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CINEMA AND TRANSITORINESS

A TRANSIENT MEDIUM

Apart from cinema there is no other medium the nature of which is so absolutely linked to transitoriness. Cuneiform script or hieroglyphics on clay tablets or stone – the Code of Hammurabi and Egyptian obelisks – can last for thousands of years. A printed sheet of apparently perishable paper – as in the first copies of the Bible displayed in the Gutenberg Museum in Mainz – can transmit knowledge and not just aesthetic sensations for hundreds of years. A radio signal sent out on air by Marconi and his continuators, with its electromagnetic frequencies carrying changing content fills not only our globe but also the universe surrounding it, travelling at the speed of light over infinite spaces (which became a starting point for Robert Zemeckis' *Contact*, a 1997 film in which a radio wave moving away from the Earth carries and immortalises the memory of broadcast events).

It is equally impossible to immobilise the sound of a living word (when it is stopped, it becomes silence!)¹, just as it is impossible to immobilise the motion picture. A screening that has been stopped ceases to be a film, it becomes just a frame, an image belonging to a different medium – photography, which, in turn, is an attempt to “stop, embalm the surface of the world in its light form”². Film means constant motion, constant change, but heading towards an inevitable end. Although in contemporary cinema we rarely see the final “The End / Fine”, the spectators who decide to see the film will know how long the screening will take. In other words,

¹ The psychodynamics of orality – the spoken word is analysed by W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Routledge 2013, p. 31.

² A. Gwóźdź, *Skąd się (nie) wzięło kino, czyli parahistorie obrazu w ruchu, [in:] Historia kina. Tom I. Kino nieme*, ed. T. Lubelski, I. Sowińska, R. Syska, Kraków 2009, p. 45.

when it will end, when the film images and sounds will pass, remaining only in the memory of the spectators in front of the screen that ceases to reflect the light stream of seemingly moving images.

The camera appears to be immortalising past events, it “resurrects the time” of our past³, but transitoriness is part of the nature of film: the passing of time during screening puts frames, shots, sequences, scenes into the past. Having direct access to the medium – celluloid tape, disc or digital file – the viewer can go back to the film many times, but, as Kieślowski argued, every time it will be a new viewing, differing in its context, situation, place: every time it will be a “different film. [...]”⁴. Every previous viewing of the film belongs irrevocably to the past. *Panta rhei*.

With each screening the celluloid tape acquires signs of wear and tear: scratches and cracks. The colours fade: Andrei Tarkovsky intended his black-and-white *Andrei Rublov* (1966) to finish with a colourful sequence of icons painted by the Russian monk, yet today the spectators aware of this can at best only imagine the colours. The situation is not much better with newer media – changing technologies cancel their predecessors. 8-mm film projectors have long disappeared from people’s homes. What happened to personal collections of films recorded on Betamax or VHS tapes, when video players were replaced by optical and digital devices? Who remembers today the 30-centimeter optic LaserDiscs, placed on the market in the 1970s, which seemed to guarantee permanence for the recorded films despite multiple replays and passage of time? DVDs, which seemed revolutionary barely 15 years ago, are becoming a thing of the past; producers of audiovisual systems and personal computers, increasingly devoid of DVD readers, are now supporting content stored on servers and available in web streaming. Despite the easy and wide-spread access to films⁵, the risk of their transitoriness is as big as never before.

Film is a medium much less durable than the previous media: this is evidenced both by specialists’ efforts to save old celluloid tapes at risk of disintegration as well as the increasingly long list of missing films, which were once made, distributed, watched. Bad storage conditions, wars, fires but also strict norms imposed by producers and distributors destroy impermanent carriers. *Hugo* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2011), which recalls the figure of one of the fathers of cinema, Georges Méliès, shows the tragedy of films sinking into oblivion – films forgotten, ignored by the audience, destroyed by the author himself. Unlike books, multiple copies of which can be found in public and private libraries – and which physically do not disappear, apart from exceptional situations – even the most popular films, watched by millions of people, are withdrawn from distribution once their licence has expired and,

³ S. Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 78.

⁴ *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, ed. D. Stok, London-Boston, Faber and Faber 1993, p. 154..

⁵ In February 2013 the catalogue of the empik.com store contained over six-thousand films on DVD and over one-thousand on Blu-ray.

if the producer does not opt for television broadcasts or digital release, remain only in an isolated copy in the National Film Archives, as well as reviews and analyses, in some sense resembling obituaries written in advance: texts about films that are no longer there.

TRANSITORINESS IN FILMS

Viewers often reduce films to one dimension: narrative. “What is this film about?” – very often about transitoriness. About the impermanence of the world and bonds between people, about passing away, death, lack of agreement to the fact that an end will come. About the end of everything, the entire existing world.

A question about transitoriness can be posed by a child, like Paweł, who in Krzysztof Kieślowski’s *Decalogue I* (1988) asks his father:

- Why do people die?
- Depends. Heart failure, cancer. Accidents, old age.
- I mean, what is death?
- Death? The heart stops pumping blood, blood doesn’t get to the brain, everything stops.

That’s it.

- And what’s left?
- What remains is what you’ve done. Memory of it, of you⁶.

Krzysztof did not answer his son’s following question – about the soul. It returned in a subsequent conversation with aunt Irena, who replied with a gesture of embrace: God, whose nature is TO BE, is in love. Both Krzysztof and Irena will have to face a sudden and unexpected passing – Paweł’s drowning. Rebelling against the boy’s death, Krzysztof will overturn an altar, silently reproaching God, whose response can be seen in drops of the candle – tears on the cheeks of the image of the Madonna of Jasna Góra. Fear of transitoriness appeared in Kieślowski’s oeuvre even earlier, which can be seen e.g. in the scream “Nooooo!” coming from Witek’s throat, showed in close-up, in the opening sequence of *Blind Chance* (1981), and found its complement in the final scene of his last film, *Three Colours: Red* (1994). People saved from a ferry disaster, like in Noah’s Ark almost, will be only the couples from the three parts of the trilogy and a hitherto unknown steward⁷.

A director who often goes back to the theme of transitoriness – though examined not in terms of melodrama or nostalgia, but with reference to existentialism – is Krzysztof Zanussi. His oeuvre deserves a monographic analysis of the subject of transience or death, which runs through dozens of his films, from his diploma piece

⁶ Quoted after the film’s soundtrack.

⁷ M. Haltof, Śmierć, żałoba i pamięć w filmach Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego, [in:] *Kino Kieślowskiego. Kino po Kieślowskim*, ed. A. Gwóźdź, Warszawa 2006, p. 64. The author stresses that “many of [Kieślowski’s] protagonists live with the experience of death of their loved ones”.

The Death of a Provincial (1965) until *Revisited* (2009). In Zanussi's films youth comes into contact with transitoriness, often expressing its objection: a nameless student in *The Death of a Provincial* has to face not only the unfamiliar reality of a monastery, but also the passing of an old monk; passing – the sudden death of the professor in *Hypothesis* (1972) is a manifestation of cruel injustice that will stop the progress of science and humanity for many years⁸; Franciszek Retman in *The Illumination* (1972) and Tomasz Piątek in *The Spiral* (1978), Witek in *The Constant Factor* (1980), doctor Tomasz Berg in *Life as a Fatal Sexually Transmitted Disease* (2000) or the oligarch in *And a Warm Heart* (2008) are all unable to accept an incurable disease and death – their own or their loved ones. The vision-like ending *The Spiral* suggests the prospect of crossing the barrier between life and death: after his suicide Tomasz goes away to the mountains. Wiktor's protest against his wife's passing is heard in the opening scene of *Persona non grata* (2005) – in its finale the couple, now reconciled after their death, sit down together on seaside rocks. Kieślowski used a similar solution in *No End* (1984), in which Urszula follows her deceased husband, because her longing for him does not let her live. Despite passing, they are still there – though in a different reality. Not an image, impossible for the followers of Islam, but a symbol of light signifying dying as an encounter with God, was used by Majid Majidi in *The Colour of Paradise* (1999): the grief of the living is alleviated by the prospect of eternity.

One can also wait in vain for death, when life does not end despite the passage of time – like in the case of Paul Edgecomb, a prison guard from Frank Darabont's *Green Mile* (1998) or the monk Anatoly from Pavel Lungin's *The Island* (2006): the law of transitoriness is unnaturally suspended for those who have committed the gravest sins against the innocent. Anatoly, suspended between death, which he has escaped, and life, which is passing him by, will be allowed to depart from this world only when he is forgiven for the murder – not accomplished but committed (he shot his commander) – by the commander, who ultimately did not die as a result of Anatoly's cowardice. Lungin's *The Conductor* is a multi-layered story through which runs the motif of Christ's musical and Biblical Passion, taking place between Moscow and Jerusalem. It is quintessentially a story of transience, of a terrorist attack the preparation of which is presented as a perverse Passion *a rebours*, of a break-up of marital love and bond, and, finally, of the death of the son of the eponymous protagonist, who is helpless in the face of the traumatic event, because he has never participated in a funeral before! Passing is inevitable: it is accepted, when it refers to the Biblical past in the Passion conducted in Jerusalem, longed for by the Palestinian terrorists, and not admitted by the conductor. The multi-layered

⁸ A similar motif was developed much later by Alejandro Amenábar in *Agora* (2009): the scientific findings of Hypatia of Alexandria, killed by Christians, will be arrived at by astronomers only more than ten centuries later.

nature of transitoriness is examined by Andrzej Wajda in his *Sweet Rush* (2009): the story of the death of Krystyna Janda's husband is a transformed personal experience of the actress, complemented by filmed literary works by Sándor Márai and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz.

The Biblical Book of Ecclesiastes, written down around 3rd century before Christ, sees in the inevitable passing of man and his old age a gradual break-up of the world, but also a discovery of the ultimate goal of existence:

Because mortals go to their lasting home, and mourners go about the streets; Before the silver cord is snapped and the golden bowl is broken, And the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the pulley is broken at the well; And the dust returns to the earth as it once was, and the life breath returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says Qoheleth, all things are vanity! (Eccl 12:5-8).

The poetic metaphors in the Old Testament text illustrate a gradual break-up of one's microcosm, of which man is well-aware. This is also how the matter is presented to the doctor by recovering Andrzej in Kieślowski's *Decalogue II* (1988):

— I'm coming back... from there?
 — Yes, you are...
 — You know, I thought the world was falling apart. Everything was getting ugly, awkward, as if someone deliberately... so that I wouldn't be sorry. And now...⁹

Much more pessimistic are words uttered by the Oracle in *The Matrix Revolutions* (dir. Andy Wachowski, Larry Wachowski, 2003): "Everything that has a beginning has an end. I see the end coming, I see the darkness spreading. I see death."

Perhaps we should refer here to the words of John Paul II from his last poetic work:

He was alone in his wonderment, among creatures incapable of wonder – for them it was enough to exist and to go their way.

Man went his way with them, yet carried along by wonder.

In his wonderment, he always emerged from the tide that bore him on, as if to say to everything around him: "Stop! – in me you find your haven," "in me you find the place of your encounter with the Eternal Word" –

"stop, all this passing has sense"¹⁰

Awareness of transitoriness and discovery of its sense are what makes humans differ from the other living beings. Grandfather prepares Joshua for his passing in *Wide Awake* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 1998); William Parrish becomes aware of the proximity of a personified death in *Joe Black* (dir. Martin Brest, 1998); the boy in *Oscar and the Lady in Pink* (dir. Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, 2009) knows that his life is coming to an end; the elderly lady from *Time to Die* (dir. Dorota Kędzierzawska, 2007) is preparing her death giving all her possessions to children who

⁹ Quoted after the film's soundtrack.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *The Roman Triptych*, USCCB Publishing 2003.

need them more than her calculating relatives. In the Passion-based drama *Jesus of Montreal* (dir. Denys Arcand, 1989), there is no resurrection, invalidating Christ's passing in the Gospel and in nearly all its film adaptations; instead, we have a passing life of one man that can prolong the life of others: transplantation of organs taken from Daniel's body – the eponymous Jesus – restores sight, revives someone's heart. A fully conscious self-sacrifice – in order to atone in some way for a tragedy, i.e. a car crash with fatalities – is what Ben, played by Will Smith, has in mind in *Seven Pounds* (dir. Gabriele Muccino, 2008). After a precisely planned suicide, his organs are to serve people selected by him. A completely different, egoistic and nihilistic – as an expression of a “negation of existence, sense and values”¹¹ – is the chronicle-like, quasi-documentary account of the self-starving protagonist of *The Sound of Insects: Record of a Mummy* (dir. Peter Liechti, 2009): tired with life, the protagonist methodically rejects it as a meaningless state. Disappointed with life, deprived of love and the violin, Nasser-Ali from *Chicken with Plums* (dir. Marjane Satrapi, 2011) sees the only solution in his passing: he does not know that someone will shed a tear at his funeral. A destruction of the whole world is the objective of the idea of deconstruction (we have echoes of Derrida's philosophy here), which the President from Zanussi's *And a Warm Heart* (2008) wants to sponsor in his testamentary bequest¹².

People, bonds and relations pass, and whole world, too, can pass: not only in catastrophic, apocalyptic visions from *Deep Impact* (dir. Mimi Leder, 1998), *Knowing* (dir. Alex Proyas, 2009) or *2012* (dir. Roland Emmerich, 2009), but also in the more intimate recent films – the quasi-catastrophic *Melancholia* (dir. Lars von Trier, 2011); the melodramatic *Perfect Sense* (reż. David Mackenzie, 2011), in which people are deprived not of life, but a possibility of communicating through a gradual loss of their senses; or in *The Turin Horse* (reż. Béla Tarr, 2011) drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilistic concepts, in which only silence and darkness remain: emblems of nothingness or perhaps a withdrawal to before the starting point of the Biblical Book of Genesis, before “in the beginning, when God created ...” (Gn 1:1). The outbreak of the First World War destroys the safe, ordered world of Jewish culture and beliefs in *Austeria* (dir. Jerzy Kawalerowicz, 1983); it is razed to the ground by the next world war in *Schindler's List* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1993), *Train of Life* (dir. Radu Mihaileanu, 1998) or *The Pianist* (dir. Roman Polański, 2002).

Is it possible to come to terms with an awareness of transience (like in the great *Tokyo Story* directed by Yasujirô Ozu, 1953), and not respond by trying to escape death, save life at all cost, like in the dramas devoted to the tragedy of the Rwandan mass slaughter during the 1994 civil war? A fear of death is what prompts the

¹¹ J. Wasiewicz, Nihilizm — w labirynty znaczeń, [in:] *Nihilizm i nowoczesność*, ed. E. Partyga, M. Januszkiewicz, Warszawa 2012, p. 33.

¹² This is how the attitude is interpreted by M. Marczak, *Niepokój i tęsknota. Kino wobec wartości. O filmach Krzysztofa Zanussiego*, Olsztyn 2011, p. 467.

young teacher to abandon his pupils and his friends in *Shooting Dogs* (dir. Michael Caton-Jones, 2005); life becomes unbearable for Jacqueline, who has been saved from genocide, is still hiding and feels guilty that she is alive, while the others are dead in *Le jour où Dieu est parti en voyage* (dir. Philippe Van Leeuw, 2009). Yet the necessity of passing, of an end can be accepted, even if we know that it is an expression of undeserved cruelty and extreme injustice: the eponymous protagonist of *Korczak* (dir. Andrzej Wajda, 1990) protects the dignity and safety of the children from a Warsaw orphanage until the end, when, under a green flag from the ghetto, they set out to get on a train that is to take them to a death camp. Joanna Preizner notes that for Jews, who reject martyrdom as unnecessary demonstration, “it is nevertheless acceptable to voluntarily agree to die, provided that the decision is a form of participating in the life of society, that it supports the bonds existing in that society and that it protects that society”¹³. The final scene, in which the carriage with children is separated from the train and is stopped among the fields, tries to introduce some hope and dreams into the message of the film, which reconstructs dramatic historical events: death is not the end, Korczak and his children were not affected by passing. However, it is possible to fight successfully for passing to stop: *Stranger than Fiction* (dir. Marc Forster, 2006) depicts Harold Crick’s fight to make the writer creating his character abandon her plan to kill him in the finale of the book she is writing.

A moving and unusual account of passing is presented in *Departures* (dir. Yôji-rô Takita, 2008) – has an employee of a funeral parlour, a professional of passing, ever been a leading character before? In the Japanese film, which reveals a variety of cultural and religious traditions in funeral ceremonies, a farewell to a dead person become an opportunity for the loved ones to tell all that they had no time or perhaps courage to tell when the deceased was still alive. The protagonist of the film, Daigo Kobayashi, is marked by incomplete passing as well: the memory of his father, who abandoned his wife and child long time ago, becomes increasingly blurred, but unexpectedly finds its material symbol in a stone found by the son in his dead father’s hand. The son will prepare his father for his last journey. At the point of the final departure the memory of love, trust, happy moments of years ago will come back, invalidating passing, as it were.

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Mk 13:31): a film illustration of words uttered by Jesus challenging passing can be found in *The Book of Eli* (dir. Albert Hughes, Allen Hughes, 2010), where – following the example of *Fahrenheit 451* (dir. François Truffaut, 1966) – the permanence announced in the Gospel is guaranteed in a post-apocalyptic world by human memory, which precisely records and transmits the sound of words recorded in system-

¹³ J. Preizner, *Żydowski Świąty — “Korczak” Andrzeja Wajdy*, [in:] *Biografistyka filmowa. Ekranowe interpretacje losów i faktów*, ed. T. Szczepański, S. Kołos, Toruń 2007, p. 94.

atically destroyed books. However, memory, too, passes: illness destroys words, thoughts and memories in *Iris* (dir. Richard Eyre, 2001); sometimes we can even want forgetfulness and use various methods for erasing our memory in order to avoid the pain of broken love, like in *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind* (dir. Michel Gondry, 2004).

What if the end can be reversed? Perhaps there is no passing, perhaps there are only constant waves of a pulsating Universe, expanding from the Big Bangs to successive implosions? This is a vision proposed in *Mr. Nobody* (dir. Jaco van Dormael, 2009): when the expanding universe stops, time will start going backwards, everything that once was will come back, but from the end to the beginning, the effect will precede the cause, a phenomenon that surprised Alice so much in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*. The passage of time can be parallel – what is past takes place next to what is present in *Frequency* (dir. Gregory Hoblit, 2000), a discovery of a passage between the past and the present makes it possible to prevent a disaster, death, passing; the speed of passing in parallel worlds can differ – this is experienced by the Pevensie siblings in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (dir. Andrew Adamson, 2005). Or it is possible to restore time that has already passed, as in *Groundhog Day* (dir. Harold Ramis, 1993), when transitoriness ceases to exist, because every morning begins the same day, with all the mistakes made that day being remembered. Time is cyclical instead of linear here. We see the same mechanism, though not on the daily scale but one measured by someone's life – as in the reincarnation returns in *What Dreams May Come* (dir. Vincent Ward, 1998), where objection to passing, which echoes the ancient myth of Orpheus, who goes to the underworld to retrieve his beloved Eurydice, interweaves with Dante's – largely Christian – vision of afterlife and Oriental belief in incarnation. Linear time, but with opposite vectors, heralds an end which is paradoxically a beginning in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (dir. David Fincher, 2008): does the old man, who will die an infant, pass? After all, he returns, paradoxically, to the beginning of existence.

Passing may prove impossible, though not for a human being – mortality, which is proof of humanity, is what the Android Martin, the eponymous protagonist of *Bicentennial Man* (dir. Chris Columbus, 1999), longs for; in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2001) time passes mercilessly and the world, united into one Einstein-like for all except David, a boy robot: despite the extinction of human civilisation, David continues to wait, looking for thousands of years at an image of a fairy, as if taken straight from Collodi, for a mother, for love, for affection. The longing does not pass.

* * *

Transitoriness as a film subject can be viewed from different perspectives: by describing the work of directors, who grappled with the transience of the human

world in successive films (in addition to Kieślowski and Zanussi, we should mention here Ingmar Bergman and his pessimism); by identifying common thematic areas – passing of a human being as an individual, death of feelings, passing of micro- and macrocosms; by analysing films as audiovisual philosophical or theological treatises examining various strands of thought and religion. In films stories the examples of a stoical acceptance of the condition of man, naturally passing, or of hope present in the great religions and associated with the permanence of life (though its bodily form does pass), or extremely nihilistic pessimism seem to be dominated by a “talking away” of the fear of disease and death¹⁴, as well as unrealistic dreams (and turpist dreams in horrors), which in a popular manner transform and make familiar Horatio’s *non omnis moriar*. Cinema – a medium of illusion – makes illusion its content, when it promises permanence, entrusting it to images, which pass so easily.

CINEMA AND TRANSITORINESS

Summary

The first part of the paper supports the argument that the intrinsic nature of cinema is transitoriness. According to Kracauer, the camera seems to record past events, to restore them to life, although cinema as a medium is more fragile than the media which preceded it. The film, its technologies and formats (plastic strip, disk or digital files) are not as durable as stone or paper (M. Scorsese illustrates it in *Hugo*, 2011)! A film that is being shown cannot be stopped: if it is, it becomes a simple still picture.

The second section identifies the main tendencies and themes in cinema: passing of individuals and fear of dying are subject of numerous films by K. Kieślowski (e.g. *The Decalogue*, 1988), K. Zanussi or M. Majidi, who offers a religious interpretation (the death opens a new life). Protagonists of films are aware that their life will end; they try to prepare themselves (*Wide Awake*, dir. M.N. Shyamalan, 1998; *Oscar et la Dame Rose*, dir. E.-E. Schmitt, 2009). People and relationships terminate, the whole universe can disappear not only in catastrophic films (*Melancholia*, dir. L. von Trier, 2011) but also in a recent nihilistic vision by B. Tarr (*The Turin Horse*, 2011). Sometimes passing is impossible — in films playing with the philosophy of time, where time is circular or inverted instead of linear (*Mr Nobody*, dir. J. van Dormael, 2009), or for the protagonist of *A.I.* (dir. S. Spielberg, 2001), a witness to the world’s dissolution. Contemporary cinema offers both pessimistic and optimistic perspectives, but its optimism is often an illusion.

Summary translated by Marek Lis

¹⁴ W. Kuczok, *Śmierć. Umierając w kinie*, [in:] *Odwiecne od nowa. Wielkie tematy w kinie przelomu wieków*, ed. T. Lubelski, Kraków 2004, p. 303.