

## Film and the True State of Things

Obviously we are aware of the fact that a film's message can contain nearly all forms of artistic statement, some (music) applied directly, others (literature) potentially outright or completely transformed, and all adjusted to its needs. In this bizarre, always fascinating mish-mash of quotes we can effortlessly identify themes borrowed from literature, drama, poetry, painting, or even other films. At the same time, a film envisaged as a complete work inspires us to reflect that it may not signify much more than itself since its meaning may be similar to that of an object: after all, neither the former nor the latter has to appeal to our mind. On the other hand, both can, and this is usually the case, affect our silent ability to decipher and understand the world, and to imagine the co-existence of perceived objects, phenomena and people.<sup>1</sup>

*It is true that in our ordinary lives we lose sight of this aesthetic value of the tiniest perceived thing. It is also true that the perceived form is never perfect in real life, that it has always blurs, smudges, and superfluous matter, as it were. Cinematographic drama is, so to speak, finer-grained than real-life dramas; it takes place in a world that is more exact than the real world,* wrote Merleau-Ponty<sup>2</sup>. In what sort of events, therefore, can a film be embroiled? What sort of borrowings and quotes are involved: synthesis or antithesis of reality? Probably all works of art within the realm of culture, i.e. interpreted, are also directed against or towards something. How is it that – we ask further – sophisticated and strictly defined film reality simultaneously reduces and intensifies external reality?

Assuming that we still remember Andrzej Wajda's *Niewinni czarodzieje* (Innocent Sorcerers) it is worth recalling that the critics' reviews were not overly enthusiastic. With the exception of several interesting comments the majority accused Wajda of making an insufficiently cinematic film and predominantly questioned its authenticity.<sup>3</sup>

The contemporary reality presented in *Innocent Sorcerers* is highly irritating and provocative in its conciseness. The apathy and inertia of the young people, the ambitionless "cool cats" – a more peaceful version of the beatniks – is not assessed, not to mention subjected to negative criticism.

They exist. They listen to jazz. The mask of ostensible life and illusion grows denser every day. We shall not learn anything about them, because they play their "innocent" roles *vis à vis* each other and the reality they contest. Nor shall we find out anything about them because even feelings and love are but a slightly more sophisticated game, which becomes interrupted because its score, known in advance, discourages all further moves.

*I do not believe in the bitterness of Wajda's protagonist, wrote Aleksander Jackiewicz, nor in the scepticism of his heroine. I even find it hard to believe in the probability of the nighttime situation enacted in a small bachelor's pad, where a boy and a girl play a platonic game of masks. I prefer to*

*treat this motif of Innocent Sorcerers as a metaphor and a generalisation.*<sup>4</sup>

The entire film is also probably a metaphor, just as all contestation movements, including the one depicted by Wajda, are a specific form of metaphor and generalisation. Each countercultural current usually opposes the images and system of values of the dominating culture it had conceived. Protest against criticised values can assume the form of, e.g. dressing and behaving in a way that becomes either a caricature of the values in question or an entirely alternative lifestyle. Similar phenomena could be observed in the protest movements of the 1970s and today. This is why Bazyli, the film's main protagonist, decides not to quit the game or face the consequences of staying with the girl. He is not evil or twisted; after all, his dreams about a home and affluence do not seem to differ from the so-called "national average" of the period. At the same time, each adjustment of the mask may lead to an irreversible process of blending into the well-known background of surrounding reality. After all, right outside his bachelor pad an even more masked world has settled down, an arena of the game of ostensible life; this mundane reality is filtered by slogans full of a false unity of minds and hearts.

The film's title is also symptomatic, since "innocent sorcerers" are yet another particle of the Romantic vi-



*Innocent Sorcerers* by Andrzej Wajda

sion of solitude and incapability of achieving autonomy, with the artificial outer world forcing to seek enclosure and wait things out. This is the motif ever present in works by Byron, Mickiewicz, Słowacki, and the Romantics.

*Their point of departure*, wrote Juliusz Kleiner in his sketch: *Romantyzm, is discontent with present reality, established social relations, the outcome of heretofore culture. European culture resulted in a world that seems unnatural, evil, soulless, and moribund. It is requisite to escape from it or to transform it, and to reject the restrictions it imposes in the name of an ideal of liberty.*<sup>5</sup>

*Each day from dullest memories returning  
of dull folk, dull events, to books and yearning  
and loneliness, my spirit to beguile,  
like a voyager cast away on a desert isle:  
each day on different sides he strains his eye  
in hopes a fellow-being to espy –  
and ever night he goes back to his lair,  
mad fellow! having but increased despair.  
Love but thy lonely walls, nor tug thy chain,  
for all thou dost achieve is greater pain.*

*All hail, my lair! Prisoned in secular time,  
let's learn to be prisoners of our own free will –  
shan't we find many an art our time to fill?  
Wise men of ages past shut themselves up  
poisons and medicines to brew and cup,  
or to seek treasures from alchemic slime;  
we're innocent young sorcerers, but still  
let us seek drugs our foolish hopes to kill;  
and if through books a way to death we win  
let's bury our own souls for life therein!*<sup>6</sup>

The world depicted in Wajda's film with the "eye of the camera" is authentic. The clubs and cafés in which its protagonists meet were real and actually frequented by similar young people wearing the same distinctly overlong coats and baggy sweaters. The backstreets and courtyards where they aimlessly hang out and spontane-



*Innocent Sorcerers* by Andrzej Wajda

ously organise mini-shows – in the spirit of disorderly fun – are also genuine, as is the ecstatic jazz music they listen to and play. But it is precisely Wajda's film that is neither a dispassionate documentary record of one of the forms of the contestation movement of the day nor a plot-driven anecdote with a neat moral. Instead, it is a bizarre dance of appearances, a truly unreal game – every film is a game played with the appearances of reality – filled with unnecessary motion and words. It seems to be a film not about things or people, but about the distance between them, invisible in everyday life. This is film reality but one carrying an excess load, faulty, and resembling the outcome of an overexploitation of material.

*The idea we have of the world*, wrote Merleau-Ponty, *would be overturned if we could succeed in seeing the intervals between the things (for example, the space between the trees on the boulevard) as objects and, inversely, if we saw the things themselves – the trees – as the ground.*<sup>7</sup>

Is this the inversion we discern in the discussed film? And yet the appearing image and recorded reality cannot be endowed with those qualities. The image itself, not to mention the film image, does not offer such a direct opportunity, just as we do not have a direct opportunity to render, e.g. the essence of silence by using word or sound. We can, however, describe the phenomenon while, obviously, violating its reality and going beyond the structure attributed to it.

*Ostatni dzień lata* (*The Last Day of Summer*) directed by Tadeusz Konwicki is a film about two people meeting on a strip of no man's land, a barren desert, a border in the most literal meaning of the word.

The tale is set amidst sandy dunes, between sea and land and sand and water, along a territorial frontier whose impassability is guarded by jets patrolling the sky. *The border is created (...) by a narrower or wider belt of uncultivated land, wild or semi-wild, legally or customarily separated from adjacent areas.*<sup>8</sup> In a ritual sense, a border is the area furthest from the sacred. The interdependence of the sacred and the borderland is also intriguing, since: *... Borders and holy places have – each in its own way – the character of areas where unfettered sacredness manifests itself. They also remain in direct relations with each other.*<sup>9</sup> Demons, the ghosts of those who died a tragic death, lunatics, suicide victims and unborn children usually buried there, all the "rejected", roam the borderland. This is a dangerous expanse in a dual meaning of the word – it directly adjoins the demonic external world and the force distinguishing it is equal to the one dominating the sacred centre.

In this film the formulated image of the world also succumbs to inversion. Here too we come across an identical motif of loneliness, powerlessness, and seclusion. Once again we discover something in-between the tangle of ostensible gestures, the flood of words, the subtle game, the excess of things.

This strip of genuine no man's land, a borderland, absorbs two people who are literally lonely if only because they are the only protagonists in the film. We follow their game set against the background of highly concrete, static space. Here, words rarely have something in common with gestures and complement each other just to show the invisible area of meanings between them.

...The man begins to automatically flick sand off the woman's back.

**Man:** I just want to tell you that I am completely alone.

Close-up of the woman's back. The man's hand is brushing off tiny sand grains.

**Man:** And I achieved nothing in life.

The boy begins stroking the clean surface of her back. His fingertips move along the spine's vertebrae. The woman's back begins to shiver barely noticeably.

**Woman:** And what are you doing here?

**Man:** Nothing. I am wandering... looking for...

**Woman:** A way to get out?

Silence. Sound of hiccups.

**Man:** Sorry... Where can one run away to? Maybe you know?

The woman impulsively pushes his hand away. She adjusts her top and stands up.

**Woman:** Stop it. I don't like this<sup>10</sup>.

Their meeting and contact are accidental, fleeting, and just as uncertain as the dugout on a dune, with a shirt spread across a bush, where they hide to wait out the rain. This is no longer a cave convenient for a getaway or an apartment where "innocent sorcerers" can safely play their game but a poor substitute of a home amidst dunes and the ghosts of memories surrounding them. Words follow once more, or rather a game played with words and gestures.

...The man holds her in his arms, as if to protect her from the rain.

**Man:** Move further in, we have to wait it out somehow. At least we have a roof.

**Woman:** In a desert like this we shall be completely soaked.

(...) They slide in deep under branches and lie down next to each other. They are still breathing fast. The woman looks into his eyes. He holds her in his arms. (...)

**Woman:** Oh, what rain, such a terrible downpour; look, I don't think it's ever going to stop... In the end we'll both drown.

Close-up of the woman's face with a heavy drop falling on her cheek. Frightened, she gazes in the boy's direction and speaks rapidly and chaotically, to prevent the situation she fears...<sup>11</sup>

Once again the space covered by the camera is unquestionably authentic. The dunes, the sea, the jets flying by are all real as are the people in a never-ending dance of appearances, gestures, touches, and conver-



*The Last Day of Summer* by Tadeusz Konwicki

sation. If this dance had been rendered more rhythmic and granted greater transparency by repeating the same phrases, the result would have been undoubtedly *Salto*, another film by Konwicki, in which Kowalski-Malinowski demonstrates a dance *cum figuris*, gestures that do not mean a thing on the dance floor, but then again, can they signify something?

The two films feature some sort of an imperceptible space between things, whose presence is the reason why screen reality, the whole realism of events, turns into a game of appearances. Somehow it forces the viewers to look for additional meanings, more comprehensible ap-positions, somewhere already beyond the film frame and even beyond what the film is about.

According to Merleau-Ponty, *camouflage is the art of masking a form by blending its principal defining lines into other, more commanding forms*.<sup>12</sup> And yet the film and the film image are not only internally camouflaged form and content existing on the outside; most of all, they constitute images, as if the centre of the two extremities.

Does this mean that when examining film image, analysing it from the viewpoint of form and contents, in other words, studying both the deeply hidden and the external, we have in mind emergent and fleeting film images, brutal in their concreteness? While busy pursuing content and form are we not losing the very value that is of utmost importance but cannot be reduced to image alone?

Briefly: film image is always real and contains the same amount of the set designer's patience, the director's concept, and the actor's performance as it does of accidentally intruding reality. Nonetheless, it is something that does not actually exist and that once recorded on film or magnetic tape cannot be repeated or changed but just played.

Film image is not static not only because it is in motion but also because the fragment of filmed reality it contains is rendered dynamic and significantly marked by the rhythm of subsequent takes. True, such rhythm generally remains in accordance with the logical se-



*The Last Day of Summer* by Tadeusz Konwicki

quence known and comprehended in everyday experience, but newly created reality has nothing in common with its everyday counterpart.

*That what rhythm encompasses, wrote Leśmian, becomes immortal and unwittingly escapes earthly laws. Objects swept away by the flowing stream of rhythm discover sudden and unexpected immortality.*<sup>13</sup>

I believe that we are dealing here with a highly intriguing problem and consider attempts aimed at identifying the differences and shared qualities of film image and reality to be among the most interesting reflections on film.<sup>14</sup> They involve material best at transferring reality and emergent exact images.

*We might say that we don't know how to think of the connection between a photograph and what it is a photograph of, declared Stanley Cavell. The image is not a likeness; it is not exactly a replica, or a relic, or a shadow, or an apparition either, though all of these natural candidates share a striking feature with photographs – an aura or history of magic surrounding them.*

*(...) Whereas we are not accustomed to seeing things that are invisible, or not present to us, not present with us; or we are not accustomed to acknowledging that we do (except for*

*dreams). Yet this seems, ontologically, to be what is happening when we look at a photograph: we see things that are not present. (...)*

*Photography overcame subjectivity (...) by automatism, by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction.*

*But what photography obtained is not presence. It obtained the world, agreed, but only one of its possibilities. The reality in photograph is present to me while I am not present to it; and a world I know, and see, but to which I am nevertheless not present (...) is world past.*<sup>15</sup>

Does this not recall one of those instructive lessons received by Alice when travelling across Wonderland?

*"Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin" thought Alice; "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!"*<sup>16</sup>

The grin that remained on a tree branch just a minute ago belonged to a cat. Does it still belong to the cat or is it simply just a grin? If the latter is the case then it is already a smile-generalisation, an essence and, simultaneously, something that cannot exist in reality.

What is the film image then? A reflection of existing reality or perhaps its essence revealed? After all, only the

grin itself, however paradoxical this may seem, offers us the opportunity to experience the essence of the grin as if “in itself”. Only the film image, or actually everything it means, can make us aware of a certain feature of experienced reality even though I am absent in that image.

An equally paradoxical fact is discernible in film studies: the disclosure of closeness with such cultural phenomena as myth, symbolic thinking, fairy tale, ritual, or rite sometimes has to be conciliated with the technique of registering, the technical option of developing a true image of reality. Oneirism meets mechanical, dispassionate documentation.

Perhaps the cinema – to quote Pasolini – is based on an irrational linguistic instrument, *and this explains the deeply oneiric quality of the cinema, and also its concreteness as, let us say, an object, which is both absolute and impossible to overlook.*<sup>17</sup>

Image-signs, according to this intriguing proposal, are a unity based on a highly significant opposition: archetypal complements and visual reality. And once again the extraordinary nature of the film image reveals itself in all its complexity. We can be familiar with, or more specifically name, all of its elements. We can also presume what it is composed of, but its meaning continues to evade us. We still cannot define its function or the reality it exists in. This somewhat resembles a linguistic task, an attempt at deciphering a sentence in an unfamiliar language using only a dictionary making it possible to read words without any knowledge of the rules of grammar or potential idioms. And this is the form that the film image has been assuming most frequently.

Recalling terminology connected with the sense of sentences and idioms let us try to expand our reflections so as to include connections between the film image and poetics. After all, it was the film that, not by any means through selected words and apt measures as if established by law, led to the formation of images of reality, “the real images of things”.

By paraphrasing a quote I refer to one of the canons of ancient and Renaissance poetics, since we are trying to compare film, and the image in film, to the *rerum simulacra* rule, the essence of art, the unattainable idea of poetry. After all, this is an inherent quality of film and, paradoxically, its innate feature, “technical nature”.

*The function of a poet, a Renaissance presentation of poetics maintains, is to use speech and poems – entangled in a decorative and rich whole – to recreate human behaviour, activities, accomplishments and places on earth, human communities, location of countries, rivers, rotation of stars, nature of the world; to use signs with a figurative meaning to recreate states of mind and the agitation of hearts...*<sup>18</sup>

Delving more deeply into the very meaning of the Latin *rerum simulacra* we can interpret *rerum* (genitive plural of *res*) as: things, objects, something, as well as the world, universe, and nature; meanwhile, *simulacra* (plural of *simulacrum*) denotes images and portraits, but also

a dream apparition, a shadow of a dead man, an image of character, a phenomenon, a spectre, an illusion.

Since a real image of things has been created, Kracauer and Benjamin were right claiming that the film image is dominated by a physical and material picture of the world. On the other hand, Morin and Susan Langer were just as correct when comparing film to a dream or to archaic cave paintings. Finally, Pasolini was right while discussing death, film and montage.

*Until I die, Pasolini wrote, no one can guarantee to really know me, that is, to be able to give meaning to my action, which therefore, as a linguistic moment, can be deciphered only with difficulty. It is therefore absolutely necessary to die, because, so long as we live, we have no meaning, and the language of our lives (with which we express ourselves and to which we therefore attribute the greatest importance) is untranslatable; a chaos of possibilities, a search for relations and meanings without resolution. Death affects an instantaneous montage of our lives; that is, it chooses the truly meaningful moments (which are no longer modifiable by other possible contrary or incoherent moments) and puts them into a sequence, transforming an infinite, unstable, and uncertain present into a clear, stable, certain, and therefore describable past. (...)*

*Montage thus accomplishes for the material of film (constituted of fragments, the longest or the shortest, of as many long takes as there are subjectivities) what death accomplishes for life*<sup>19</sup>.

In other words, *what is affected by rhythm becomes immortal*, as Leśmian wrote. Everyone, Różewicz added, *carries within a stock of colourful and colourless films. Each film is edited only in the memory of a single man and perishes together with him. Timid attempts at recounting during the lifetime and projecting after death are always doomed to fail. The light, the takes, the angle shots and the dialogues are all false.*<sup>20</sup>

These examples make it possible to present a much more interesting interpretation of the meaning of the memorable single-take closing sequence of *The Passenger*. For long minutes the camera performs a remarkable somersault, “leaving” the room, “squeezing” through the bars, and “returning” to the same interior after the protagonist had already passed away.

Now, return to our focal reflections about the essence and meaning of the image in film and the ways it can be interpreted. All mentioned views about the nature or specific character of the film image, albeit dissimilar, ideally match the *rerum simulacra* formula according to its expanded comprehension. The film’s real image contains the same number of perfectly reflected objects, things, and images as that of shadows, illusions, and dream apparitions, and the same number of images of the world and nature as that of diverse, mythic, and mythological concepts about their existence.

The real image of things, however, is not an accumulation of the objects or shadows, which simply cannot be separated.

It is not enough, declared the Renaissance scholar Conradus Protucius Celtis, to encompass a certain number of syllables within a defined measure if in this metre – with the aid of diversified and appropriate figures – [the author] did not express the real image of things and portray it so strikingly that the words themselves come alive and carry the force of granting objects life, so that it would seem that through writing they again come into being. The greatest glory of a writer is to create an impression that while writing he produces and brings forth into the light something, which apparently has never existed before.<sup>21</sup>

But while a writer, a poet, has to use selected words so that seemingly heretofore non-existent things might exist anew, a director faces a different situation: he applies the photographic nature of his work, calling for different rhythm and logic as well as a different way of creating the “real image of things”.

In the introduction to this sketch I attempted to describe two films while intentionally seeking comparisons to phenomena existing outside the film image, Romantic symbolism, the anthropological concept of space, other films, and problems of contemporary mass culture. I did not claim, however, that without these supplements it is impossible to interpret or comprehend the film’s content, the life existing in it and as if already beyond our world. Have I, in the face of the merely outlined complexity of the film image, actually strayed from what a moment ago has been described as the “real image of things”?

It is impossible to once again translate the reality contained in film image into concrete terminology, to describe it anew with some sort of an external language of images. Here too we have to conduct – I resort to a word with erratic meaning – a montage of the reality of the film images surrounding us, a search for points of reference, which alone make the world of “real images of things” come into being as an instrument of cognition.

Images, according to Mircea Eliade, by their very structure are multivalent. If the mind makes use of images to grasp the ultimate reality of things, it is just because reality manifests itself in contradictory ways and therefore cannot be expressed in concepts. (...)

It is therefore the image as such, as a whole bundle of meanings, that is true, and not any one of its meanings, nor one alone of its many frames of reference.

To translate an image into a concrete terminology by restricting to it any one of its frames of reference is to do worse than mutilate it – it is to annihilate, to annul it as an instrument of cognition.<sup>22</sup>

Naturally, it is better to say that we know that a film’s message contains nearly all forms of artistic statement. And that in this bizarre, always fascinating scrapheap of quotes, thefts or inspirations we can effortlessly identify literature, drama, painting, poetry, or simply other films and, let us add, a disturbing excess of reality.

According to Merleau-Ponty it is impossible to misuse film, just as it is impossible, we should add, to mistreat the film image when making attempts at its interpretation. Therefore, after the technical instrument has been invented, it must be taken up by an artistic will and, as it were, re-invented before one can succeed in making real films. Just, let us add, as we can hope to achieve the real image of things in film.<sup>23</sup>

#### Endnotes

- 1 Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Film and the New Psychology*, in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. H. Dreyfus and P. Dreyfus, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill 1964, p. 58
- 2 Ibidem, p. 58.
- 3 Cf. Barbara Mruklik, *Andrzej Wajda*, Warszawa 1969.
- 4 Aleksander Jackiewicz, *Maski*, „Film” 1961, no. 1.
- 5 Juliusz Kleiner, *Romantyzm*, in: *W kregu historii i teorii literatury*, selection and prep. Artur Hutnikiewicz, Warszawa 1981, p. 185.
- 6 Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefathers’ Eve: parts one and two*, trans. from the Polish by Count [Władysław] Potocki of Montalk, Right Review, London 1944, p. 12.
- 7 M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Film and the New Psychology*, p. 48-49.
- 8 Stefan Czarnowski, *Podział przestrzeni i jej rozgraniczenie w religii i magii*, in: *Dziela*, vol. III, Warszawa 1956, p. 227.
- 9 Ibidem, p. 229.
- 10 Tadeusz Konwicki, *Ostatni dzień lata*, in: *Scenariusze filmowe*, Warszawa 1966, pp. 61-62.
- 11 Ibidem.
- 12 M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Film and the New Psychology*, p. 49.
- 13 Bolesław Leśmian, *U źródeł rytmu*, in: *Szkice literackie*, prep. and introd. Jacek Trznadel, Warszawa 1959, p. 74.
- 14 More in: Zofia Woźnicka, *Problem kreacji i reprodukcji w filmie*, *Studia z teorii filmu*, vol. IX, Wrocław 1983,
- 15 Stanley Cavell, *Sights and Sounds* in: *Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Harvard University Press 1979, pp. 22-23.
- 16 Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, chapter VI, *Pig and Pepper*.
- 17 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, ed. Louise K. Bernett, trans. Ben Lawton and Louise Bernett, Bloomington, Indiana UP 1988, p. 169.
- 18 Cf. Conradus Protucius Celtis, *De compositione materiali carminum* in: *Ars versificandi et carminum*, Lipsiae 1486, Quoted in: *Poetyka okresu Renesansu*, selection, introd. and prep. Elżbieta Sarnowska-Temeriusz, Wrocław 1982, p. 6.
- 19 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, p. 236.
- 20 Tadeusz Różewicz, *Morze*, in: *Proza*, Wrocław 1973, p. 79.
- 21 Conradus Protucius Celtis, *De compositione...*, p. 8
- 22 Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols. Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet, Princeton University Press 1991, p. 15.
- 23 M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Film and the New Psychology*, p. 59.