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YEARNING FOR SOMEONE WHO DOES NOT EXIST

In the beginning I thought that the proposal to write about transience as a film subject was a sophisticated provocation on the part of my learned colleague from Wrocław. For film, as such, is a metaphor of transitoriness, its model, and perhaps even transitoriness in itself. Already in the early 20th century this fact was noted by Henri Bergson, who wrote that memory is of cinematographic nature: it stores transient images in order to recall them and analyse them whenever time allows. Many years later the theme of transience was referred to by André Bazin, who wrote that film – like all art – mummifies reality. The French critic linked this function to a psychological need felt by humans from time immemorial. “To preserve, artificially, [man’s] bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life,” he wrote. He went on to say:

In achieving the aims of baroque art, photography has freed the plastic arts from their obsession with likeness. Painting was forced, as it turned out, to offer us illusion and this illusion was reckoned sufficient unto art. Photography and the cinema, on the other hand, are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism. [...] The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space¹.

¹ A. Bazin, The Ontology of the Photographic Image, transl. Hugh Gray, [in:] *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Summer, 1960), pp. 4-9.

MOREL'S INVENTION AND BAZIN'S MUMMY²

At the beginning of “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (published in 1945) we can read that “at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex. The religion of ancient Egyptians, aimed against death, saw survival as depending on the continued existence of the corporeal body. Thus, by providing a defence against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time”³. According to Bazin, visual arts for centuries perfected the ways of “mummifying” the bodies of their models, preserving their appearance, thus making them immortal. They were released from this task by the emergence of photography.

Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction. [...] Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation: [...] the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. [...] For photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption⁴.

A natural consequence of such a position is a view that film, which records movement, is a step forward when it comes to mummifying reality. The next step is sound film, then – colour film followed by 3D cinema. Bazin did not go that far. At the time when he was writing his article, colour was just tentatively entering cinema and wherever it tried to be bolder, it tended to offend refined tastes rather than to satisfy them. However, Bazin's hypothesis encompasses all possible transformations of the film image – those that did happen later and those that were barely imagined. Just a few years after the publication of “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”, in 1953, Adolfo Bioy Casares published his story, *Morel's Invention*⁵. It is a fantasy story the main protagonist of which is a machine projecting fully material images of people and their surroundings. The narrator is an accidental witness to the projection, initially unaware of what he is dealing with. A significant part of the novel is taken up by a description of his attempts to come closer to a beautiful woman, to establish some contact with her, to win her heart. These attempts are like talking to pictures hanging on the wall, because in reality they are nothing more than that. The story develops, however.

² This subchapter is a revised version of a paper I delivered in 1998 at the 3rd Film Seminar of the Gdańsk Fantasy Club, the first version of which was published in *Żyjemy w przyszłości. Materiały z III Seminarium Filmowego Gdańskiego Klubu Fantastyki*, ed. G. Szczepaniak, Gdańsk 1998.

³ A. Bazin, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁵ A.B. Casares, *Wynalazek Morela* [*Morel's Invention*], translated into Polish A. Nowak, Kraków 1975.

The protagonist first discovers the projector and then the principle on the basis of which it records these material images – or produces perfect copies of things. Then he learns – from conversations of people filmed in this peculiar way – that the “camera” which records these images at the same time takes the life away from the objects it records. Experiments conducted by the protagonist confirm the veracity of this information: flowers “filmed” by it wither and go dry, and the same happens to a hand put in front of the “camera”. At this point the protagonist of *Morel's Invention*, perfectly aware that he is committing suicide, begins to film himself. He does it in the company of the woman who was the first person he saw. He films himself and her in situations that suggest that there is some intimacy between them. In a way, he inserts his image into an already existing image to make those that will discover it think that from the very beginning he was part of the group that fell victim to Morel and his invention but also to make them think that he was loved by the woman who, in fact, had died many years before he first saw her.

Casares used the light and elegant form of a fantasy story to present a problem that was by no means trivial; he showed a human being giving his life in order to create an idealised image of himself (and he did that in the year in which Jean Baudrillard turned twenty-four and had not yet published any of his books). As an excuse for the protagonist we can say that he is a fugitive wanted for murder, is hiding on a desert island, is unhappily in love or has had a sunstroke. However, this does not change the fact that he is a man who decides that the possibility of recording his image for all eternity is more attractive than life itself. What matters for the protagonist of *Morel's Invention* is the fact that he will be seen by those who will watch the projection (very few and very doubtful – the island is deserted and has not been visited for decades) as a living and happy man.

I do not know whether Casares read Bazin's works (this is possible and probable), but I see a clear (even if unintentional) link between the concept of cinema as “mummification” of reality and Morel's invention. Morel perfected the art of filming in accordance with Bazin's predictions – he replaced the filmed object with a new object, in itself, freed from the constraints of time. Morel mummified time, saving it from self-destruction. Casares describes an invention that could appear at the end of the line set by Bazin: from the imperfection of painting, through perfection of photography and magic of cinema, to eternity. He describes the result of the development of cinema as a device to mummify reality; moreover, he presents it in a way that reveals its absurdity.

In Casares' story we find nearly all threads present in the reflection on cinema. It shows the modern cinematograph as a recording machine – one wanted by Bazin, who divides film-makers into those who believe in cinema or in reality, siding with the latter. For Morel, who launched the projector, the machine is a device that records reality and testifies to the fact that it has been experienced. In this testimony – its transfer beyond time and transience – lies the sense of the existence of the

invention. For the fugitive, who tells us about the invention, the machine is a tool of creation: by filming himself in the company of other people he creates a reality which never existed and himself as someone he never was. It is no coincidence that when “re-arranging” scenes from the life of Morel and his friends, the protagonist is in the company of Morel’s beloved and mocks the inventor behind his back. His presence in itself is a mockery of the idea that the invention is to be used to record true images of life (Morel filmed his guests without their knowledge and consent, because he wanted to avoid all kinds of posing in front of the camera).

It is possible to go even further in looking for imperfections of the invention, which was to be a perfect tool for recording reality: Morel, who wants the “truth”, invites his guests to a deserted island in order to film – in nearly utopian conditions (for every utopia takes place in a location isolated from the world), in a paradise even – brief moments of carefreeness, play or simply peace enjoyed by his guests. The irony (not intended by Morel) is that these guests who are having such fun are living the last days of their lives, unaware that they will soon die and will never leave the place. The awareness that these people are, in fact, dead, that the sentence has been passed and is irrevocable, though they themselves do not know that yet, changes the way we look at them. A walk on the beach turns into the last walk on the beach, a lovers’ embrace – into the last lovers’ embrace, a supper – into the last supper. Morel wanted to photograph life itself; instead, he recorded dying. There are a variety of ways in which we can interpret images left by Morel, but in no interpretation can we avoid the fact that it was he who had left them.

The fact that the protagonist films anew scenes already filmed by Morel and inserts himself into them can also be interpreted in a variety of ways. Firstly, it is a symbolic representation of the triumph of creation over reproduction. Secondly, it gives us an idea of what kind of use is made of the image by those to whom it is given. Thirdly, it is a model example of durability of an illusion – the discoverer and user of Morel’s invention uses it to record himself, although a moment of reflection on what happened to Morel and his friends would be enough to understand the futility of this effort (it is the fact that Morel’s friend is no longer among the living that prompts him to act, it is the fact that she is unavailable, because absent, that prompts him to resort to an indirect solution – instead of being with her he creates an illusion that he is with her), and a moment of reflection on his own actions would be enough to understand the illusory nature of this triumph over time which the protagonist wants to achieve by self-recording (by falsifying the message, he wants to tell a “truth” about himself to the future generations; he expects that those who will come to the island next will use the invention differently).

The death of people “filmed” by means of Morel’s invention is just a melodramatic device to make us aware of the inevitability of transience. It is really not important whether the filmed individuals died one week or ten, twenty or fifty years later. The important fact is that they did die. Their indestructible image does not

testify to the triumph over time and transitoriness; on the contrary – it demonstrates the futility of actions undertaken by the “mummifier”. Bazin, too, was aware of this futility. In 1958 he wrote that film was a machine to discover time only to lose it again⁶.

The Egyptians would embalm bodies, because this satisfied their need for eternal life. They saw the imperfect mummification process as a way to preserve the deceased’s soul in perfect condition. They believed in what they did. Film-makers, on the other hand, do not believe that they save the soul by filming it. The question about the kind of metaphysical need satisfied by Morel’s invention (or, more broadly, by the camera) has just one answer – vanity. The perfection and fullness of a recording do not contain a promise of eternity. Neither Morel nor the fugitive, who again set his machine in motion, give in to the illusions that the ancient Egyptians had. They do not strive for eternal life, they want to leave an eternal image of themselves. They know they will no longer be there, but they believe that there will be those who will watch them, when they are no longer there. They know that they will not see the moment when they will be watched, but they do not hesitate to take a suicidal step, because the vision (idea) of sending into the future an image of themselves – alive and pleased with life – is more tempting to them than life itself. They are prepared to die in order to leave an image of themselves alive, and they do die and nothing is left except for an image of things.

It is worth noting at this point that in Western culture painting was equated with an image of things in the Renaissance⁷. Before that (and in other cultures) it was more of an expression of knowledge of what was presented; it showed some ideas of the world and man and defined relations between them. Medieval paintings were a lecture on the nature of reality; Renaissance paintings seemed to be saying: “reality is what it is – everyone can see it (on the painting)”. In the Renaissance Western painting began to perfect its methods of creating illusory images of things and analysing the ways of their representation. Leonardo Da Vinci’s notes are full of remarks concerning the methods of drawing people, landscapes or battle scenes; the remarks are totally subordinated to solving the problem of how to reproduce what the eye can see in the three-dimensional reality on the two-dimensional canvas. Solutions to the problem included the *camera obscura*.

As Ewa Kuryluk wrote, “the most primitive camera obscura is, as the very name suggests, a dark room with a small hole in the wall or the shutter through which a reversed image of the landscape is projected on the opposite wall or bright screen”⁸. This dark room was in practice used to project reflected shapes on a piece

⁶ A. Bazin, *W poszukiwaniu straconego czasu*, transl. B. Michalek, [in:] *idem*, *Film i rzeczywistość*, selected and edited by B. Michalek, Warsaw 1963, p. 27.

⁷ This is pointed out by E. Gombrich, *Sztuka i złudzenie. O psychologii przedstawienia obrazowego*, transl. J. Żarąński, Warsaw 1981.

⁸ E. Kuryluk, *Hiperrealizm — nowy realizm*, Warsaw 1983, p. 20.

of paper or canvas, and to mark them with a pencil. In the 16th century a lens was inserted into the hole in the shutter and a concave mirror was used to eliminate image reversal; in the 17th century portable camerae obscurae – small black tents with the proper equipment began to be produced. Following successive improvements of the camera obscura in the 19th century there emerged the photographic camera and the film camera.

Using the camera obscura to create a truer image results from a specific way of understanding the word “truth”, with the idea that to represent a human being means to show how he or she looks. Bazin described man’s psychological need prompting him to see the sense of cinema in creating increasingly true images, i.e. images giving us increasingly faithful reproductions of reality. Casares shows a film image which is the ultimate result of striving for perfection understood in this way. At the same time, it is the final result of a way of looking at oneself. An image that equates people with their external appearance, a complete vision with a three-dimensional representation of space is an image in which there is no room for the soul, for the inner life, even for thinking. Humans are what we can see – the bodies; transgression of their corporeality and the inconveniences associated with it (ageing, disease and death) is to be found in embalming or freezing those bodies. In a thoroughly materialistic world immortality does not cease to be a sought-after commodity, but it is limited to a desire of becoming recorded. This may sound rather funny, but the existence of cryogenics and people who want to be frozen and thus survive (and “live on”, as they see it) clearly shows that there are people who have given in to this idea.

Casares’ story is fantasy but not science fiction. The Argentinian author (a friend of Jorge Luis Borges’) boldly transgresses the boundaries of probability, because he is interested in purely human – psychological or even spiritual – consequences of the fact that there is a possibility in our lives of transgressing ourselves. It is an impossible idea and that is why it perfectly shows the improbability of some ideas advocated in all seriousness. Yet for the very same reason it is an idea that cannot be accepted when the basis of the imagined is to be a hypothesis (an acceptable idea), i.e. in *science fiction*. The authors of typical science fiction stories boldly resorted to visions of doubled worlds or people multiplied or replaced by their images (more or less perfect robots or clones), but never dared to insolently suggest to us a vision of covering the world with a 1:1 map⁹. Some of their stories come close to Casares’ vision (others are closer to Borges’ visions) but they do it indirectly. Catastrophic or just worrying visions of the future may lead us to images of firemen burning books (sometimes with their readers); the governments ensuring universal equality by strict physical and mental impairments of their citizens; man-made machines

⁹ Such a vision was proposed by Jorge Luis Borges in one of his stories; it was used by Jean Baudrillard to describe processes taking place in the contemporary world.

functioning perfectly though man himself is no longer there (having disposed of himself by means of perfectly functioning machines). However, these visions are presented to us as mimetic fiction, as images that are quasi-real though they come from the future. Casares does not care about realism – he formulates the problem in the language of symbols and model situations, like Sławomir Mrożek. Casares arrives at an idea of cinema which “displays” material reality and the same time pronounces that there is no life nor soul in that reality. By showing the absurdity of the idea of cinema as mummified reality, Casares – indirectly – indicates that the essence of cinema lies in the presence of the absent, visibility of the invisible, ghostliness of the film image.

His story of the fugitive who falls in love with an image of an “absent” woman and (at the price of his own passing) creates an image of his co-presence with her for future spectators can be seen not only as a polemic with Bazin’s views, but also a poetic vision matching the image of cinema as a ghost known from Edgar Morin’s *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man*¹⁰ and Christian Metz’s description of film watching as a voyeuristic pleasure, the specificity of which is defined by “absence of the object seen”¹¹. As Metz wrote:

In the theatre, actors and spectators are present at the same time and in the same location, hence present one to another, as the two protagonists of an authentic perverse couple. But in the cinema, the actor was present when the spectator was not (shooting), and the spectator is present when the actor is no longer (projection): a failure to meet the voyeur and the exhibitionist whose approaches no longer coincide (they have “missed” one another)¹².

The subject matter of Casares’ story is the absence of an object that is materially present – loss of a person whose fully material image is projected by Morel’s invention. The subject matter of Casares’ story is absence of man, supplanted by his image, “mummy”, “ghost” (the word does not have to denote immateriality of the person; it only points out that the person is available to us as someone we can see and only see). In order to be able to talk of the absence of man, Casares had to ask himself “who is man?”. *Morel’s Invention* is an answer to this question. Film-makers reply to the same question with their films, forcing us to see on screen something more than just the looks of things.

MARILYN’S COPY AND VILLON’S SNOWS

When I mentioned that according to Christian Metz the voyeuristic pleasure at the cinema was clouded by transitoriness, because the person filmed appeared

¹⁰ E. Morin, *Kino i wyobraźnia*, translated into Polish by K. Eberhardt, Warsaw 1975.

¹¹ C. Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, Indiana University Press 1977, p. 61.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 63.

in front of the camera when the voyeur was not there yet, and the spectator looked on the screen when that person was no longer there, I thought that this statement became particularly bitter whenever we watched a film with Marilyn Monroe, no longer with us, but I realised that it would have been just as bitter, if the actress had still been alive. Ageing of actors can but does not have to be photogenic or at least also majestic. Memory suggests to us films like *The Whales of August* (1987) featuring over-ninety-year-old Lilian Gish and nearly-eighty-year-old Betty Davis in the leading roles or *Evening* (2007) with seventy-year-old Vanessa Redgrave rather than the latter. Looking at the wrinkled faces of actors whom we remember with smooth faces, shining hair and clear voices, we are inclined to say that the film image does have a date after all, and not an address. We thus reverse the well-known statement by Rudolf Arnheim, who, however, wanted to stress something completely different.

When we look at Marilyn Monroe's image flickering on screen in *The Seven Year Itch*, we are inclined to think, rather, that we are dealing with a person who could not get old and turn grey, and that in this particular case we are dealing with unreality, something which through its non-existence highlights the materiality and concreteness of what is there. Of course, it is only an illusion: the beam of light on the screen is as concrete as a wall, but crashing into the latter is more painful. Yet it is true: Marilyn's image will not get old unlike those who look at it. It can only fade or get scratched, but even then it can be digitally remastered, whereas the world cannot be improved in this way. For in some – rather crucial – respects the world differs from its image. Film shows us this image and, at the same time, reminds us of this difference. By mummifying the past, it makes a heroic attempt to stem the flow of time, but, in doing so, it testifies to the passage of time and the fact that what exists on screen no longer exists in reality.

The mention of Marilyn Monroe brought to my mind the snows of yesteryear from François Villon's *Ballad of the Ladies of Times Past*. The association is fairly obvious – after all Villon himself referred to the topos of “Ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt” (“Where are those who were before us”) – but, at the same time, rather problematic. The essence of the problem is that the absence of the ladies of times past, which have disappeared without a trace, like the snows of yesteryear in Villon's work, has been replaced in the age of cinema by their visible presence, often multiplied as a result of the fact that film-makers tackle the same subjects. “Joan, the good woman from Lorraine whom the English burned in Rouen” was shown on screen for the first time by Georges Méliès in 1900; films about her were subsequently made many times. In 1928 she was played by Maria Falconetti, in 1948 (and once again in 1954) – Ingrid Bergman, in 1957 – Jean Seberg, in 1962 Florence Delay, in 1994 – Sandrine Bonnaire and in 1999 – Milla Jovovich. There are other – more or less known actresses – that played her. Marilyn Monroe, who by the time of her death in 1962 had starred in thirty films, can be seen not only in

these films, but also in those in which her role is played by other actresses. In 1985 in *Insignificance* she was played by Theresa Russell, and in 2011, in *My Week with Marilyn* – by Michelle Williams. In 2001 a mini television series was made about her life (with Poppy Montgomery in the leading role); there are talks about a film adaptation of Joyce Carol Oates' *Blonde*, to be made by Andrew Dominiak, with Naomi Watts slated to play Marilyn.

In other words, cinema enables us to see the “snows of yesteryear”, both in themselves and as reproduced by the “snow of this year”. However, this does not mean that Villon's question has ceased to be relevant. Like in his time, today, too, people get old and die, and memory of them fades away. Transitoriness in the audio-visual culture does not signify disappearance but replacement: Joan of Arc is replaced by Milla Jovovich, and Marilyn Monroe by Michelle Williams, who is an improved version of the old star, like Scarlet Johansson, who (in a film about the making of *Psycho*) appears as an improved version of Janet Leigh, while Anthony Hopkins appears as an improved version of Hitchcock.

The real problem is not that the looks of stars fade and the actors die without playing all the roles in which we would like to see them. It lies in the fact that we cease to want to see them in roles which they played; this desire to see them is replaced by pictures in which their characters are played by someone else. I mean here the problem, described by Baudrillard, of replacing reality with its images and of improving reality in those versions of it that are available to us, i.e. in film images. There is no significant difference between the question as to which actress (Falconetti, Bergman, Seberg, Delay, Bonnaire, Jovovich) was best at portraying Joan of Arc, and the question as to which actress (Monroe, Russell, Montgomery, Williams, Watts) is the best at portraying Marilyn Monroe. There will be nothing extraordinary in someone saying that Michelle Williams as Marilyn Monroe looks much better than Marilyn Monroe, who evidently cannot act and does not look convincing in front of the camera.

When it comes to historical figures whose appearance is presented in numerous portraits and whose accomplishments – by documents meticulously studied by historians, it is easier to come to terms with the fact that their picture on screen is just a version of their image, because it is easier to persuade oneself that there exist somewhere the originals of those figures. However, what can we do if the only available original is a copy of a film the new version of which is just being released?¹³

¹³ We can also ask what can be done, if today's spectators cannot see and cannot understand what past spectators saw in this black-and-white gentleman or in that faded lady, and think about whether giving the roles of this gentleman and that lady to stars in whom contemporary spectators see that “something” is not the only way to persuade them that in the past the audience saw the same thing in the character played by their idol.

THE DAWN OF PROGRESS AND VISCONTI'S TWILIGHT

A motif that is important to transitoriness in film is associated with the formula from the First Letter to the Corinthians: “the form of this world is passing away”. Of course, it is about this world – material, historical, earthly. As in Malewska’s novel about the break-up of the Roman empire. A world that is passing provokes various emotions. Sometimes it is a feeling of satisfaction, because the worse has been replaced by the better, the old with the new, and the light has penetrated darkness. It can also be nostalgia caused by a feeling that what was in the past was better than what is to come. This is the ever recurring myth of the Golden Age, followed by the Silver, the Bronze and the Iron Age (and, eventually, Plastic Age or something even worse). This feeling gives rise to the conviction that we are just dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants, a statement popularised by the film *The Lord of the Rings* but attributed to Saint Thomas, Isaac Newton, Abbot Fulbert (sometimes Bernard) of Chartres, as well as the Americans (without making a distinction into the better and the worse). This feeling provokes a need to talk about what passes as something that collapses.

Talking about changes for the better is not valued too highly by the critics, who see in it an activity tainted by propaganda, and talking about changes for the better with everything that is changed being unequivocally presented as worse cannot, in fact, be free from accusations of spreading propaganda. When describing Luchino Visconti’s 1960 film, Alicja Helman noted:

The nostalgic tone of *Rocco and His Brothers*, the clear note of longing for irretrievably lost values, turning to the transient definitely dominate the “constructive” thread of the Parondis’ trying to fit in the contexts of their new life, of Ciro’s becoming class-conscious and of achieving financial stability. Visconti clearly is with his tragic protagonists; he is fascinated with the melodramatic complications of their stories. He said on many occasions that he was interested in losers, people in the twilight zone, marked by decadence, people who tragically missed their time. They live here and now but belong to a different period which inevitably is becoming a thing of the past.

In an earlier paragraph the author points to the protagonists’ dilemma. She writes that they are aware of the fact that

there is no return to old forms of existence and what remains is a belief in a better tomorrow, because people understand what is good and right for them. But even Ciro, who abhors the hard life, animal existence even, of the inhabitants of Sicilia, misses what they have lost leaving their village¹⁴.

Visconti indeed opted for melodrama, highlighting the tragic nature of choice and conflicts his protagonists had to face, leaving their poor Calabrian village in

¹⁴ A. Helman, Urok zmierzchu. Filmy Luchino Viscontiego, *Gdańsk 2001*, p. 164-165.

order to look for happiness and jobs in a city. Jerzy Płażewski is right in pointing out that

The tragic, white-hot characters, painfully aware of their constant choices had negative connotations with the primitive peasants of Calabria. Rocco seemed particularly anachronistic and fictitious – a dreaming Christ-like little figure with boxer gloves and Alain Delon’s dandy face. Visconti undoubtedly began with something socially concrete only to resort immediately to pomposity to imbue the film with outbursts (violence, massacres) which the Japanese would not be ashamed of¹⁵.

Płażewski is right. Primitive peasants do not read Faulkner, and although they may experience tragedies similar to those experienced by his protagonists, they should not, nevertheless, be aware of what they are experiencing. Instead, they should look like primitive peasants, because otherwise the spectators will not know who they are watching. The was understood by the British “angry young men”, who at the time when Visconti was making *Rocco and His Brothers* promoted an array of actors with proletarian looks (the protagonists of their films were representatives of the working class and not peasants), like Richard Burton, Richard Harris, Tom Courtenay, Albert Finney or Rita Tushingham. The audiences looked at Richard Burton’s coarse, rough-hewn features (his “dirty gob”, we might impolitely say) and knew straight away that this was a man who had never read Shakespeare in his life and even if he had, he had understood nothing. When it comes to Polish artists, this was well understood by¹⁶ Grzegorz Królikiewicz and Witold Leszczyński, when they made their film adaptations of Polish “peasant literature”.

Królikiewicz used Julian Kawalec’s prose and filmed his *Tańczący jastrząb* (*Dancing Hawk*), casting Franciszek Trzeciak as Michał Toporny. Leszczyński filmed Edward Redliński’s *Konopielka*, entrusting the leading role to Krzysztof Majchrzak. In both films – like in the entire “peasant cinema” – the idea is the same: as a result of the political transformations after WWII, the Polish countryside was put on a path of development and progress. In Królikiewicz’s film this progress means that having left his countryside family behind, Michał Toporny moves to a city, goes to university, marries a doctor’s daughter, has a career in a mining company and finally decides to fell a forest which the people of his home village fiercely defend. In fact, he does it only to show them that he no longer has anything in common with them. In Leszczyński’s film progress comes to the village in the form of a teacher; the protagonist played by Majchrzak – an illiterate peasant who knows nothing about the world but who has vivid imagination – must face the imminent changes. In both Polish stories we have outbursts which the Japanese would not be

¹⁵ J. Płażewski, *Historia filmu 1895-2000*, Warsaw 2001, p. 265.

¹⁶ Among others, of course. I hope that the fact that in such a short essay I cannot give justice to all who deserve it (for instance to Andrzej Wajda, who has shown many times that by choosing the right face, he can show a character’s IQ on screen, like he did when he cast Jerzy Radziwiłłowicz as Mateusz Birkut or Alicja Bachleda-Curuś as Zosia) is obvious and that I will be forgiven.

ashamed of, but which are served with greater sensitivity than in Visconti's films. Królikiewicz imposes an ironic distance to his protagonist by means of technical devices. He deforms not only the image but also the sound (for example, in the English lesson scene in which what comes from Toporny's throat is mechanical crackling), creating a picture imbued with many meanings. Leszczyński uses humour, finding verbal and situational comedy in events that end tragically.

Visconti kept making films about what had passed. He showed a world that was a thing of the past and people who belong to that world. But other film-makers, too, did (and still do) the same (though not always achieving the same results as Visconti). Years ago Polish film-makers, together with Polish writers, showed the decline of the traditional Polish countryside and today they are showing the past charm of the People's Republic of Poland. American film-makers waxed nostalgic about noble last cowboys at (more or less¹⁷) the same time as they exposed the conquest of the Wild West as a period in which the primitive and brutal white invaders killed the Indians and destroyed their culture (that Indian culture is shown tenderly and nostalgically as a value that passes irrevocably under the impact of change). Finally, we have seen directors who obtained their diplomas in the Soviet Union make nostalgic films about pre-revolutionary times, striking the tone of clear yearning for irretrievably lost values; we are anxiously waiting for them to start making nostalgic films about Stalin¹⁸.

By comparing such different figures as Visconti and Królikiewicz, and such different faces as those of Delon and Majchrzak, I try clumsily (I admit) to say once again what I said at the beginning – that film is a metaphor of transitoriness, its model or maybe even transitoriness itself. That it is enough to start looking carefully to see that there is not a single film-maker who would not talk about it. In addition, I also try in this way to reiterate the thesis that the only story of transience that is valued and appreciated is one in which what passes is shown as something that declines, and what follows is presented as a stunted version of what it replaces. I make this attempt, because I would like to add another quotation from Alicja Helman's book in which she says that the main thread in *The Leopard* is one of "decline, twilight, of the lions of leopards leaving the stage having to make way for hyenas and jackals"¹⁹. However, I do so without much conviction, because I am reminded again

¹⁷ The term "more or less" may denote a difference of between five to fifteen or twenty years. If we compare *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962) with *Dances with Wolves* (1990), we will have a difference of almost thirty years, but in the case of *Little Big Man* (1970) and *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (1970) the difference is much smaller.

¹⁸ The anxiety is undoubtedly felt by the Italian illustrator Igot, who ends his comics book *Ukrainian Notebooks* saying that the Russians are already remembering this "statesman" with some nostalgia.

¹⁹ A. Helman, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

and again about the film *Whale Rider* (dir. Niki Caro, 2003), which does not quite fit the theses I have been advocating.

Whale Rider can be described as a film about the decline of the patriarchal culture. One of its protagonists is Koro, the chief of a Maori tribe living in the north-east of New Zealand (Whangarei district). The role of the chief is rather symbolic, but in order to preserve a symbolic link to the past, Koro wants to teach young Maori people about the past and traditions of their tribe, but they are not very eager to learn. For them, the place in which they live is a godforsaken hole in the middle of nowhere and their biggest dream is to find a job in Germany. The only person wanting whole-heartedly to acquire the knowledge transmitted by Koro is his granddaughter Paikea, but according to the tradition, the chief's successor should be male. *Whale Rider* can just as well have the same motto as Visconti's *Leopard* – "Things have to change in order to remain the same". The story of this change can easily be called a piece of "feminist propaganda", for Niki Caro's film is a tale of a young girl who has shown that she is worthy of taking over the mantle of her ancestors. It ends with a scene in which the Whangara organise a traditional feast to celebrate Paikea, a feast that is a pretty folk festival but also – or perhaps it only seems so to me – an expression of recognition for someone who cares about something.

Whale Rider is a story about a break-up of a traditional community. The descendants of Maori warriors live in cheap houses, drink beer and live from day to day. We may have the impression that they despise their heroic past and traditions, because they despise themselves. Children laugh at the traditional songs and rituals, the teacher includes them in the school curriculum because they are part of the past (meaning they do not belong to the present), the adults are preoccupied with their own business. True, the grandfather talks in all seriousness that their ancestor came to New Zealand from Hawaiiiki on the back of a whale, but no one is able to say where that place is. *Whale Riders* talks not so much about passing but about what has just passed. No one believes in legends anymore, old rituals are the subject of jokes, the chief's son has disavowed his heritage, abandoned an unfinished boat, left his daughter with the grandparents and left for a distant country. All this overlaps with another story – of the passing of an emotional bond between the grandfather and the granddaughter. However, when it seems that all the threads about transience will become one and will end in some picturesque disaster, there comes a scene with whales.

One evening Koro finds whales thrown onto the beach by the ocean. The entire Whangara people sets out for the beach to save them. No one asks "why" and "what for". No one wonders what rescue services should be called. Men, women and children work all night without a break and give their all to save the animals, like the one on the back of which their ancestor came to New Zealand. They cry whenever an animal dies. This is the moment in which a story about what passes turns into a story about what has remained. It has remained so deep, that it does not have to be

talked about or danced. It does not have to be repeated or taught, because it is simply there. When I watch this clearly feminist story by Niki Caro about a girl who became a leader and prophet of her people, despite patriarchal traditions and chauvinist prejudice, I believe that every story about transience contains a story about what remains, although not every story has whales that help to bring it to the surface.

YEARNING FOR SOMEBODY WHO DOES NOT EXIST

Summary

Film is a metaphor of transience and its model which was noticed quite a long time ago by Henri Bergson when he wrote that memory had a cinematographic nature. The topic of transience and fighting against it has been tackled by many film critics and film scholars, such as Andre Bazin and Christian Metz, in a number of articles and books. Many film masters, for instance Luchino Visconti, dealt with this ever disturbing issue. The present essay offers a look at different views on passing – presented in films and literature, by artists and critics – to show that where something passes at the same time something remains, and where something goes away at the same time something new comes along.

Summary translated by Sławomir Bobowski