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Sixty years later

A brief publication by Justyna Żelasko entitled *Przygoda w Pociągu. Początki polskiego modernizmu filmowego* (*Adventure on a Train. Beginnings of Modernism in Polish Cinema*) provokes thoughts that extend beyond its subject matter. Interpreting films attributed to the Polish Film School in a way that had not previously occurred locally, the author initiates a completely new direction of research. Yet, at the same time, she holds a certain position among researchers who have analysed this phenomenon for decades. Żelasko advances varying propositions, although they are not strictly radical.

It was a common conviction that the emergence of the Polish Film School marked a new chapter in Polish cinema, yet the idea was constrained by a certain unilateral thinking present in film studies in the past. It is said that every generation writes its own story. However, the representatives of later generations complemented rather than revised the propositions formulated “on the spur of the moment”, when the Polish Film School was still developing. The emerging discussions covered the content of the School’s films in terms of worldview, historiosophy, politics, relation to tradition, and interpretations of attitudes: in other words, all that can be recognized under the term “the fate of a Polish man”. Much less attention was paid to the artistic side, the language, and poetics. In view of the importance of the elements related to the content, the matter of form paled into insignificance, if it was mentioned at all. Moreover, the style of reception in those years established the criteria of topic selection and influenced how problems of contemporary film watching practice are presented. Similar observations concerning this period can be found in every historian’s writing. Therefore, it is distinctive that the same point of view is also expressed by the people who, in the first place, influenced cinema after the October breakthrough in Poland and changed it according to the formal criteria.

Furthermore, it should also be remembered that in those years the unique thinking of the cinema—focused on its separateness, uniqueness, and characterized by particularism—started losing ground to an all-embracing approach. According to this point of view, a movie sets a place of meeting, collision, and interaction between many ideas. This concept can also be considered as a complex statement, concerning not only

the present or past reality, but also cultural tradition, other arts, currents of thoughts existing in the epoch, and its basic configurations. That is why the trend emerged that postulated treating the films produced in the second half of the 1950s as “near-literary” compositions. Almost every film was an adaptation of a contemporary literary work and the screenwriters and co-screenwriters involved in the process were professionals working in production teams. Consequently, disputes concerning the problem of authorship brought a new matter to the discussion. The screenwriters demanded to be considered as the fathers of the success or, at least, to be noticed (concerning the popularity of Wajda’s, Munk’s and Kawalerowicz’s films). Is it the author himself who is responsible for the content of the picture, or is it he who shaped its visual form? Pursuit of the answer to this question is not the main subject of this essay; it is enough to mention that the directors won the conflict. Finally, as Konrad Eberhardt wrote, in cooperating with the camera operators they found the “form and way” that established cinema as “aesthetically responsible”¹.

In retrospect, of greatest importance are the questions: How did they find the way and form? What were their sources of inspiration? To which traditions did they refer? Did they use particular patterns consciously or unconsciously? The creators of the Polish Film School were disconnected neither from world heritage nor from what was happening in European and American cinematography at that time. They were acquainted with the current cinema and they wanted and were obliged to establish a dialogue with it.

The examination of the problems concerning form, language, and poetics started from the question of the sources of inspiration. The results more often appeared as remarks of a more general nature, or less often as analyses of formal solutions of a technical character. Neorealism was considered the first and unquestionable source of inspiration. In this case, it could not have been different. After the emergence of neorealism, it was impossible to return to earlier forms of realistic poetry. Therefore, in the most general understanding of the term ‘neorealism’, it appeared wherever the author expressed himself in the style and spirit of realism. Bolesław Michalek writes that neorealism in Poland functioned as “an instrument to forge new forms of expression”². However, he contended that the group connected to Polish cinema, which gained an advantage between 1954 and 1956, does not owe as much to neorealism as was believed. The traces of these inspirations are obviously visible in certain places. However, indicating the neorealist influences suggested by researchers was often invalid.

The aesthetics of the Polish Film School frequently derived from Expressionism. Nonetheless, the critics assigned different meanings to this style: colloquial, historical, or updated by new experiences. The poetics of expressionism, with its characteristic

¹ Konrad Eberhardt, „Spory wokół estetyki”, in *idem, O polskich filmach*. Warszawa: WAIIF 1982, p. 183.

² Bolesław Michalek, „Polska przygoda neorealizmu”, *Kino* 1 (1975), p. 28.

type of distorted visual effects, the technique of handling film images, the method of evoking a mood, and searching for an equivalent for expressing inner states in specific methods of organizing materials; all occur within multiple periods. The recurring aspect is the one related to universal values beyond the historical character of expressionism, not with the historical variability of the poetics of German Expressionism. Expressionism was mainly a school of artistic perception. The creators recognized the possibilities of expression in the field of film art through the achievements and opportunities offered by painting and architecture.

The problematic of the references of the Polish Film School to historical experiences was summarized concisely by Marek Hendrykowski: “The active past, kind of an ‘artistic memory’ of the Polish Film School, from now on will include not only the realistic context which was most important before, but also other images of artistic experience visible in 20th century art: from expressionism, through surrealism and existentialism together with ‘situation theatre’ and the theatre of the absurd (*Kanal*, *Eroica*), down to the creative adaptations of poetic realism in film, poetry and painting, with its lyrical-dramatic focus on the privacy and inner world of the human (*Somersault*, *The Last Day of Summer*)”³.

In Hendrykowski’s comments, the phrases “the active past” and “an artistic memory” are important because they underline the tendency that also appears in many other texts written by historians of Polish cinema. According to them, the Polish Film School should be seen from the perspective of its times, referring to the humanistic interpretation of the historical character distinguished by Jerzy Kmita⁴.

However, today the most interesting achievement of the Polish Film School appears in the form of a completely different point of view, revealing aspects that were impossible to notice before. The problems with recognition of the aforementioned aspects appeared because of the lack of distance and appropriate tools available to the researchers. The abbreviation “tools” in this case means not only new research techniques, but also a new language of description, as well as new trends and concepts of thought.

Firstly, Justyna Żelasko places the group of films from the period of the Polish Film School in the context of modernism. According to the author, the chosen films: *Night Train (Pociąg)* by Jerzy Kawalerowicz, *How to be Loved (Jak być kochaną)* and *The Codes (Szyfr)* by Wojciech Jerzy Has, *The Last Day of Summer (Ostatni dzień lata)* and *Somersault (Salto)* by Tadeusz Konwicki, *Nobody's Calling (Nikt nie woła)* by Kazimierz Kutz, and *The Passenger (Pasażerka)* by Andrzej Munk are related to each other in terms of innovative

³ Marek Hendrykowski, „Polska szkoła filmowa’ jako formacja artystyczna”, in „*Szkoła polska*” – *powroty*, ed. Ewelina Nurczyńska-Fidelska, Bronisława Stolarska (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego) (1998), p. 14.

⁴ Jerzy Kmita, *Wykłady z logiki i metodologii nauk* (Warszawa: PWN) (1975), p.218.

film language and their “close origins of formal experiments”. *Night Train*, *How to be Loved*, and *Jump* depict how the memories of World War II and the following events determinate the experience of the present reality. The second group of films demonstrates the way in which those events can become catalysts of a particular view of reality, perceived as a code that “requires deciphering”. The books of Gilles Deleuze (*Cinema 1-2*) and András Bálint Kovács (*Screening Modernism*) can be mentioned as the methodological inspirations of the author.

“Both researchers, as the basis of the changes in the language of film at the turn of the 50s and 60s, point to experience rooted in the post-war period. They perceive it as the most important impulse to recognize the previous forms of expression as outdated. This experience also inspired the search for new forms that were more appropriate in the context of the modern human condition and were related to living in in a constantly changing reality in the shadow of the two Great Wars. In the view of Deleuze and Kovács, whose diagnoses are the starting point for my research perspective concerning the display of this world on the screen, the cinema had to invent new codes to be able to describe its fundamental dimensions; previous forms of expression seem to be inadequate. I assume that without knowing the aforementioned codes, understanding the language of film is impossible, and the historical experience which they tried to record is inaccessible to the viewer” (pp. 13-14).

The title of the book is also significant. *Przygoda w Pociągu*, in the literal meaning, can be associated with Kawalerowicz’s film, which is the primary picture interpreted by the author. In addition, it brings to mind Antonioni’s film *L’avventura*, which is considered an emblem and a ground-breaking work in the field of film language development. It should also be mentioned that although *L’avventura* won the special prize for innovative language in Cannes, it was booed by the festival audience. Our [Polish] critics reviewed *Night Train* kindly, but without enthusiasm, not recognizing any innovative aspects. In those years, this was normal practice. Justyna Żelasko immediately noticed that when it comes to the texts of the epoch, if the problem of form was taken into consideration, it was connected with a particular technical aspect, isolated from the context of the content (subjective camera, distinctive camera operating solutions). “The experience of modernity” that is the returning motif of a “Train” causes the elements of the content, as well as those connected with the form, to be conditional upon each other, almost eliminating the boundaries between them.

The subject of language, presented from a different point of view, will return in the following chapters. At the beginning of the interpretation of the film entitled *How to be Loved*, the author starts from Deleuze’s concept of the “incoherence of the experience, as well as the language describing it”, which is typical of the period covered by this article. The memory of the war and post-war events—as Justyna Żelasko writes—becomes “the catalyst of a new perception of reality, the reason why the previous descriptions are no longer up-to-date”.

The category taken from Deleuze's theory of the crystal-image makes it possible, according to the author, to most accurately represent the narration of Has's film, underlining the distinctive connections between real and virtual things. The present (the picture on the screen) and the past (memories, fantasies, roles, and images that blend into current pictures) are intangibly connected with each other, presenting the metaphysical meanings on the screen.

The next reference to Deleuze can be found in chapter III, in which the language in *Somersault* is characterized and the "crisis of the steady object, the connection between language, reality and the representation of values [...] are mentioned. The presented world turns out to be a distinctive projection of Kowalski-Malinowski. The relationship between him and the outside world, as well as the efforts to integrate his own identity, appears on the narrative level. While navigating through the universe of cultural meanings, the character reconstructs his own position in the world" (p. 95).

Deleuze introduces a group of films presenting a radical version of the crystal-image (lack of distinction between the real and imagined) as a part of the distorted narration, where it is impossible to distinguish what is really true. *Somersault* seems to fit in this category, but Kowalski-Malinowski is not a triumphant Deleuzian counterfeiter—a creator of truth, who is aware of his power. In *Somersault*, we observe powerlessness, impotence, lack of fulfilment, and the sense of a crisis.

The crisis of the cinema of 'movement-image', as Deleuze writes, disturbs the order of a common sense vision of reality (classic cinema strongly established this vision). Thus, cause, effect, and spatiotemporal and teleological order are deranged. Their disorganization brings the feeling of disorientation and—on the level of the cinema—it causes the destruction of the existing language. The author emphasizes the weakening of the narration, the separation into episodes, the dispersion of the composition, the reinterpretation of the genres, the transfer of the meaning of the plot into the picture, and the connections between the images.

The natural consequence of the changes is the emergence of the 'time-image'. Previous connections were replaced by new ones. "They are constituting themselves in the moment, while the actual image [...] not only opposes the connection with the other one, but also opens into its own virtual image [...], in other words, into a set of new references" (p. 106).

Of course, these few indications presented in the context of the author's interpretation cannot express the complex nature of Justyna Żelasko's precise and influential analyses. She covers many problems that complement the main subject and correspond with it in the field of content and form or rather—according to her intention—focus on their mutual impact.

The author describes the characters in the interpreted films as “pursued by history” (by underground sentences, war memories, unsolved mysteries). The pressure of history on the individual is the main motif used by the Polish Film School artists, and by some not mentioned by Justyna Żelasko. The characters are imprisoned in the past; involved in and simultaneously affected by past events, when they should be able to start new lives. They cannot (or maybe they do not want to) do this. However, the distinction of the certain groups of films made by Justyna Żelasko is worth emphasizing. Not all films classified as Polish Film School pictures present the character’s fate, which is determined by history, in the same way. Here the author makes use of Hayden White’s approach and his two models of historical narrations. The first treats history in a way that enables its representation in the form of a linear story. This kind of narration was distinctive for the phase of ‘movement-image’ and—in all possible variations—revealed the chosen aspect, while at the same time hiding other facets. The events of the 20th century, which were described by White as “modernistic” (two World Wars, the Holocaust), initiated the discussion about the lack of descriptive language. Modernism created the second model of the historical narrative, one in which the differences between events are obliterated and their representations in the discourse take into consideration the basic oppositions of the true and the false, and the subjective and objective. While in their way of presenting history and using images, the films of Wajda and Munk represent the first type of story, the films of Has, Konwicki, and Kutz, as interpreted by the author, are classified as the second type. In this case, an ally of Justyna Żelasko is also Bergson, who distinguishes “automatic recognition” and “attentive recognition” as a part of his concept of human actions determined by time. The first is based on habits, beliefs and attitudes, which means that a reaction to particular events is predictable. The second leads to the deeper content of consciousness and occurs when a person rejects automatic reactions. This division is confirmed by the conceptions of the ‘movement-image’ and ‘time-image’.

It is difficult to leave the book at the end of the process of writing about *Przygoda w Pociągu*, as it offers an extremely wide range of threads and related connections. It is only fair to say that to acknowledge this extraordinary work by Justyna Żelasko, one should quote her book.

Justyna Żelasko, *Przygoda w Pociągu. Początki polskiego modernizmu filmowego (Has, Kawalerowicz, Konwicki, Kutz, Munk)* (Kraków: Korporacja ha!art) (2015).