motivation for the clearing up of a "mystery" which has really not been a mystery at all. Thus in *Little Dorrit* the structure of mystery in one syuzhet line subordinates the non-mystery syuzhet lines, and in doing so provides the means for considerable defamiliarization in those other lines.

Eikhenbaum's essay on Gogol's "The Overcoat" finds the device of *skaz* governing the whole. (There is no equivalent term for *skaz* in English; it means any writing that imitates speech patterns—the most obvious example being dialects.) By concentrating on spoken language, he argues, Gogol minimizes syuzhet complexity. The devices foregrounded by *skaz* construction include puns, imitations of sound effects, and ultimately the entire grotesque tone of the novella, including its puzzling lapse into fantasy at the end.[9]

In the previous chapter, our examination of stairstep construction in *Terror By Night* centered around a dominant structure composed of a mixture of genre conventions. We saw how the mystery elements which seemed to govern the narrative were actually deformed by the hidden operations of the film in order to generate suspense. As a result, all the devices in the film—comic subplots, set design, camera movement, and so on—organized themselves around the need to delay progress in the rather simple hermeneutic line. In *Terror By Night*, a set of narrative inconsistencies resulted from inadequate motivation of these deformations. Most, if not all, of the other films I will be analyzing exploit the tension between dominant and subordinated structures for more systematic aesthetic ends.

Since an artist frequently uses similar dominants from one work to the next, we often can generalize about the dominant of his or her

[7] Yuri Tynjanov, "On Literary Evolution," trans. C. A. Luplow, in *Readings in Russian Poetics*, pp. 72–73.

[8] Victor Chklovski, *Sur la théorie de la prose*, trans. Guy Verret (Lausanne: Editions l'Age d'homme, 1973), pp. 190–191.

[9] Boris Eikenbaum, "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Is Made," trans. Beth Paul and Muriel Nesbitt, in *Dostoevsky and Gogol*, ed. Priscilla Mayer and Stephen Rudy (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), pp. 119–135.

overall output as well (though there will always be some differences among works, and we may usefully find variant dominants differentiating periods within a career, or other subcategories within an artist's output). Eikhenbaum characterizes Tolstoy's early dominant as "the destruction of psychological proportions, the concentration on minuteness."[10] Here, as with the theoretical discussion of the dominant, we see Eikhenbaum treating it not as a placid unifying factor, but as the suppression of the familiar structures in favor of a new and defamiliarizing one. Eikhenbaum's historical-critical essay on O. Henry investigates the dominant of the surprise ending. By concentrating on such endings, he claims, O. Henry's works are pushed toward irony and parody. Eikhenbaum analyzes the characters' lack of psychological depth—how they act purely in accordance with the mechanics of the action. He looks also at the author's use of language: "O. Henry's basic stylistic device (shown both in his dialogues and in the plot construction itself) is the confrontation of very remote, seemingly unrelated and, for that reason, surprising words, ideas, subjects or feelings. Surprise, as a device of parody, thus serves as the organizing principle of the sentence itself."[11] Thus surprise governs form—from the overall shape of the plot down to the level of the individual sentence.

Finally, groupings larger than a single artist's works are often made around dominants, and the basic features of those dominants tend to be widely recognized elements. For example, the dominant of verse was for a long time bound up with rhyme, though the blank and free verse forms have challenged that traditional view. Dominants provide the means of studying historical changes in large-scale modes. Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose* deals extensively with the introduction of the novel form and with the evolving attempts by authors to deal with the difficult organizational demands of the long prose form. He traces the shift in the novel from the early form, composed of a frame situation and a series of embedded stories (e.g., *The Decameron*), to the picaresque novel, unified as a continuing protagonist's adventures (e.g., *Don Quixote*), and finally to the nineteenth-century–style novel, with its interweaving of simultaneous plot lines (e.g., *Little Dorrit*). I have tried to do a similar kind of history of early film, comparing the narrative structures of very short primitive films, of the longer one-reel-

Boris Eikhenbaum, *The Young Tolstoi*, trans. David Boucher et al., ed. Gary Kern (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1972), p. 63.

B. M. Ejxenbaum, *O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story*, trans. I. R. Titunik (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Contributions, 1968), pp. 15–16.

ers, and of the feature-length film standardized in Hollywood by the mid-1910s.[12]

## THE DOMINANT IN *LES VACANCES DE MONSIEUR HULOT*

How do we go about constructing a dominant for a film like Jacques Tati's *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*? On first viewing, *Les Vacances* may appear to consist simply of a series of individual comic incidents loosely strung together. It does not strike one as a typical, tightly constructed narrative comedy of the Buster Keaton or Harold Lloyd variety (though as a mime Tati is often compared to these performers). By specifying the distinctive traits of *Les Vacances*, we can tease out a notion of a dominant.

The film's small comic scenes involve a succession of different characters, take place in different locales, and often follow each other with unspecified time lapses in between. Indeed, most are not causally connected in linear fashion, so that many could be rearranged considerably without affecting the basic minimal proairetic line. Perhaps equally striking, however, is the film's insertion of moments when nothing—humorous or otherwise—seems to be happening. Shots of nearly empty beaches, streets, and seascapes punctuate the humorous action, and sometimes when we do see characters, they are performing habitual, unfunny actions. We might dismiss these moments as subsidiary to the real business at hand—the jokes. Perhaps they create a "low-key" type of humor, or perhaps they are there to make the action more realistic. These are undoubtedly among their functions. But given that such moments often come at the beginnings and endings of segments of the film, they would seem to perform a more important structural function across the whole.

Noël Burch's brief but perceptive analysis of *Les Vacances* in *Theory of Film Practice* singles out these nearly actionless moments as very important to the film's form.

Here the contrast between sequences, simultaneously involving duration, tempo, tone, and setting (interiors or exteriors, night or day) is under constant, meticulous control, determining the whole progression of the film and constituting its principal source of beauty. Aside from the broken rhythms of the gags, so perverse and yet so perfect, the principal rhythmic factor is an alternation between strong and weak moments, between deliberately action-

[12] David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), chaps. 14 and 15.