

From Ekphrasis Rhetoric to Cinema Anthropology. Contemporary Film Poetry and “Telling Films”

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Introductory remarks

The presence of cinema and film in Polish poetry has been intense since the very beginning of the 20th century, although it should be noted that the fascination of interwar poets with this new art form was more avid back then, and also seemed to offer more interesting results, both in terms of form (in terms of the poetic language and extending its borders), and genealogy. For example, specific poetic genres emerged then, in which film and cinematicity dominat-

ed on special, strictly defined rules – such as conventionally journalistic poetic film reviews, *film raconté* (re-told films)¹, cinematographic poems², and film novels³. On the other hand, contemporary references to cinema and film(s) are both numerous and dispersed. Generally speaking, there is a mutuality of a sort: film and cinema belong to everyday culture, and what follows – to both everyday and poetic language.

The titular “contemporaneity” is not a precisely defined period, but it allows one to chronologically define the relationship between the poetry of the first decades of the 20th century and post-war poetry, including modern poetry. Apart from all the significant elements differentiating those two periods, there is also the problem of ekphrasis: if it was already present before, it was as a formal experiment, and later – with more awareness of the rhetorical load of the genre⁴.

In modern film poetry various “film subjects” are represented, attempts at “imitating” film have been undertaken (even if these were unintentional gestures testifying to a “cinematic” way of seeing and depicting), and finally cinema and film constitute – as is commonly known, even internalized “worlds” and association systems – the basis for *metaphors*, comparisons, analogies. “Everything is so cinematic here”, as Marta Berewska⁵ writes in the poem *Do S. Wyspiańskiego* [To S. Wyspiański]. Regardless of various attempts at systematizing the unusually abundant material of contemporary film poetry, it is possible to distinguish a group of poems with *references to specific films*. They are not just embellishments, and they are not among the numerous simple references to the popular culture or intertextual allusions, nor are they bragging with erudition or an empty sign of *zeitgeist* (although there are also numerous examples of those) – they are different because they are attempts at a profound (poetic) insight into film pictures. Looking for theoretical inspirations in reflections on the presence of painting and music in literature, and especially in poetry, I am leaning towards a thesis that distinguishing certain characteristics selected for the analysis of a dozen or so poems allows to observe examples of ekphrases.

¹ See Grażyna Szymczyk-Kluszczyńska, “Opowiadam? Opisuję?” [Am I telling? Am I describing?] (Poeci-surrealiści wobec kina [Poets-surrealists and cinema]), w *Male formy narracyjne* [Small narrative forms], edited by Eugenia Łoch (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 1991).

² See Grażyna Szymczyk-Kluszczyńska and Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, “Poemat kinematograficzny. Analiza pewnego typu związków między literaturą a kinem” [Cinematographic poem. Analysis of a certain type of relationships between literature and cinema]. *Przegląd Humanistyczny* No 11 (1982).

³ See Alina Madej, “Między filmem a literaturą. Szkic o powieści filmowej” [Between film and literature. A sketch on film novel], in *Film polski wobec innych sztuk* [Polish film and other arts], edited by Alicja Helman, Alina Madej (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, 1979); Janusz Kucharczyk, “Pierwiastki filmowe w twórczości literackiej Tadeusza Peipera i Jalu Kurka” [Film elements in the works by Tadeusz Peiper and Jalu Kurek]. *Kwartalnik Filmowy* nr 1 (1965).

⁴ Hence the present text, also due to the limitations of space, I do not consider the interwar poetry – despite its many references to specific films. Film poetry of that period is a rather well-studied topic. See for example Ewa and Marek Pytasz, “Poetycka podróż w świat kinematografu, czyli kino w poezji polskiej lat 1914-1925” [A poetic journey into the world of cinematography – cinema in the Polish poetry from 1914-1925], in *Szkice z teorii filmu* [Sketches on film theory], edited by Alicja Helman, Tadeusz Miczka (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, 1978), 18-32; Wojciech Otto, *Literatura i film w kulturze polskiej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego* [Literature and film in the culture of the Polish interwar period] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo PTPN, 2007).

⁵ Marta Berowska, “Do S. Wyspiańskiego”. *Poezja* No 7-8 (1985): 93.

“Telling films” – cultural and theoretical contexts

In attempted answers to the question whether poetic ekphrasis in a film is at all possible, it is a good idea to refer to the association of “telling films”, which – as a seemingly everyday, common activity – is not often included in the history of cinema, which would also involve a number of cinema-related practices, rather than focus solely on films and their creators. However, leaving out the purely anecdotal layer of the issue, in which telling films for their “everyday” needs of the parties involved⁶ was sometimes even a subject of jokes⁷, it is possible to look at this issue from a strictly historical and/or cultural, as well as – what I find especially interesting – theoretical perspective. Due to the variety of contexts preparing the ground for reflection on “proper” film ekphrasis, I will only address a handful of the most characteristic examples, accentuating the level of “translation” in all other cases, seeking or constructing an *ersatz* of a sort: a verbal “text” in terms of the (moving) film picture.

It seems that the oldest of the above-mentioned associations are related to the character (and profession) of *benshi* – a Japanese film-external narrator of silent film. *Benshi* not only read subtitles for the audience, but also what the character were saying (thus becoming an actor of a sort during screening) and they “interpreted” what the film was suggesting, often intentionally distorting the meaning of foreign films. According to scholars of this subject, “*Benshi* transformed the visual language of cinema into a verbal one, hence explaining the meaning of a film completely depended on their perspective”⁸. On the one hand, it is said that Japanese cinema was created and developed differently from its European or American counterparts, which is why *benshi* were so important for it, and on the other – that it was actually due to the huge role played by *benshi* that greatly contributed to the fact that Japanese cinema followed its own path for a longer time, especially in terms of constructing narration and introducing sound in the 1930s⁹. Interestingly, *benshi* – as an institution – has survived until today, and even Polish audiences recently had a chance to experience it¹⁰ (it has survived as a continuation of the respectable art of storytelling, as well as a part of the trend of returning to unique practices sought in the times of the cultural globalization of practices, in the times of film’s common availability, and – most importantly – the fact that film remains the same during every screening).

⁶ Today – quite paradoxically – those practices are continued in computer algorithms or programs available online, which “listen” to our story (typically reduced to key words) in order to suggest what film we mean, if we just remember something from it, but not the title. A similar function is served by dedicated Facebook groups.

⁷ A cycle of radio sketches from 1970s, *Para-męt pikczers czyli kulisy srebrnego ekranu* [Paramount Pictures – the backstage of the silver screen], screenplay by Andrzej Zaorski. As Jędrrek, he talked with Maniek (Marian Kociniak) about a film they saw. Conventionally, each episode started with a line *I saw a cool movie yesterday...*

⁸ Hiroshi Komatsu, Charles Musser, “Benshi Search”, quoted after Krzysztof Loska, “Benshi jako współautor filmu” [Benshi as a co-author of a film]. *Kwartalnik Filmowy* nr 59 (2007): 59.

⁹ See Loska; Jeffrey Dym, *A Brief History of Benshi (Silent Film Narrators)*, https://aboutjapan.japansociety.org/content.cfm/a_brief_history_of_benshi; Dawid Głownia, *Początki kina w Japonii na tle przemian społeczno-politycznych kraju* [Beginnings of cinema in Japan and the socio-political transformations] (Wrocław: Atut, 2020).

In 1994, a Japanese-American film *Picture Bride* (Kayo Hatta), set at the beginning of the 20th century, about a marriage arranged based on photographs. In one scene set in the village where the young bride eventually ends up there is a travelling cinema. Film fight scenes between samurais are explained to the audience by a *benshi*. Interestingly, the role was played by a then 70-year-old Toshirō Mifune, the famous Japanese actor, best known from his previous roles (also of samurais) in films by, among others, Akira Kurosawa.

¹⁰ An event organized at the Warsaw cinema, Elektronik (3-4.03.2017), during which three Japanese films were shown with Kataoka Ichirō, master storyteller of the story in question (earlier – in 2015 – he was also a guest of 12. Święta Niemego Kina [12. Celebration of Silent Film]).

Although the “institution” of *benshi* remains characteristic of and unique to Japanese cinema, as this is where it emerged and took shape, mostly due to different aesthetic traditions, especially theatrical terms; there is no doubt that similar “storytellers” were also needed elsewhere, especially in the silent film era. The major reason for this was the fact that illiteracy was common – viewers could not read the cards with “stage directions” and dialogues. The second biggest problem was that audiences were not prepared to receive film – as a form of art relying on specific means of narration, and devoted to a world which was often completely alien to viewers. This is evidenced by the Łódź novel *Ulica* [Street] by Jisroel Rabon, set in the 1920s. The protagonist works at the Wenus cinema and gives an account of his first performance: “I spoke loudly, with fire and passion. The room was quiet. The audience was listening to my words in awe. [...] When the first act was over and the light was back on, the audience gave me an ovation yelling ‘long live the reader!’”¹¹.

On the one hand, the previously-mentioned practice of telling films creates a slightly different context for reflection on the intersemiotic translation of an audiovisual work, while on the other, there is its culturally-conditioned tradition. In his short novel with the telling title *The Movie Speaker*, Hernán Rivera Letelier explores precisely this topic. The story is set in the 1960s in a small Chilean village, where most people work in a saltpeter mine. Among the few available forms of entertainment there is a cinema, however, few can afford it. Due to poverty and the father’s disability, one family (a single father of four sons and one daughter, the youngest, María Margarita) comes up with the idea of sending one child to the cinema, so that he or she can tell the film to the rest. He even organizes a special contest, in which the girl wins, unmatched, “the best movie speaker in the family”¹², who retells the onscreen story with unusual suggestiveness, together with a detailed account of the background of events, and becoming increasingly more professional in terms of acting out individual characters – all the while using her unlimited imagination, and even gossip or suggestions from such things as film stills. “When I tell a film – being generous with gestures and voice modulation – I transform into each of the characters. That evening I was Ben-Hur, Messala – a dark character – and both lepers healed by Jesus. I was even Jesus himself”¹³. It should also be stressed that the narrator herself appreciates the significance of her training (of a sort) for becoming her family’s film teller (and not just that, for with time a cultural institution of a sort develops, which even competes with cinema) – her mother telling her bedtime stories. What is interesting for me here is the very fact of suggestive narration and the need to listen to it. However, in broader terms, we cannot forget that Letelier’s story is in a way representative of certain contexts of the development of receptive cinematic practices. It also highlights the significance of orally transmitted stories in the life of individuals and societies, including their role in the shaping and inspiring the imagination of listeners.

The formula of *told cinema* (in Belarusian *izustnoje kino*) is a relatively new phenomenon with its own specific history (i.e. not found in other accounts, however, due to the fact that it also has its own genealogy – analogical or similar enterprises must have appeared elsewhere). In the 1980s in Belarus there was an intensification of activity of various artistic *avant-gardes*, including the group Belarusian Climate – a multidisciplinary formation which also included “told cinema”. Of course

¹¹See Izrael Rabon, *Ulica*, translated by Krzysztof Modelski (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1991), 117.

¹²Hernán Rivera Letelier, *Opowiadaczka filmów*, translated by Natalia Nagler (Warszawa: Muza, 2012), 12.

¹³Letelier, 31.

the broader context was important here, including the fledgling market for video players and VHS tapes: renting films, exchanging them, *ad hoc* home cinemas, as well as talking about these films and telling films. However, the told cinema produced by Belarusian Climate was a fully autonomous form of expression, located between oral literature and performance: here a told film was “invented” (i.e. it did not have a prototype), together with the whole plot, and even genre (even music is told in it) – as opposed to the rather imitative (apart from the question of talent and the individual author’s ambitions) character of the performances of the “film teller” from Letelier’s book and other similar “tellers”. Alena Siutsova wrote an M.A. thesis on the niche and the unique phenomenon of told cinema¹⁴. In her attempt at presenting the broad, theoretical characteristics of the genre, she also refers to ekphrasis – of course with a reservation that *de facto* what is being described, the original, is missing. However, what is equally important (both in ekphrasis and told cinema) is achieving a similar effect in the addressee and their imagination (a mental picture / moving pictures). Although it would be equally interesting to refer to the tradition of hypotyposis (defined as a vivid, picturesque description of scenes or events, so suggestive that it is able to create an adequate equivalent in the listener’s or reader’s imagination, not necessarily referring to an existing work of art), it is still a fact that told cinema is an interesting example of a practice which could be defined as an attempt at achieving a cinematic effect – without its direct participation, but including all the transformations it has achieved in the ways of perceiving, imagining, and finally – telling it.

The last one, *audiodescription*, also brings us closer to intersemiotic considerations on ekphrasis. This is not new – in fact, it remains very topical today, being put into practice and subjected to theoretical considerations more and more intensely. It allows a confrontation of two types of description: film and fine arts (audiodescription – also in the institutional context – first appeared in modern museum practices, later followed by cinema and TV). It should be stressed that the tradition of audiodescription (typically that related to the fine arts) is often connected to the theory of ekphrasis¹⁵. In the understanding of film audiodescription as a “tool”, a functionality of sort, which is supposed to play a given role in mediating a “cinematic” message to visually impaired audiences, the “target text” does not aspire to be a form of art. However, at the same time, researchers of that topic raise the issue of the quality of such a “text”; there is no doubt that the reception of a film via its linguistic translation largely depends on – precisely – the type of narration. It can be said that in this sense the practice of audiodescription brings together all of the above-mentioned experiences and traditions. Magdalena Urbańska refers to the views and activity of Hannah J. Thompson, which is about showing appreciation for audiodescription, considering it a form of activity which could even be awarded during film festivals (which is already taking place)¹⁶. The very reflection on the possibility of finding an equivalent between a moving picture and its linguistic description shows clearly what the problem and the art of poetic ekphrasis might be. In this analogy, a visually impaired listener becomes the best – if one can say that – addressee of a “told film” – the quality of narration will translate directly into the quality of the mental picture.

¹⁴See Alena Siutsova, “Kino opowiadane. Historia i teoria” [Told cinema. History and theory] (M.A. thesis, Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2014).

¹⁵See Robert Więckowski, “Audiodeskrypcja piękna” [Audiodescription of beauty]. *Przekładaniec* No 28 (2014); Beata Jerzakowska, “Ekfrazja poetycka w audiodeskrypcji” [Poetic ekphrasis in audiodescription]. *Polonistyka* nr 5 (2013).

¹⁶See Magdalena Urbańska, “Głos filmu: o audiodeskrypcjach” [Cinema’s voice: on audiodescription]. *Ekrany* No 4 (2020): 117; Hannah Thompson, “Audio Description: Turning Access to Film into Cinema Art”. *Disability Studies Quarterly* 38, nr 3 (2018), <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/6487/5085>.

Film poetry – towards ekphrasis

The attempts at classifying the material of film poetry presented above can be constructed around three sub-genological criteria: thematic, formal, and metaphorical. It is not always possible to clearly separate them from one another – which also refers to ekphrases. For, on the one hand, we are dealing with a clear subject reference: to a specific film, its title, and particular elements. However, on the other hand, if such poems are initially classified as ekphrases, they will also contain attempts at a linguistic expression of film constituents as a work of art, which eventually lead to the writing of a poem. And so from a formal perspective, in such cases issues of intersemiotic translation, formal mimesis, or imitation as a certain tendency, in art which tries to go beyond its own material, or make it “softer”¹⁷ (semiotic theory of ekphrasis), should also be included.

From a purely “thematic” perspective, when a given film seems to be the leading or secondary character in a poem, it is possible to distinguish several variants of such transmedia references and characterize the collected material in different ways. Ekphrasis (discussed separately) is obviously the access point here, understood as “literature moving towards film”¹⁸, but it is worth characterizing the way itself in the search for it.

A large group of poems in which film titles appear are constituted by incidental *references* to them – contextual, pretextual, or purely “formal”, as specific events which are merely a background or signal for a lyrical situation. For example, in the poem *Mógłbym* [I could], Zbigniew Machej refers to the 1983 Federico Fellini film:

I could describe, at least in a few poems,
what you were doing when you were at the cinema with me
when you got bored with the film *And the Ship Sails On*¹⁹.

Any kind of intertextual games and irony in which specific films are signs of collective imagination, as well as of film awareness of the authors who can in fact use them as well-digested cultural texts, also belong here. *Casablanca*²⁰ by Marcin Świetlicki would be a good example. The poem (regardless of its title) mixes motifs and the characters of “an elderly man who disturbingly resembles Bogart”, and “a seventy-year-old Marilyn Monroe”.

¹⁷See Erazm Kuźma, “Granice porównywalności poezji z malarstwem i filmem” [Limits of comparability of poetry with painting and film], in *Pogranicza i korespondencje sztuk* [Art borderlines and correspondences], edited by Teresa Cieślukowska, Janusz Sławiński (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1980), 267.

¹⁸This is how Jerzy Kossak characterized early works by Pier Paolo Pasolini, referring to the title of one of the essays by the director himself, and – what should be remembered – the semiotics of film. *Scenariusz jako “struktura, która chce być inną strukturą”* [Screenplay as “a structure which wants to be a different structure”], see Jerzy Kossak, *Kino Pasoliniego* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1976), 16.

¹⁹Zbigniew Machej, “Mógłbym”, in *Dwa zbiory wierszy* [Two books of poetry] (Londyn: Puls Publications, 1990), 82. Mógłbym opisać, choćby w paru wierszach,
co wyprawiałaś będąc ze mną w kinie
kiedy cię znudził film “A statek płynie”

²⁰Marcin Świetlicki, “Casablanca”, in *37 wierszy o wódce i papierosach* [37 poems about vodka and cigarettes] (Bydgoszcz: Instytut Wydawniczy Świadectwo, 1996), 25.

Poetic texts whose titles lead the reader to specific film tropes, but whose text does not provide a simple continuation of the association, deserve to be mentioned here as well. These are suggestions which – according to the rule of attribution to famous films and surely intentional gestures of the authors – set off a system of associations with the story they are telling, such as in the poem *Złodzieje rowerów* [Bike thieves] by Roman Bąk²¹. The title clearly opens a relationship with Vittorio de Sica's 1948 film, although the story itself does not resemble the film. However, the similarity of contexts is noticeable: an unemployed father, his little boy, hunger, and staggering poverty which determines their existence:

son, I don't have money for bread,
I don't have enough for eternal bread
your clothes are torn
under the brightest of skies
[...] ²²

A similar characteristic can be noted in reference to *Ballada o Narayamie*²³ [Ballad on Narayama] by Krzysztof Lisowski: on the one hand, it is a reference to the 1958 Keisuke Knoshita film and the main motif of the story it tells; on the other – it is a universal existential project, which contains a journey (literal or metaphorical) towards death.

we have to leave unnoticed
home
body
[...]
without looking back
pass by wilderness cross streams
meet God on the Mountain top²⁴

Grzegorz Olszański offers a broad spectrum of references in his *Kroniki filmowe*²⁵ [News-reels]. Each of the 36 poems in the book has a title which is identical with some more or less known films (the list of contents contains the last names of directors, which is interesting in itself), and there is no doubt that individual texts were written “under the influence”

²¹Roman Bąk, “Złodzieje rowerów”, in *Ulica, gdzie sprzedają zapałki* [The street where matches fall] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo “W drodze”, 1985), 25.

²²nie mam już synku na chleb
na wieczny chleb mi zabrakło
rwie się twoje ubranko
pod najjaśniejszym z nieb

²³Krzysztof Lisowski, “Ballada o Narayamie”, in *Ciemna dolina* [Dark valley] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Śląsk, 1986), 65-66.

²⁴trzeba wyjść niepostrzeżenie
z domu
ciała
[...]
ale nie patrzeć za siebie
mijać bezdroża przekraczać strumienie
na Górze spotkać się z Bogiem

²⁵Grzegorz Olszański, *Kroniki filmowe* (Warszawa: Lampa i Iskra Boża, 2006).

of the films they refer to. Both the whole book of poems, and individual, various accounts which take place between films suggested in titles and the text, would actually deserve a separate paper, especially given that in some poems additional, less obvious and open intertextual references can be found. For example, there are cryptoquotations from other films in the poem *Mondo Cane* (in Polish, the film was also known as *Dogs' world*): “a dog’s afternoon and a man who bit a dog”²⁶. (I will refer to another example from the same book of poems later in the text)

A separate group of reviews does not present “proper” ekphrases due to their clearly judgmental tone, rather than a merely descriptive one, characteristic of ekphrasis. This group also has quite a different character from the already mentioned interwar poetic film reviews, which are full of awe and exultation, and written from the perspective of an emotionally engaged viewer, impressionistic and typically focused on attractions related to the very phenomenon of cinema as an art of moving pictures, technological advancements and unattainable film stars, who are to be loved without any limits. Modern examples are more critical, deconstructionist, and often ironic. For example, the attitude of the protagonist of a collage poem *Non-stop-show* by Tadeusz Różewicz can be read like this. In the poem, there is a passage on *Lolita* by Stanley Kubrick (1962) (according to the rule of combining passages of texts, quotations, subtitles, in a different place in the poem there is also an excerpt from a genuine [?] newspaper review of the film):

[...] I saw *Lolita* in Munich
Lolita That *Lolita* is a very long
 film with a perfect actor who is bad
 in that film *lolita* is like an icicle
 a gitl with no armpit hair
 like a doll On decent or something like that
Lolita cruel naked hairless doll
 here and there that wooden saw that boring
 melodrama has been screened for months in the biggest
 cinema of Munich Royal-Theater²⁷

²⁶Grzegorz Olszański, *Mondo Cane*, in: Olszański, *Kroniki filmowe*, 43. The line quoted here is a contamination of titles of films by Sidney Lumet, *Mondo Cane* (1975) and *Man Bites Dog* (1992), authored by three directors: André Bonzel, Benoît Poelvoorde and Rémy Belvaux (the Polish title is modeled after the English version, not the original *C'est arrivé près de chez vous*).

²⁷Tadeusz Różewicz, “Non-stop-show”, in *Utwory zebrane. Poezja*, t. 2 [Collected works. Poetry, vol. 2] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 2006), 407–408; from the volume *Twarz trzecia* [Third face] (1968).

[...] *Lolite* widziałem w Monachium
Lolita Ta *lolita* to bardzo nudny długi
 film z doskonałym aktorem który jest zły
 w tym filmie *lolita* to taki sopelek
 lodu dziewczynka bez zarostu pod pachami
 jak lalczka On decent czy coś w tym rodzaju
Lolita okrutna naga lalczka bez włosów
 tu i tam ta drewniana piła ten nudny
 melodramat idzie od miesięcy w największym
 kinie Monachium Royal-Theater

In *Streszczając niezaznajomionym „Przeminęło z wiatrem”*²⁸ [Providing a recap of *Gone with the Wind* for those who haven't seen it], Marta Podgórnik adopts a similarly ironic (at least initially) attitude, with a clear distance (both temporal and emotional) to the classic film novel. The very formula of the title directs the reader towards “telling a film”, and eventually while giving an account of Scarlett O'Hara's life irony turns into empathy, and the narrative about film events unnoticeably transfers to the world of both the “teller” and the readers:

Ashley, in spite of his most honest intentions, could not marry miss O'Hara.
 Ashley married miss Hamilton due to them having common interests.
 Scarlett married Charles out of spite, who – luckily soon died in a war.
 Scarlett could not predict how much her next relationship was about to change her life –
 [...]

 First she loses her child, then love.

I'll think about it tomorrow, this is what she tells herself
 First your heat breaks, than that thin floe
I'll think, she thins, *about other stained glass*

I would consider other, different intertextual and intersemiotic relations to poetic *travesties* or film *updates*. *W środek miasta*²⁹ [In the City Center] by Jerzy Harasymowicz, about an incipit, does not suggest anything in the title; the poem starts with a universal parable about a man a woman (from the perspective of the former), about their life together. It is only during the narration when the following lines appear: “She believed I did miracles / the mythical Zampano / breaks horseshoes / (plywood) / in the clouds”, which is a direct reference to *La Strada* by Federico Fellini (1954); to some degree the sad story from the poem is a variation of the film story, though contemporary and rooted in a different context (“She was pushing the strolley / of Cracow's poverty”).

²⁸Marta Podgórnik, “Streszczając niezaznajomionym «Przeminęło z wiatrem»”, in *Zawrót głowy. Antologia polskich wierszy filmowych* [Dizziness. An anthology of Polish film poems], edited by Darek Foks (Łódź: Narodowe Centrum Kultury Filmowej, 2018), 278 (from the volume *Dwa do jeden* [Two to one], 2006).

Ashley, pomimo najszczerzych intencji, nie mógł ożenić się z panną O'Hara.
 Ashley ożenił się z panną Hamilton, ze względu na pokrewne zainteresowania.
 Scarlett ze złości wyszła za Karola, który – na szczęście, zginął na wojnie.
 Scarlett nie mogła przewidzieć, jak bardzo zmieni jej życie kolejny związek –
 [...]

 Najpierw utraci dziecko, potem straci miłość.
 Pomyślę o tym jutro, tak sobie powtarza.
 Najpierw pęka ci serce, potem ta kra cienka.
 Pomyślę, myśli, o innych witrażach.

²⁹Jerzy Harasymowicz, “W środek miasta”, in *Od Staffa do Wojaczka. Poezja polska 1939-1985. Antologia* [From Staff to Wojaczek. Polish poetry 1939-1985], edited by Bohdan Drozdowski, Bohdan Urbankowski (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, 1988), vol. 2, 244-245 (from the volume *Kłękajcie narody* [Kneel down, nations], 1984).

Thus the famous film story is treated as a specific matrix – in this case – for a love story, and applied to “its own” story. Maciej Woźniak does something similar in *Bonnie i Clyde*³⁰. This time thanks to the titular clue the reader has no doubt that the dialogue between lovers refers to a specific film (Arthur Penn, 1967), the story it tells, and the way it is presented (the manhunt scene in which the protagonists die is now famous because of the masterful camerawork and montage):

[...]

I wanted (we were young and we thought: if it hurts, that's nothing)
them to shoot us with four cameras, as we are under gunfire,
with good montage it will look as if we were dancing.

I wanted us to lie in blood,
and for others to read the final credits, not us

In an attempt at using the film matrix for telling “one’s own” story, what Woźniak does is so suggestive, that actually – but for the mediation (“I wanted”) – the poem would be very close to ekphrasis.

Ekphrasis and its “viewer”

In literary studies, in terms of ekphrasis, there is a common reference point: a rhetorical tradition of (literary) description, and even “a detailed description” of a work of art, typically a painting, sculpture, or architecture. In terms of the constituents of such a poetic genre, Adam Dziadek lists metalinguistic indicators (title, painter’s last name, etc.), and “elements of a description of a work of art placed inside a literary text”³¹ (contexts of the described work of art, its genre characteristics, characteristic motifs in the works by a given artist, etc.). For the purpose of this paper, I would also distinguish and accentuate three important issues. Firstly, modern research into ekphrasis is predominantly focused on the very language of description: its possibilities, rhetorical limitations, its persuasive power³². After all, James A.W. Heffernan defines ekphrasis in a condensed way, as a verbal reflection of a visual

³⁰Maciej Woźniak, “Bonnie i Clyde”, in *Zawrót głowy. Antologia polskich wierszy filmowych*, 280-281 (which provides information on the source [*Iluzjon* [Movie theater], 2008], podczas gdy pochodzi on z tomu *Wszystko jest cudze* [2005]).
Chciałam (byliśmy młodzi i myśleliśmy: to nic, kiedy boli)
żeby kręcili z czterech kamer, jak do nas strzelają,
po dobrym montażu będzie wyglądało, jakbyśmy tańczyli.
Chciałem, żebyśmy leżeli cali we krwi,
i żeby to inni, nie my, musieli czytać końcowe napisy.

³¹See Adam Dziadek, *Obrazy i wiersze. Z zagadnień interferencji sztuk w polskiej poezji współczesnej* [Picture and poems. On the interefence of arts in the modern Polish poetru] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2004), 55.

³²See Dziadek, 53; Michał Paweł Markowski, “Ekphrasis. Uwagi bibliograficzne z dołączeniem krótkiego komentarza” [Ekphrasis. Bibliographical notes with a short comment]. *Pamiętnik Literacki* XC, z. 2 (1999).

image³³. Secondly, ekphrasis is not really about faithfulness or “responsibility” understood in any other way – ekphrasis is an interpretation, not a reproduction. In this sense the perspective of the teller is crucial in its definition: “Ekphrasis describes a work of art, but not only that – it also describes the person who is admiring it”³⁴. Thirdly, one “problem” of ekphrasis is also the very fact of reception: a collection of intellectual, sensual processes, and especially those which affect the reader’s or listener’s of a poetic “film teller’s” imagination. However, the key question whether there is such a thing as film ekphrasis, and how it exists, will be answered after analyzing a few examples.

Under the title of her poem *Ruchome piaski*³⁵ [Quicksand], Krystyna Rodowska places a decisive piece of information: (“inspired by *Woman in the Dunes*”). It is a specific clue, without which the reader would not recognize the source of that inspiration, and would not even know that there was any. This comment should moreover be treated as a *quasi-genre* qualification, which talks about an artistic way (from a film to a poem), about a specific transmedia relation (the film *Woman in the Dunes* vs. the poem), and finally about the honesty of the adopted perspective: the subtitle in brackets makes the character of a “film story” precise and specific. Of course, as has already been noted, even in the case of a restrictive focus on defining poetic film ekphrasis, seeking some plot contiguity or adequacy is out of the question. In most cases – according to the definition of ekphrasis – the poet makes a choice, looks and writes through a given prism, typically referring to a memory, an event and the afterimages it stores. It seems that in Rodowska’s poem – instead of “film telling” there is a record of a condensation of meanings (the story from *Woman in the Dunes* as a parable of existence, the process of self-cognition and the possibility of living in a relation with the Other and in society), and characteristic formal determinants (such as a focus on texture: sand, water, the human body):

Buried return to what is the closest
 Their hearing is a result of pouring sand
 In the transparent hourglasses of bodies

³³Danuta Mirka, “Czy istnieje muzyczna Ekphrasis?” [Is there musical ekphrasis?]. *Ruch Muzyczny* No 18 (2001): 35.

³⁴Dziadek, *Obrazy i wiersze. Z zagadnień interferencji sztuk w polskiej poezji współczesnej*, 72.

³⁵Krystyna Rodowska, “Ruchome piaski”, in *Nic prócz O. Wiersze z lat 1968-2018* [Nothing but O. 1968-2018 poems] (Warszawa: PIW, 2019), 19 (from the volume *Gesty na śniegu* [Gestures on the snow], 1968).

Zasypani powracają do tego co najbliższe
 Ich słuch jest wynikiem przesypania się piasku
 w przezroczystych klepsydrach ciał
 Miarka piasku, miarka losu
 Ich źrenice są otwarte i czarne
 jak obojętność wody pozostającej na dnie
 W języku silnych tutaj: pij zabij!
 Po sznurowanej drabince wyobraźni
 wspina się z dołu tylko śmiech
 W ich słonej skórze są powiększone ziarna
 wszystkich tajemnic
 ławice snu przejęte koralowym dreszczem
 wilgotne pnie dotyku z bolesnym nacięciem
 Nad głową ptak się waży jeszcze nienazwany
 Zasypani powracają do tego co najdalsze
 bo nie wiedzą że piekłem jest właśnie ucieczka

A measure of sand, a measure of life
 Their pupils are open and black
 like the indifference of water lest at the bottom
 In the language of the strong ones here: drink kill!
 Only laughter climbs up
 a rope ladder of imagination

In their salty skin there are augmented grains
 of all mysteries
 shoals of dream shivering with corals
 moist trunks of touch with a painful cut

Above a bird is flying, not yet named
 Those buried return to what is the furthest
 because they do not see that escape is hell

In the poem *Filmowa Skandynawia (Harriet Anderson)*³⁶ [Film Scandinavia], Andrzej Kuśniewicz takes a different perspective. Both the name of an actress, and the conglomerate of motifs, associations, or plot details (circus troupe, journey, subsequent camps, Skagen, epidemic) lead to a conviction that the world presented in the poem is also – probably – a conglomerate of films. One will definitely be *Sawdust and Tinsel*, a 1953 film by Bergman (starring Anderson), and among the others – references to other examples of “film Scandinavia”, not necessarily Bergman’s:

Heralds at the gates

Epidemic in Skagen
 Skagen is in a lockdown

³⁶Andrzej Kuśniewicz, “Filmowa Skandynawia (Harriet Anderson)”, in *Czas prywatny* [Private time] (Warszawa: PIW, 1962), 11-12.

Heroldy u bram
 Zaraza w Skagen
 Skagen zamknięte
 Od nocy podkowiąło
 Łazarz
 z deską na oczach
 białokonnym morzem
 w mróz
 Aż do ostatnich godzin płynął
 nad wędrowcami namiot w chmurze
 Zachodziło w pożar gdy mówiła:
 – jestem silniejsza od ciebie
 zginam podkowy
 ujeżdżam znarwione konie
 moje uda – gdy nimi –
 to najmocniejszy ogier
 – popróbuj!
 W żółtych płachtach
 godziny zasłonięte
 Skagen nocą milczące
 Skagen na łańcuch zamknięte

Horseshoes from the night

Lazarus

with a wooden plate on his eyes
on a white horse of the sea
into the frost

Until the final hours a tent
swam over travellers on a cloud

It was turning into a fire when she said:

–I am stronger than you
I bend horseshoes
I break in frisky horses
my ties – when with them –
are the strongest stallion
– try!

Hours covered
in yellow sheets

Skagen, silent at night
Skagen locked with a chain

Bohdan Zadura in *Siódma pieczęć*³⁷ [The Seventh Seal] uses the title to refer the reader to a very characteristic, inimitable imaginarium of Bergman's 1957 film: it is specific characters ("they see lumberjack knight and devil in their dreams"), props and motifs, but also an attempt at summoning the raw, dark, disturbing atmosphere of the represented world of the film, together with the key conviction regarding the death as the inevitable:

³⁷Bohdan Zadura, *Siódma pieczęć*, in *W krajobrazie z amfor* [In the landscape of amphoras] (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1968), 29.

kiedyśmy wielkie siadają na wzgórzach
siedem lichtarzy niby słońce świeci
do snu się kładą zwierzęta i dzieci
po nieskończonych znużone podróżach
w snach widzą drwala rycerza i diabła
i widzą tabun uskrzydłonych koni
i w śnie dopada ich tętent pogoni –
ostatnia gwiazda do otchłani spadła
drzewo się zwali dosięgnie nas kamień
echo nas zwiedzie które schwycić trudno
po drodze może napotkamy zamek
i jak zwierzęta ruszamy na północ
zamek odpływa i odpływa góra
i śmierć jak jastrząb dopada nas w chmurach

when huge moths sit on hills
 seven candelabrum shine like the sun
 children and animals are going to sleep
 tired after endless journeys

they lumberjack knight and devil in their dreams
 and a horde of winged horses
 and they hear the hoofbeat of a chase—
 the last star has fallen into the abyss

a tree will fall down a stone will reach us
 echo will deceive us, which is difficult to capture
 maybe we will come across a castle on our way

and like animals we will set off for the north
 the castles floats away, and the mountain floats away
 and death like a falcon catches us in the clouds

Kazimierz Hoffman sends a signal of a different kind – his poem is entitled *Kurosawa*³⁸. However, it is unclear how legible this is for the reader. Perhaps Macbeth will be enough to recognize *Throne of Blood* by the Japanese director (1957); however, the equivalence of a picture from the film proves to be equally suggestive:

And then the forest approaches and everything like Macbeth
 crackles shivers lightly in needles and leaves until
 the wind blows away the red flames from the sky
 and stops

The previously mentioned book of poems by Grzegorz Olszański *Kroniki filmowe* offers plenty of interpretation possibilities, as well as examples of “proper” ekphrases (leaving out all the remaining “ekphrasis-like” attempts – actually, the whole book). The poem *Ziemia i popioły* [Earth and Ashes] (title of the 2004 Atiq Rahimi film) is an especially interesting text, in which the problem of verbalization of the visual is thematized. Hence the cultural practice and theoretical problem of “film telling” are additionally highlighted:

1.
 Wide shot, short cuts, sudden close-up's.
 A story told with pictures, plot torn with sound,

 word by word, frame by frame.

³⁸Kazimierz Hoffman, “Kurosawa”, in *Trwająca chwila* [The ongoing moment] (Bydgoszcz: Ośrodek Kultury Regionalnej, 1991), 31.

A potem las podchodzi blisko i wszystko jak Makbet
 trzeszczy dygoce drobno w igłach i w listkach dopóki
 czerwieni rudej płomieni z nieba nie zdmuchnie wiatr
 i nie ustanie

2.

An old man and a boy are walking slowly on the cinema screen.
Behind them there is a burnt village and memory larded with land mines
of oblivion
Which is tempted by nothing. Nothing is domesticated

by this something, which is impossible to name.

3.

Words which are close to their expiration date in
the background (nonsense, sense, dream). Paper language swallows
subsequent letters. Three letters are already missing from the alphabet

s.o.s.³⁹

Karol Maliszewski accurately comments on Olszański's "method", at the same time formulating one possible definition of film ekphrasis: "It is really not about telling someone about the contents of the films one has experienced. It is more about looking for equivalents. Looking for a short, brilliant, ambiguous lexical construction, which would be an equivalent of a film experience, cumulating in it the imagery and emotionality, and, at the end, put down with an intellectual riposte of an aphoristical character"⁴⁰.

In order to summarize this thread it should be stressed that poetic ekphrasis in a film is possible, even if we assume that the restrictive rules of rhetoric do not allow to discuss its full realizations. As Adam Dziadek put it (in the context of plastic ekphrases): "Typically those works only partially meet the criteria of ekphrasis, and it would be better to talk about their *ekphrasisticity* or their *ekphrasistic character*"⁴¹. Also in reference to film ekphrases the "nature" of language seems to be an unsolvable problem; it has difficulties and sometimes is even unable to fully reflect what is non-linguistic, the *stricte* film-related: the audiovisual, evanescent, impossible to "cite". The different statuses of works which are in an ontological

³⁹1.

Szeroki plan, krótkie cięcia, nagłe zbliżenia.
Historia opowiedana obrazami, fabuła poszarpana dźwiękiem,
słowo po słowie, klatka po klatce.

2.

Stary mężczyzna i chłopiec idą wolno przez kinowy ekran.
Za nimi spalona wioska i pamięć naszpikowana minami
zapomnienia.

Co daje się uwieść przez nic. Nic daje się oswoić
temu czemuś, czego nie sposób nazwać.

3.

Na trzecim planie słowa, którym kończy się termin
ważności (bezsens, sens, sen). Papierowy język połyka
kolejne litery. W alfabecie brakuje już

s.o.s.

⁴⁰Karol Maliszewski, "Poeta już nie musi na Judahu skale" [The poet no longer has to on Judahu rock] *Po debiucie. Dziennik krytyka* [Following the debut. A critic's journal] (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2008), 121.

⁴¹Dziadek, *Obrazy i wiersze. Z zagadnień interferencji sztuk w polskiej poezji współczesnej*, 55; emphasis mine, RK.

dialogue with each other – a poetic text and a film – make “complementarity” impossible, hence the ekphrases discussed here are typically focused on selected, special elements: a film fragment, an individual frame, a scene, as well as on the captured dominant: atmosphere, mood, color. There is no doubt that all those poems, apart from being about film, are also about something else – what should be extracted in the process of interpretation, however, one issue – already suggested in a quote from Maliszewski – demands an independent completion.

The vast majority of ekphrases cited above (or film poems of an ekphrasistic character) were inspired by specific films. Hence, it turns out that the layer of cinema experience is also important: it is this picture that proved to be strong enough to make someone record it in a poem. The effort of a poetic description is directed not only towards a given film, but also its reception, experience, the screening itself. In Horace’s formula *ut pictura poesis* there is no direct mention of the translation process (of one work into another) – it is a comparison of the receptive situation which – to some extent – may bring a similar effect. It is in this “how” where I am looking for receptive attitudes, experiences, aesthetic experiences, impressions, which a film creates – and those are typically comparable due to their non-linguistic character. In the already cited *Kurosawa* by Kazimierz Hoffman, the description of an approaching army wearing a forest camouflage (a film scene) sets off a viewer’s perspective, who is left with a highly suggestive scene and a sudden end of the film:

But the tension will hold for a long time
the heart is still racing and birds are drawing black initials
in one flash⁴²

The poems by Stanisław Grochowiak “*Joanna D’Arc*” *Dreyera*⁴³ [Dreyer’s “Joan of Arc”] and *Męczeństwo Joanny wg Dreyera*⁴⁴ [Dreyer’s The Passion of Joanne of Arc] are especially interesting examples of ekphrasis characterized in such a way, both thematizing the same act of reception of the 1928 silent film. The former compares two “reception styles”: academic (“I won’t be brought back to life by a scream from the last row / ‘Take a good look, gentleman, at the mole on the bishop’s lips’”), and individualized, within which the power of experience wins over the temptation of a cold vivisection (“I am shivering hit with an arrow / of common ugliness and Falconetti flour”). The latter, slightly later poem is also devoted to the intense cinematic experience rather than the film itself (darkness “Sits on the heart and scratches with its paws”) and – once the film is over – the confrontation with the awareness of the illusion in which the viewer has just participated:

⁴² Ale napięcie trwać będzie jeszcze przez długi czas
serce wciąż spieszy i ptaki kreślą czarne inicjały
jednym błyskiem.

⁴³ Stanisław Grochowiak, “«Joanna D’Arc» Dreyera”, in *Wiersze nieznanne i rozproszone* [Poems unknown and dispersed] (Wrocław: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Polonistyki Wrocławskiej, 1996), 87 (poem dated to 1954-1956).

⁴⁴ Stanisław Grochowiak, “Męczeństwo Joanny wg Dreyera”, in *Wiersze nieznanne i rozproszone*, 138 (poem dated to 1957-1963).

So the darkness of the smoke is just a curtain
 Look mighty Lord here we have mercy
 Claps following FIN
 A burst of fire of a thousand killed dinners⁴⁵

Finally, the last example – a short text by Jerzy Oszelda, *Fanny i Aleksander*, doubtlessly alluding to the 1982 Bergman film, is fully devoted to an attempt at an aphoristic reflection of the state of the viewer following the film:

My awareness was hit by a stream
 of second consciousness
 Existential amperage of 1 Bergman (Bg)⁴⁶

Conclusions

The considerations presented here lead to two conclusions which are already suggested in the title. On the one hand, I would like to confirm that a poetic ekphrasis of a film is indeed possible, and support this claim with arguments about “ekphrasisticity” formulated by Adam Dziadek (in a different context), as well as with a number of examples of ekphrases (as full as possible). However, one characteristic of such an ekphrasis – moving away from the classical or traditional understanding – includes rather frequent (a separate list of examples) cases of a shifted perspective: from the film itself to *an account of seeing the film*. Although an ekphrasis of a work of art is possible through a detailed description (which brings it closer to hypotyposis), as well as an ekphrasis of a piece of music, thanks to adequate linguistic measures (the musicality of literature) and/or structural (for example in reference to composition), in the case of film ekphrases, the description of the very act of reception appears relatively frequently⁴⁷: a cinematographic experience, which is often a formulating event, or at least strong enough to be subjected to an attempt at a poetic reflection. In such a conceptualization, the reader of a poem also functions according to a special set of laws, as they are simultaneously a film viewer (who remembers the original film described in the poem, and confronts two perspectives: poetic and their own).

The second conclusion is related to the first one. In the same way as the need or necessity to tell films has existed, a poetic reaction to a film is also understandable. After all, this is also a form of “film telling” which has specific reasons and goals. And again: the effect will not necessarily be a “proper” ekphrasis, and those attempts should not necessarily be considered ekphrasis – from the theoretical and genological perspective. Perhaps a shift from the field

⁴⁵ Więc ciemność dymu to tylko kurtyna
 Patrz mocny Boże mamy oto litość
 Trzaskają klapy po napisie FIN
 Salwa tysiąca zabitych obiadów

⁴⁶ Świadomość moja otrzymała uderzenie strumienia
 drugiej świadomości
 Natężenie egzystencjalne 1 Bergman (Bg)

⁴⁷ Dziadek, *Obrazy i wiersze. Z zagadnień interferencji sztuk w polskiej poezji współczesnej*, 71-72.

of rhetoric to the ground of *cinema anthropology*, which is more interested in all the practices surrounding film, including telling films (including writing and reading poems about films), would be more adequate here. A side note can be added that a problem- or chronology-oriented organization of poems referring to specific pictures allows them to be read also as a form of reception – what was seen and when, which ones greatly impressed poets, which ones “deserved” a poem.

From the perspective of cinema anthropology, film telling is simply an everyday activity (something that people “do” with films) taking various forms and manifestations, which are conditioned by cultural contexts, sometimes widely different. In fact, it is a truism that film transformed the 20th-century (and later) culture and art, including poetry. However, it seems that the practice of “film telling” / “telling films” has played an especially interesting role – being both mundane and sophisticated, defined as an existential need – which is also reflected in poetry.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

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KEYWORDS

cinema anthropology

EKPHRASIS

film poetry

ABSTRACT:

The paper attempts at collecting and interpreting a dozen or so film poems, by authors such as S. Grochowiak, K. Rodowska, A. Kuśniewicz, B. Zadura, K. Hoffman, J. Oszelda, G. Olszański. Out of numerous cases of transmedia relations (film – literature), examples which could be classified as ekphrases according to the rhetorical tradition are distinguished. The phenomenon of poetic film ekphrases has been completed with a cultural context, related to the different traditions of film telling, treated as a common practice (amateur, professional, artistic) and conceptualized with the framework of cinema anthropology.

intersemiotic translation

FILM TELLING

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