

## Varia

„Kwartalnik Filmowy” no. 121 (2023)

ISSN: 0452-9502 (Print) ISSN: 2719-2725 (Online)

<https://doi.org/10.36744/kf.1415>

© Author; Creative Commons BY 4.0 License

**Jeremi Szaniawski**

University of Massachusetts Amherst

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5437-4516>

# Wiesław Myśliwski's Ideal Cinema

### Keywords:

Wiesław Myśliwski;  
modernism;  
film adaptation

### Abstract

The author of this essay searches for traces confirming the influence of cinema on Wiesław Myśliwski's life and works. Despite the fact that the writer acknowledged his love for cinema, this aspect is overlooked in discussions of his oeuvre. Myśliwski himself also does not devote much space to it in his recently published collection of texts and interviews *W środku jesteśmy baśnią. Mowy i rozmowy* [*We Are a Fairy Tale Within: Speeches and Conversations*] (2022). In this article, the author devotes special attention to film motifs in the novel *A Treatise on Shelling Beans* (2013), the cinematic imagination that is revealed in this book, and the role of history in Myśliwski's work.

## Myśliwski and cinema: A formative influence

Cinema occupies an often overlooked yet no less fundamental place in Wiesław Myśliwski's life and oeuvre.<sup>1</sup> Even in the finely curated collection of essays and interviews published in 2022 for the writer's 90<sup>th</sup> jubilee, *W środku jest eśmy baśnią. Mowy i rozmowy* [*We Are a Fairy Tale Within: Speeches and Conversations*],<sup>2</sup> which is explicitly meant as a summing statement of Myśliwski's career as a public figure, an intellectual, and a towering figure of the Polish literary scene since the late 1960s, there are precious few references made to cinema. And yet, in those rare instances, Myśliwski is keen to indicate that he was an avid filmgoer in his youth.<sup>3</sup> He refers to himself as a "film buff" [*kinoman*] who would attend every screening at the local cinema in Sandomierz, where he went to high school, and then later compulsively patronize, along with his fiancée, and later wife, Waclawa, the various film theatres of Lublin, where they went to college, and Warsaw, where Myśliwski would work for thirty years as a literary journal editor. Passing mentions of this engagement with cinema and its import in Myśliwski's life are disseminated punctually throughout his partly autobiographical and most celebrated novel, *Widnokrąg* [*Horizon*] (1996).<sup>4</sup> Yet I want to focus not on this major work (which has yet to be translated into English), but rather on the writer's subsequent book, the delightfully moving and whimsical *A Treatise on Shelling Beans* (*Traktat o łuskaniu fasoli*, 2006, English translation 2013, hereafter: *A Treatise*),<sup>5</sup> which may be one of the most subtle, profound, and remarkable exercises in channelling cinema's spirit, and adapting it to literature – not only by Myśliwski, but by any writer in world literature. Looking closely at selected passages of *A Treatise* allows us to reflect on medium specificity at its purest yet also at its most hybrid. Indeed, there is something at once supremely visual and non-visualizable about the character of Myśliwski's writing, in line with the definite yet discursively elusive influence of cinema on his output, and the enigmatic 'ideal cinema' his works instantiate. Even more importantly, perhaps, these considerations will allow us to consider the relationship Myśliwski establishes with History by way of cinema and the function proper of such a relationship.

While *A Treatise* seems, upon first look, almost like an afterthought to *Widnokrąg* – a bit, say, as in Nabokov's oeuvre *Pnin* (1957) can be regarded a sidenote to its most voluminous and momentous older brother, *Lolita* (1955); or as Gombrowicz's *Cosmos* (*Kosmos*, 1967) next to *Ferdydurke* (1937) – I want to argue that it is every bit as much a major work as the longer one; indeed a masterpiece in many ways, and, in fitting with the purpose of this study, a most idiosyncratic reappropriation of the visual and the cinematic by literature. On this note, it goes beyond mere anecdote to point to the fact that Myśliwski has indicated that the very genesis of the novel's narrator's musical instrument of choice – the saxophone – originated directly in a film he had watched as a teenager: *The fact that the protagonist of "A Treatise" ... is a saxophonist is connected to a certain story. So it goes that during my school years I attended the cinema passionately. I not only went to all the films, but even to all screenings of a given film. In those days they would show many American films, which Poland received as part of support from the UNRRA, including "Sun Valley Serenade" starring Glenn Miller – which featured trombones, saxophones.*<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the inception of a novel published in 2006 was prompted by a film, years before Myśliwski even decided to become a writer (his first novel came out in late 1967), and germinated for several decades longer before becoming cryptically, yet unequivocally, his most pointed love song to cinema and the cinematic. As a matter of fact, this cinephilia has even deeper roots: it reaches back beyond the school and college years mentioned above, to the writer's prime childhood in Starachowice before the war, when his mother took him to films screened at the local firemen's club (the town did not feature a movie theatre). Memories of images from the first films he saw at age five or six are enshrined in an early section of *Widnokraj*.<sup>7</sup> And, as a child living in the small town of Dwikozy during and directly after the war, the young Wiesław would be excited and attracted by the visit of the traveling cinema, which screened worn reels of films in the town's ramshackle 'community centre,' the People's House. Memories of the drunk projectionist and the interruption of the screening due to power outages made their way to *A Treatise*, too.

While his love of film seems to have been fairly indiscriminate at first, with the cinematic experience mattering more than the film itself, the writer has over time singled out a few select auteurs as his favourites, for having elevated cinema to an art form and philosophy. Chief among them is Ingmar Bergman, and Myśliwski has repeatedly mentioned the powerful impression made on him by *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*, 1956).<sup>8</sup> The Swedish master is followed by several key auteurs: Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Luis Buñuel, and Luchino Visconti. And indeed, reading *A Treatise* brings to mind an array of indirect references to the works of these greats. The free associations and combinations of 'real' life, dreams, memories, and their interpolation in the novel, but also the motif of artistic impotence, are clearly inspired by Federico Fellini's *8 ½* (1963), including a scene of suffocation in traffic, taken straight from the opening of that film; the philosophical musings and more offbeat intrusions, but also the tenderer encounters between live people and ghosts of the past, as well as the pastoral setting, strongly evoke Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (*Smultronstället*, 1957), as in a scene where the narrator recounts happening upon the ghosts of his relatives. There are also 'Viscontian' imports in *A Treatise*: not only in the engagement with History (with a capital H, the history of large-scale events and political and economic processes), but also in an interest in the idea of lateness (our narrator in *A Treatise* being a kind of man-out-of-time, a relic of a disappeared social totality, at the end of his life), and the attention to detail (a subversion of *calligrafismo* and the inventory/cataloguing of details and references derived in Visconti's case from the opera/theatre). The moments of absurd humour, quid-pro-quos, and dialogues in the novel, meanwhile, at times, feel as though they could have come straight out of Buñuel's late-period films. And while it may be a bit more difficult to locate Antonioni's influence on Myśliwski, we shall see that the concept of the objectivity of the photographic image, as in his *Blow Up* (1966), is one that keeps recurring in *A Treatise* (but also in the author's other novels, including the prologue of *Widnokraj*). One can furthermore argue for a certain fascination with space, a space that is highly specific and carefully described, but at the same time rendered almost uncanny. Finally, the drama in *A Treatise* often plays out in ways

that are not explicit or direct, but instead displaced, or out of sight, which was one of Antonioni's signatures. The list does not end here (what with all the influence of Polish cinema itself!), as we shall see, but clearly points to a consistency in the writer's self-professed favourite filmmakers and films and their patent echoes in his work. But while this cinematic aspect is evident and will be the focus of what follows, and while Myśliwski himself is keen on pointing out that literary analogues of montage and film editing techniques (abrupt ellipsis, cross-cutting, etc.) are prevalent in his oeuvre, this aspect of his writing must be set alongside the ways in which it so staunchly resists the visual and visualizable – which would include the cinematic.

### **Impossible images? (Or, a new dimension of the literary through the visual, and vice versa)**

Let us look no further than at the programmatic passage, late in *A Treatise*, when one of the narrator's interlocutors describes a 'physically impossible' photograph (as both the narrator and the reader must wrap their heads around an absent image that can only be imagined on the basis of words): *I wanted to show you a really interesting photograph. ... The person who took the picture captured the exact moment when my father was standing in front of me. Where on earth is it? I refuse to believe it's not here. The most extraordinary thing about it is that we're looking into each other's eyes. ... Both our faces can be seen together en face. It's hard to credit, but you must believe me, both faces are opposite one another and both are en face. The place the picture was taken from seems physically impossible, to have two faces opposite one another and both at the same time looking at the camera. I've tried to figure out where that point must have been – so far without success. ... Who can say if it won't be a new dimension of space that for the moment is inaccessible to our senses, our imaginations, our consciences.*<sup>9</sup>

Myśliwski undoubtedly wishes to cultivate the ineffable and ambiguous; consequently, his forms and images are at once striking and elusive. Such is the mysterious, impossible, unrepresentable photograph with which the narrator of *A Treatise* associates his visitor. This visitor, we are led to understand, is at once a proxy for the reader and a version of the narrator's self (a younger narrator now comes to take his place in the resort, now a full-blown allegorical purgatory of sorts, an in-between zone of indeterminacy between the past and present, between the authenticity of pre-war countryside life and its comfortable and reified version in the post-Communist age, with its neat little cabins with electricity and running water and all modern-day appliances). This impossible picture that the narrator tries to describe to the visitor (which had in the past been described to him) both promotes and precludes the visual; it also brings to the fore the reflexive capabilities which have traditionally been associated with cinema, especially its correlation with the mirror paradigm (another Bergmanian trope), but puts a linguistic spin on it. As has been well known to linguists since Saussure, language itself cannot accurately map the world, relying overly, as it does, on displacements or metaphors, which at once strengthen the bond between the signified

and the arbitrary sign, and cause the relationship between the two to be, at best, a variable one, and beleaguered, as a consequence, by the basic implications of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis on linguistic relativity as applied to each and every person – namely, that any verbal description of an image will inevitably lead to a multitude of images, based on each and every reader's interpretation of it.<sup>10</sup> This is where Myśliwski's genius as both a trickster and an 'illuminator' is revealed: first, he creates a deep sense of intimacy between his text and the reader by leading the latter to produce their own images and their own imaginary film based on the images in the text, and then, he forces a kind of retreat, in a purely modernist defamiliarizing gesture, when we realize that all (or none) of what was being described was ever to be taken at face value, as visually imaginable. There is no image, nor even a series of images, that could express this, hence the images must dissolve and transform into something more inscrutable.

The playful and impossible distortion at play here calls for visual imagination and rejects it all at once – this image can be conceptualized in formal terms or dimly imagined in the mind's eye, yet it cannot possibly be conceived of as what we know as a photograph (at least not without any double exposure, which would clearly be impossible in this case), taken from a single point in space and time. Things would be different with a cinematic image that would combine a shot-reverse shot, but that is a possibility ruled out here by the author's insistence on evoking a single still image. What Myśliwski is engaged in here, at any rate, certainly recalls something of the modernist fixation on the visual and the 'cinematic.' Extensively utilized even prior to the invention of cinema (as Eisenstein had identified in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*), techniques evoking cinema and montage (including avant-garde film) were often incorporated into modernist literature, as in the works of John Dos Passos or Nathanael West, Georges Bataille or Robert Desnos, Andrei Bely or Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. This practice thus recalls in a way the great modernist tradition in film – both directly and in its literary appropriations or reformulations – in a work that is also a belated instance of literary modernism, of an unassuming, pastoral kind (even if it is an uncanny pastoral). This persistence of modernism is perhaps a function of Myśliwski's status as a late bloomer and no doubt of his socio-historical context. Born in 1932, Myśliwski would have found himself as an adult standing between late modernism and its uncertain successor, a still largely amorphous postmodernism, of which as we know there are various expressions, not least in the works produced in socialist countries in the 1970s and 1980s. He also started his career as a writer quite late, having worked for a couple decades as a literary editor. Spurred on by his wife, he finally published his first novel well in his thirties (*Nagi sad* [*The Naked Orchard*], 1967). Immediately, its stunning and arresting visual quality, as well as its ability to capture the mental image or evocation behind the visible or visualized, seemed to betray a debt to the great post-war cinematic tradition (the very films he mentions as influences), given the latter's concern about the visible and its possible transcendence.



*Przez dziewięć mostów*, dir. Ryszard Ber (1971)



*W poszukiwaniu zgubionego buta*, dir. Izabella Cywińska (1997)

## ***Widnokraj*: Toward a virtual image beyond the literal image**

Explicit and virtual, or suggested, images abound in Myśliwski's oeuvre. In *Widnokraj*, an ambiguous work of autofiction (many autobiographical elements seem to be included in this story of a young boy growing up in Stalinist Poland, but none of it, as Myśliwski repeatedly states, is ever entirely autobiographical, and neither should it be read as such), he masterfully revisits an array of affects and representational traditions familiar from pre-war culture. Images from pre-war films, remembered as a child would (that is to say, divorced from the plot – pure images), are incorporated and sublated into atmospheres of great visual and emotional poignancy that add a very different emotional tone.<sup>11</sup> But this powerful 'aura,' for lack of a better word, the haunted quality of the visual as evoked through words, contaminates or seeps into images that are not markedly cinematic. As a result, these images acquire a layered, complex quality, at the same time constituting evocations, 'objective' images, and summoning the image behind the image in a way that is practically ineffable: a set of virtual images (or "crystal images," to borrow Gilles Deleuze's coinage<sup>12</sup>). For example, in one chapter, the young Polish boy watches as Russian soldiers slaughter cows brought from Germany, who have grown too exhausted to walk any further. The convoy of weary cows, a tragically beautiful and grotesque image, serves as a metonym for the war, its vast processes of cruelty, dehumanization, and extermination, as well as its mangled aftermath for the Polish population (the meat of the cows, it is understood, is not for the Polish people but loot to be brought back to the Soviet Union). At night, while the Russian soldiers are heard singing catchy paeans to Stalin, the boy sneaks into the barn where the cows are being slaughtered, intent on stealing an unclaimed cow's head so that his mother may use its meat. The comradely and warm image familiar from films – a field at dusk, illuminated by the fires around which the soldiers drink and sing – becomes extraordinary and uncanny as another layer is added: it is peaceful and bucolic yet bathed in trauma and horror of slaughter, having now shifted from people to animals, and reminding us of the continuing horror of war. The scene with the dead cow becomes the negative mental image of the night-time reverie, the nightmare to the sweet dream, the flip side of the manifest and familiar picture, as it were, amplified further by the summoning of additional senses: the vaguely sweet smell of the innards into which the boy falls inadvertently, the sticky sensation of blood and faeces on his body, the distant singing and sounds of the night, and the tremendous, unexpected weight of the cow's head, which the boy attempts to lift by pushing it up against the barn's wooden wall.

Elsewhere in the same chapter, the boy sees the ghost of a dead Jewish brewer, Kuferblum, yet, this time, the image is treated entirely differently, like an image seen in a camera obscura or out of a silent and black-and-white film: *Once, at high noon, I saw Kuferblum himself through a crack in the boards, among these pallets, tables and empty bottles. I thought I was having a delusion through that one eye, and I applied my other eye on the crack, but I saw him then too. He was sitting on one of these tables, bent deeply over his knees, and swayed as if he was falling sleep. Or maybe he was deeply worried. All I could see of his face was a piece of white forehead and a long white*

beard resting on those knees. He was wearing a black cloak and a skullcap, and if it hadn't been for that white beard glowing in the dark, you'd have thought it was just a tuft of shadows pushed to one spot by the rays streaming down the cracks.<sup>13</sup>

The scene here performs a kind of synthesis between camera obscura and a more modern film projection, but also between the representations of Hasidic people of pre-war Polish cinema, of which very few traces remain (*The Dybbuk / Der Dibuk* by Michał Waszyński in 1937 being a notable exception), and the haunted imagery of Bruno Schulz by way of Wojciech Jerzy Has's *The Hourglass Sanatorium* (1973). The point of passage is the ambiguity between an optical illusion and a real crystal image (in Bergsonian terms, a moment when the illusion of the past-present-future continuum is disrupted and these planes coexist in a 'Whole'<sup>14</sup>). It is, a semi-virtual or ambiguous image which itself summons mental images that remain inside the boy's mind. Yet, while still remaining imprecise or impalpable, these images also insinuate themselves into the fabric of the visible, as flat or even incomplete (the monoscopic perspective is clearly emphasized through the fact that the boy never looks at the ghost, or optical illusion, with more than one eye at once) in what is otherwise a vibrantly coloured, three-dimensional, and synesthetic world.

In another instance, the boy and his gravely ill father make a stop on their way home from the doctor. The father, doubly defeated and humiliated as a pre-Soviet officer and a member of the Polish Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, which fought in the underground against both the Nazis and the Soviets and their Polish military arm, *Armia Ludowa* – the People's Army), recounts the Battle of Cannae when Hannibal and the Carthaginian hordes assailed the Roman army after riding elephants across the Alps. Again, with apparently effortless skill,<sup>15</sup> the scene combines the visually present setting in which the story is told – the steep stone stairway leading from the family's dwelling down to the village – with the battle, as it is recounted by the father and imagined by the little boy – moving from words to virtual images. In a devastating moment that will go on to haunt him, the young protagonist, who sides with the Carthaginians (as opposed to his father, who celebrates the brave but defeated Romans), taunts his father with a song in praise of Stalin that he overheard earlier on in the field next to the barn. The two images – the 'real' situation of father and son standing on the stairs in post-war Poland, and that of the story of the battle in Antiquity – have become fully overlapping: the visible read through the invisible, but in a tragic way. Indeed, at this point, the father is so devastated and nearing death that he doesn't even see a point in castigating the child and simply heads home instead.

### ***A Treatise on Shelling Beans:* Myśliwski's kaleidoscopic cinematic imaginarium**

The depth and harrowing power, but also the moments of tragic humour to be found throughout *Widnokrąg*, are at once doubled and deflected or mediated in *A Treatise*, which is a considerably less devastating or directly affecting narrative. In this book, a visitor happens upon a little summer resort by a river, the Rutka,



where the elderly narrator, purportedly the resort's caretaker or property manager, proceeds to teach him how to shell beans and tell him his entire life story, with much chronological jumble, seeming non-sequiturs, and, yes, cinematic references, overt and covert.

As is well known to those acquainted with his biography, Myśliwski's involvement with the seventh art goes well beyond his cinephilia. Several of his works have been adapted to the screen.<sup>16</sup> Yet the writer steered clear from writing the screen adaptations of his own works, which would be a punishing exercise for someone who knows and understands questions of medium specificity perfectly well and whose own reappropriation of the cinematic for the purpose of his work as a novelist renders his work titillatingly and eminently cinematic, yet at the same time utterly unadaptable. While there are many aspects of why this is the case, the formula often encountered in *A Treatise* runs roughly like this: an initial situation sets the scene in a way which could easily be translated into a filmic image. It then proceeds to accumulate and repeat what is initially a fairly straightforward (and thus representable/adaptable) situation and action, entirely destroying the straightforward time-based character of the scene that would have made it amenable to filming. Only the kind of play with time that Béla Tarr made his bread and butter in *Satantango* (*Sátántangó*, 1994) could possibly recreate the chronological protraction of such scenes, their sheer sense of duration distinct from the actual events that unfold. But even as we imagine the potential of this approach, it seems to fall short, and would capture little of what makes certain scenes in *A Treatise* at once evoke and confound the cinematic.

This may all sound rather abstract and inscrutable, but will immediately become apparent to those who read *A Treatise*. Let us take the obvious, direct cinematic reference in chapter five as an example. Our narrator/protagonist, orphaned after the war, recounts a film screening at the vocational boarding school (half orphanage, half military barracks), where he is placed after being apprehended by the communist authorities as a shoeless urchin selling food on trains. Now a pupil of the State, he is trained to become an electrician, but his gift for music (and for the saxophone in particular) begins to emerge. One day, the children are summoned to the main hall for a film screening, a reward and distraction from their otherwise numbingly drab existence of constant labour and military discipline. The film shown to the pupils goes thus: an elegant couple, Mary and Johnny, enter a hat store. Under the stoical gaze of the shopkeeper, while Mary appears bored and indifferent, Johnny proceeds to try on what seems to be an uncountable number of hats. None seem to fit, and the absurdist, repetitive humour of this situation drives the children in the audience crazy. At times, Johnny seems on the verge of having found the right hat. A most subtle expression on the shopkeeper's face suggests his own patience is being tested. But Mary, when she deigns to look up, does so only to thwart Johnny's – and the shopkeeper's and the young spectators' – hopes. We are never told the actual length of the scene, but we learn instead that its duration is experienced phenomenologically as eternity. The drama and comedy on the screen are redoubled and amplified by the young viewers' impatience, as they start to insult the characters as though they were real people (a delightful literary transposition of the "Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show"

trope, itself recycled by Jean-Luc Godard in *Les carabiniers* /1963/), limning the dim border between willing suspension of disbelief and the vagaries of projection and identification for the viewer (and the reader – but in different ways). Then, a power outage interrupts the projection, leaving the hat store scene unresolved. The youths erupt in revolutionary outrage and proceed to tear everything around them apart, beating up the projectionist and destroying his projector, unwinding the film reels, cutting up the screen, smashing the windows of the room, and – to the protagonist's horror – destroying the musical instruments of the makeshift local school band, stored in that same room. The whole scene can easily be read as an allegory of socialism, and its protracted promise of delivery to the people, leading to unrest. Alone, the hat store scene could scarcely support this allegorical reading or political unconscious. But coupled with the audience's reaction, it becomes quite evident.

The children's eruptive egotistical yet guiltless rampage immediately evokes the extraordinary libertarian fervour of the schoolkids running amok in another highly allegorical piece, Jean Vigo's *Zéro de conduite* (1933). However, in *A Treatise* the tone has darker implications, given the students' threat to hang their music teacher with torn-up strips of the movie screen, fashioned into a noose. The whole incident is followed by the students' refusal to cooperate and return to their normal routines, and their protracted negotiation with the school management (including a military officer in Socialist Poland regalia). This negotiation scene offers a take, highly resonant in the present day, on the interplay between soft and hard totalitarianism, between cooing and coaxing and threats of severe retaliation. The revolt is catalysed by the film screening's *interruptus* moment, but anger and resentment have brewed for a while, power outages having deprived many of the youths of a proper bedtime routine, such as being able to wash and undress properly, and so forth. Their demands are as simple as they are difficult to meet: to be provided with oil-lamps so that they may do their ablutions after work. In the end, it is the music teacher, an unrepentant drunk whom the youth respect (but also the very one whom they had considered hanging during their frontier-justice moment), who manages to convince them to surrender and return to their rooms and work. He is then swiftly singled out by the Communist authorities as seditious and taken to a destination unknown, in a scene charged with a sense of foreboding – as though he were the scapegoat for the children's revolt, on his way to his beheading, or, more likely, the labour camp. The music teacher's fault is not so much his alcoholism or his inability to adjust to the new regime. Instead, it is precisely his ability to convince the youth to submit from a position outside of the power structure, which renders him at once a perfect scapegoat and a potential threat to the regime (although he is bereft of any genuine practical seditious intent, his only crime being his obvious scepticism about the new regime and order). Just prior to being driven away, under the children's silent gaze, the teacher exclaims one last time what seems to be the redeeming motto of the novel's narrator, as tragic and senseless as it is beautiful: *Long live music, boys!* This site of passive or even unwitting resistance, being located outside of the recognized power structure, is closely associated with art, perhaps the only activity through which the individual self (one notes the phallic connotations of the protagonist/

narrator's saxophone) can be sustained while also creating a kind of alternative social space.

We see in this example – one of many in the book – the tremendously seductive and titillating wealth of cinematic references, affects, and promises contained in just a few pages of *A Treatise*. We might begin our analysis of this scene with something I briefly noted above, namely the temporal regime at play. Once we have accepted that what is called “montage” in Hollywood parlance (with a very different meaning from other uses of the term in reference to film) – a sequence condensing a long period of time, usually resorting to cross-dissolves or dynamic cuts, and very much a staple of the commercial American film – would only result in a very paltry alternative to capturing the whole of the interminable experience of the youths as they watch Johnny don his countless hats, we realize that the trick – one that literature can produce, but cinema cannot – lies in a kind of clash of temporalities. Put differently, we can certainly imagine that the events recounted in the scene would have a specific duration in theory, yet what we experience as mediated through the perception of the young spectators is at once dependent upon and in excess of that duration. This conundrum would probably have proven well-nigh irresolvable for even the greatest masters of the seventh art. But even if we assume that the most talented auteur could find a way to recreate the scene (and make it, as Myśliwski does, at once infuriatingly repetitious and yet jubilantly amusing and playful), it could still simply not contain all of the layers, affects, and implications one finds here. The writer meaningfully sets up the revolutionary outburst with the extreme opposition between the sheer precariousness of the real environment – the power outage, the near-slave labour and hunger of the pupils under Stalinist Poland, where all was lacking, and the obscene parade of commodities, hats and other items of clothing, in the film. And he integrates this episode into the greater whole (and specifically into its political implications) and combines an expression of deep resentment harmoniously with a nostalgic affect, almost yearning for this abject yet vibrant childhood of the protagonist. Tonally, one might find here a sort of combination of the work of Bergman and that of Vigo, with the melancholy retrospection of the former overlapping the anarchic joy of the latter. Given the dizzying implications of the textual and filmic images, not to mention the affective key in which they are deployed, it would seem nearly impossible to properly translate or adapt Myśliwski's palimpsestic and multifarious cinematic *imaginarium*; what begins with the visible, and indeed with the filmic image, ends up slipping away into indistinctness.

This ambiguity and indeterminacy, however, is not limited to the temporal or spatial level. In some ways, similarly to the ‘impossible’ photograph discussed above (albeit in a less radical way), the author deliberately evokes a film that resists identification or even vague categorization, as though it were in some sense a film that could not exist. The comic scene in itself suggests a pre-war film, while the names of the protagonists would indicate a British or American film (perhaps something from Lubitsch, in a pinch, but grotesquely amplified and transformed through the endless hat fitting scene). There is clearly much that is decidedly slapstick here and evocative of silent cinema, not least with the quasi-mute shopkeeper, bowing in supine deference and stoically furnishing Johnny with another stack

of hats. Yet the film is clearly a sound one, as betrayed by the characters speaking on screen; furthermore, they must be speaking in the only language the children could know, namely, Polish. And while pre-Soviet era Polish cinema was rife with comedies and featured a number of star filmmakers and actors (Waszyński, Pola Negri), it would have been extremely difficult to procure a comedy of that type. Here, again, the shadow of the war, ever-present in Myśliwski's work (both as formative trauma and an almost unspeakable other), comes to the fore, since the vast majority of Polish films of the 1920s and 1930s were destroyed, many of them during the Nazi razing of Warsaw following the 1944 Uprising.<sup>17</sup>

### World War II, collective trauma, and *A Treatise's* rapport to Polish History

In *A Treatise*, it is the war that serves as the darkest of blind spots. The narrator miraculously survives the massacre of his village. He is then found by the Polish Underground and put in the care of an angelic 'Sister,' a name that plays with the polysemy, in Polish, of the word *siostra*, which can refer to a biological sister, cousin, nurse, or nun. Only near the end of the chapter do we understand that she is not only a caregiver and nurse, but also a comfort woman for the soldiers. She dies, however, without having given herself over to the only one who really loves her. The narrator does not witness her death first-hand, but recounts the scene as though someone had told him about it: *She'd died dressing the wounds of one of the men who had fallen. It had been pointless. The man had only been able to open his eyes and say, There's no point, sister. Then he was dead. Who heard it? You ask like you didn't know there's always someone who hears. There's no situation in which there isn't someone who hears.*<sup>18</sup>

Again, Myśliwski indirectly summons a function of cinema – far more accurately than an 'omniscient' literary narrator would, in which, it is important to point out, he himself does not believe. The writer considers that the "I," the first person, is the only real mode and perspective of literature, even when it parades under the guise of the second or third person singular – in the way that cinema creates the impression of there always being someone (and by someone we mean not the camera, but this presence next to it, that is us, the immaterial presence of the viewer) to overhear or spy upon even the most intimate moments, while also not being there. We find, in this death scene and the way we are made privy to it by proxy, the basic evocation of the cinematic gaze as well as the intimacy of Bergman's whispered love scenes, which we intrude upon as though walking on velvet which turns out to be a carpet of the sharpest and finest crystals, its imprint buried into our skin like so many minute splinters of regret, pain, and sorrow.

The motifs of the war, History, and that of the double pervade the novel, nowhere more tightly wound together than in Mr. Robert, whom the narrator meets abroad, while giving a concert (he is now a consummate professional saxophonist and the time is the early 1990s). The two men become pen-pals over many years. Gradually piecing together elements from the letters he receives, the narrator realizes that Mr. Robert's summer cabin is indeed located on the Rutka river, where the narrator grew up before all the villagers were massacred (it is unclear whether this was at the hands of the Ukrainians or the Nazis, but we know

that these villagers are Christian Polish peasants, not Jews). This thrilling chapter combines the epistolary tale with the detection story, leading from the clear lines of text on a postcard or letter to a night-time drive in the fog to a mythical place that the protagonist dimly intuits he will never leave. This is the place where he miraculously survived the massacre; the place where, as an adult, accompanied by his two dogs, he becomes the caretaker/property manager after Mr. Robert fails to return. The place where, with religious zeal, the narrator carefully paints the crosses on all tombs in an archetypal Polish forest. Here, in these evocations of Slavic woods, associated as they are with pastness and death, one can't help thinking of Andrzej Wajda's celebrated adaptations of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz's *Brzezina* (*The Birch Wood*, 1970) and *Panny z Wilka* (*Young Maids of Wilko*, 1979). But there is more wonder and uncanniness in Myśliwski's forest than there is in Wajda's, for all their shared romantic – or perhaps symbolist – morbidity. In *A Treatise*, the forest near the Rutka river is a place where time becomes blurry, and where, in a typically Bergmanian fashion (again one thinks of *Wild Strawberries*), the narrator, now an elderly man, sees himself as a child, before the war, shelling beans with his family by candlelight, listening over and over again to his grandfather's stories of heroic feats during World War I. These ghosts of the past look at the narrator – and he at them. In that typical moment of misrecognized precognition, when levels of reality and temporalities are once more collapsed, the dead are suddenly with us once more, and the heart sinks. But to Bergman's moving evocations of reminiscence and the summing up of one's own life – and perhaps making peace with it – Myśliwski adds the texture of nature at night and the flickering light of the candle. Here he seems to reach out for the rapturous beauty of the most intimate moments in Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* (*Zerkalo*, 1975), amplified by a technique which adds further depth to the book, namely simple yet deep philosophical ruminations (in this case, on the nature of light). These elements comprise the pastoral uncanny, which the writer (I am tempted to write "the filmmaker") has made his own, just as the great film auteurs he admired each devised their own idiom.

Through each chapter of *A Treatise*, Myśliwski evokes and blends together different cinematic influences, while also flaunting generic expectations. There is the menacing Communist era palace where a sinister masked ball for the Polish Communist Party nomenklatura takes place and at which the narrator is supposed to play the saxophone. But the distant echoes of a Kubrickian ball-turned-Satanic ritual quickly give way to Polish comedy and its own brand of the grotesque (with Schulz, again, a clear exemplar). The narrator goes to the bathroom during a break and hears a guest talking in the adjacent stall. Intrigued, the narrator climbs up on the toilet seat and is shocked to see the man looking up at him, only to realize that he had simply put his mask on the top of his head (not unlike one of Johnny's many ill-fitting hats). The drunk man is speaking to his penis, enumerating his anxieties about emasculation (and again, one wonders about the relationship between this insecure, unreliable socialist penis and the author's saxophone). This grotesque scene constitutes one of the most explicitly hopeless ones in the novel, but also the most direct satirization of Communist masculinity; the comic shades into the tragic, with the latter perhaps revealing itself more in memory, from a distance, knowing what we know about the fate of Soviet bloc socialism.

Comedy appears in a more bittersweet fashion in the scene where a buxom, middle-aged woman invites the young apprentice electrician to sleep with her, dotes on him, and smothers him, in her large breasts, clearly enticing him to lose his virginity with her, all the while repeating that he should sleep. Here again we find the comedy of repetition, rendered all the more absurd by the woman's contradictory signals, as well as an indeterminate relationship between actual chronological time and the phenomenological impression of duration. Furthermore, the tonal contradictions that characterize the novel as a whole are particularly palpable here, as this seeming comic relief (the lusty, smothering woman – one thinks of the shopkeeper in Fellini's *Amarcord* /1973/) becomes inextricable from the tragedy of the woman, not to mention her post-traumatic stress disorder and the resulting alcoholism that leads men to be less interested in her now than before; what at first seems like a comic lustiness reveals itself to be born of historical hardship. But this trauma is but a small-scale echo of the events of the war itself, which we see more directly when the boy is rescued by his angel-like 'sister' and lives with the Polish Underground. When, in a scene of devastating intimacy, shortly before she is killed in combat, the 'sister' tells the pre-teen narrator that she can't take it any more (is she referring to the war? To attending the wounded men? To giving herself to the fit ones as a comfort woman?) against the backdrop of a pristine forest lake, we are suddenly taken aback by a scene bereft of any humour, and we are simply confronted with the banality and everyday quality of raw, brute horror during the war years. This scene seems far less complex or layered than anything else in the book, which makes it all the more powerful and poignant. Accordingly, it could perhaps lend itself more easily to a cinematic adaptation, except that Myśliwski is careful to prepare the harrowing reveal (the idea of relativity of perception and point of view that allows the woman who is a sister to the little boy to also be the whore of the regiment) in a way that would probably make it difficult to adapt without lapsing into kitsch or pathos that the chapter itself manages somewhat miraculously to avoid – if narrowly.

### **History that shapes and hurts: Love, individual trauma, longing in *A Treatise***

There are those novels and films which we wish would not end. And by virtue of its non-linear structure, *A Treatise on Shelling Beans* could indeed, in theory, go on forever, from the evocation of one moment in life to another, from the minute and apparently insignificant detail which seems to expand into the infinite to the most momentous historical trauma – with which Polish history was particularly replete through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But the novel does end, and it does so with an evocation of the narrator's love – a woman to whom, *in fine*, the entire work seems addressed and dedicated, yet who appears to have vanished from the story itself. As in the episode with the hat store film or with the buxom middle-aged woman, among others, the chapter adopts a premise that is somewhat comedic and titillatingly cinematic, summoning a range of classic references and combining them with the motif of (mis)recognition. Our narrator, now mid-

dle-aged, meets a woman. It seems as though the two have met before, somehow, somewhere, across space and time (did he dream about her first?), although this fact is never ascertained or confirmed (an oblique reference, perhaps, to Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* / *L'année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961). The encounter makes a profound impression on the narrator, who then proceeds to think about the mysterious woman until they meet again, and then a purported third time – in a café – whereupon he tells her about their previous encounters. She seems to deny any previous meeting, but it is not clear whether she is being coy or playing with him, or she simply does not remember their first encounter(s), or the two have really never met (she may, after all, indeed be another woman, and yet at the same time, the woman). This ambiguity, which the novel cultivates, would almost be impossible to render directly in film, although it can be suggested, as it has been by Hitchcock and his many followers, from the least overt (Antonioni, Resnais) to the most deferential disciples (Brian De Palma, Pedro Almodóvar). One could conceive of the initial factual encounters (or lack thereof) on a train and later on a bench, and the third – or de facto first – encounter, and the budding romance that ensues, as cinematically adaptable. But the chapter quickly veers toward, again, the unrepresentable, blending not only fantasy and the real but also conflating referential or 'real' time with a more complex mental mix of temporalities and realities – the trappings and failings of memory, the complexities of life and love, and all the meandering and intertwined stuff of reality and fantasy that these are made of, as attested to in the narrator's ruminations: *The thing was, the longer I looked at her, surreptitiously of course, the more certain I was that we'd met once before. But where and when – I racked my brains. It even occurred to me that she might have been the woman ... in the dream. I spent the whole of the rest of the journey trying to remember.*<sup>19</sup>

*Again I tried to figure out where I knew her from. Because by now I had no doubt it had been a long, long time before the train. ... But how long ago it could have been, I strained to recall. ... One by one, as if looking through a photo album I went through all the women I'd ever known, but I didn't find her.*<sup>20</sup>

*You probably think that you have to meet a person first to be able to remember them later. Have you ever thought that sometimes it's the opposite? So you think it all depends on the memory, yes? In other words, first something has to happen, and then, even if it's years later, memory can bring it all back? If you ask me, though, there are things that it's best for memory not to meddle with.*<sup>21</sup>

Needless to say, perhaps, the writer does not limit himself to individualistic considerations about memory and romance – as History resurges at the most unexpected moment. During the café scene, as our protagonists engage in friendly banter, the narrator (and the reader) catches a fleeting glimpse of what is probably a concentration camp tattoo on the woman's arm, giving an all the more chilling resonance to her claim that she hates train rides and never smokes, or her punishing herself for craving cake. Then the dialogue turns into a series of more essayistic passages about cake and the nature of love. Disguised behind these are two key terms in Myśliwski's oeuvre: longing and trauma, both from and for a History that shapes and hurts.



*Saksofon*, dir. Izabella Cywińska (2012)



## A modernist survivance, a new form of Neorealism

What is certain is that, in a now depleted cinematic landscape, modernist cinema's imaginary lives on, covertly memorialized and recycled in Wiesław Myśliwski's prose. The ideal cinema that results from this cannot accurately be characterized as postmodern play or pastiche; it is a collection of fragments, but fragments that are of a single consciousness, one that is deeply aware of History and its own historical determination. Here, references to the past are not so much dead styles or even cultural reference points, but rather a way to reach the real, which lies beyond any text or image. Myśliwski manages to distil in his work much of what made post-World War II cinema great, something we can argue was first articulated in Italian neorealism (which, if not strictly modernist, certainly was a crucial point, especially via Roberto Rossellini, on the pathway to the flowering of modernist films so admired by the author), fed by a variety of factors. In Italy, we find a tradition of technical excellence (Fascist-era cinema as produced in Cinecittà in the 1930s was among the finest in the world in terms of technical and technological expertise) alongside a deep historical trauma and a feeling of guilt and shame associated with it, which had to be integrated and somewhat exorcized at the same time. Poland and Italy were on different sides of History (and perhaps ironically, the 'loser,' Italy, got a much better deal), yet both were torn between factions and had to renegotiate their national identity and present it to the world in a rather accelerated fashion. Italian cinema achieved this through neorealism, which was spearheaded not only by genuine Communist and Leftist filmmakers, like Giuseppe De Santis and Luchino Visconti, but also by figures who had been deeply entwined with everyday fascism, like Rossellini. Poland did the same with its new school of cinema, in the films of Wajda and Jerzy Kawalerowicz, under the auspices of the fascinatingly fraught figure of Aleksander Ford. In both cases we are dealing with a culture with strong literary and artistic traditions which were in part functions of a need, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to foster national unity and identity under circumstances of nation-building or to resist the erasure of a nation under partition. Italian neorealism and Myśliwski's work also share a focus on the child, a figure which has been identified as a site through which a new (or "modern") relationship to the world is expressed, one not so much of taking action as of witnessing. Much as Rossellini illuminated the world by showing characters who were learning to see it anew (particularly his Ingrid Bergman trilogy), so does Myśliwski help us see the world in a new light. And his works – *A Treatise* perhaps more and better than any other – achieve this exactly the way Italian neorealism did in its first phase (before it was integrated and superseded in the works of Fellini, Antonioni, and the other great masters Myśliwski admires): by working with or upon and accumulating clichés, most often related in some way to national traditions or identity.

Myśliwski may be dismissed by the superficial or regressively leftist reader as doing little else than astutely compile clichés and archetypes of a bygone Poland and Polish identity; in this case, his pastoral uncanny would function as a way of paying lip service to traditionalism and nostalgia for of pre-Communist

nist Poland, and little else. Such a foolishly reductive reading explains, perhaps, why his work has not received greater appreciation that would genuinely put him on an equal footing not only with the most lionized Polish authors but with the greatest writers in world literature. To bask in maudlin archetypes and trade in cliché was the bread and butter of socialist realism as much as it is of non-socialist kitsch representations. The great painter, composer, filmmaker, or writer, though, can both incorporate and transcend these elements, rendering them deep and complex, as they take on the kind of layering, ironies, and ambiguities one finds in Myśliwski. But this is not limited to the modern or modernist works. Perhaps we may turn to Max Ernst, an unlikely source, here: for him, modern art, in essence, was one that, beyond performing the many operations of artwork in and of itself and resisting its own reification, managed to summon in the viewer (or reader) a new, original emotion, akin to the phenomenally fresh, new feeling that we experience in childhood when our minds and bodies are attuned and open to the world in a way that makes everything more vibrant and wondrous. This is not a matter of some sort of naïve regression to childhood (as though the experience of a work of art were simply a replication of that sort of experience), nor is it simplistically nostalgic. Instead, it is a matter, at least in its successful iterations, of a defamiliarization, a 'prolongation of perception' that dissolves the world into the mind, reminding us both of our distance from it and of the impossibility of grasping it first-hand, outside of our own isolated perceptions and language. In Myśliwski's case, this defamiliarization is ultimately a means to reach an evanescent forgotten past rather than any stable or more specific referent. This is not an idealized or even horrifying past (both of which could easily amount to clichés), but one in which time and experience were not subsumable to images, were not replaced by the suffocating clichés and schemas that negated all possible meaning, or even the process of meaning-making itself, insofar as the meaning of everything had been determined in advance, whether by the Party or the Culture Industry. To try and create such a work in the present is to illustrate the continuing value of an approach that takes modernism itself as an object of nostalgia (for we can never be modern again), processing and referencing it in a way that escapes the postmodern hall of mirrors and refers us instead to dark inscrutable corners to which the visible only serves as an initial entrance. For a man in the twilight of his life to have produced such a work serves as a supreme testament to the value not only of modernist art as a means to grasp at a world that eludes us but also the modern gesture wherein the specificity of each medium is reasserted yet all can be combined into one, in which they dissolve and diffuse: an ideal work of art that is also the idea of a work of art.

### **Myśliwski, Wajda, and the functions of the pastoral uncanny**

What has perhaps become obvious by this point is that not only is Myśliwski's prose saturated with cinematic influences, which it absorbs and turns into sheer, unadaptable literature, but also that his works are deeply invested in and with History (mostly 20th-century Polish history, i.e., the history that the writer

experienced directly). The question then arises of what function his writing performs in presenting this past and History, in the highly specific and unique way that it does, for Polish people in particular, but perhaps for any reader of his work. This is where we need to return to Wajda's romantic evocations of pre-Communist Poland in *The Birch Wood* and *Young Maids of Wilko*. These intensely lyrical films about longing and irretrievable loss, set in near-mythological nature, resonate intensely with Myśliwski's works, or at least with some of their motifs and affects, yet contrast starkly with them. Unlike the work of the writer, Wajda's films are humourless, even ponderous, for all their gorgeousness. But both authors possess and express a kind of *élan vital* that can be associated with a strain in Polish (and, by and large, Slavic) culture, namely a combination of resilience, inner 'fire' (*żywiół*), and intuition. They are also, and no doubt rightly so, considered exemplars of a certain mastery (and, due to their longevity, as 'old masters') of their respective arts. What roles these old masters fulfilled (or continue to fulfil) in a society that has traversed so many distinct political, economic, and historical moments is a question that we cannot avoid: any exaltation of the pastoral and the past, whether in the 20th or 21st century, must be considered potentially reactionary and therefore suspect; its motivations must be probed. Wajda, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>22</sup> always fulfilled a very specific role as a channeler (and thus neutralizer) of dissent while speaking in the guise of a subversive voice. It suffices to consider how the key moments of his long career echo in the changes in the Politburo's policies. Cases in point include his spearheading of the Polish School of Cinema in the mid-1950s, just as de-Stalinization was happening and it was acceptable to acknowledge that not all Home Army soldiers were bloodthirsty terrorists (contrary to what the socialist realist propaganda claimed until 1956 or so), or his joining the cinema of moral unrest wagon with *Man of Marble* (*Człowiek z marmuru*, 1976) in the mid-1970s, when, in essence, his film was merely beating the dead Stalinist horse. Much more interesting from a political standpoint is the political unconscious of *The Birch Wood* and *Young Maids of Wilko*, works that appear apolitical on the surface. Wajda's overtly political films, like *Ashes and Diamonds* (*Popiół i diament*, 1958) or *Kanal* (*Kanał*, 1957), stroked the ego of the battered post-war Polish civil society without, for all that, exonerating the Home Army (instead merely acknowledging that some members of the Home Army were good youths led astray from the just bosom of Soviet Communism). Wajda's apolitical films did something similar, however not through the narrative, but by exalting the Polish imaginary of lush forests and rivers, romantic landscapes, and life on the edge of nature, be it in a rustic cabin or a landowner's mansion (*dworek*, 'small palace'). Clearly, the association of this bucolic and pastoral imagery with pastness and death in Wajda's work delivered a subliminal message to its audiences in socialist Poland: this beauty functions as a measure of symbolic compensation, a way to negotiate (and exploit!) a reductive expression of nostalgia, but it also conveys the idea that the past is never to return, and that Socialism is here to stay with its modern, drab, economically depressed, and unromantic lifestyle. In other words, as is so often the case with commercial filmmaking, Wajda's films have always carried deep in their texture the unpleasant function of an insincere schoolmaster, there to entertain on the surface, shape society through ideology,

while sanctioning and disciplining in an underhanded manner. The undeniable energy and *élan vital* found in these films somehow negates itself through this process, and is thus morbid in essence.

The differences between the means of production of feature filmmaking and novel writing notwithstanding, it is fair to say that the pastoral evocations of Myśliwski feel more direct and sincere, but also express a very different relationship to History: one that is at once extremely close and immediate (as in the precise evocation of place and time), but at the same time filled with longing and loss. What we get here is not a pastoral fantasy that would compensate for an accepted drab present, in a kind of affirmation of the status quo, but rather a text whose vivid and precise realness or concreteness – its power to evoke clear images in the reader's mind – ends up being thwarted by the ultimate breakdown of the image as a means to truly grasp History. In short, in place of the fullness and recompense of fantasy, we get an image that directs us from initial plenitude to its revelation as illusory and inadequate. History, in its direct representation, cannot but be a fantasy, and it is perhaps for this reason that Myśliwski insists that word trumps image (*The Word is the creator of the world. Not the image*<sup>23</sup>). Instead, it must be never-quite-there, at once revealed and obscured by words and images; one can only truly grasp it as a lost object. Yet to strive to grasp it and at the same time to show the inadequacy of that grasp functions as an act of political resistance against the disappearance of History and its reduction in culture to a cliché, fetish, or inventory of styles. And for all the melancholy in *A Treatise*, this is ultimately a life-affirming gesture, an expression of the persistence and value of the power of human memory, provided that it is sought not in the compensatory space of the fantasy image, but precisely as what resists the formation of that image itself, that shows it, inevitably, to be not something that connects us to History but instead that endeavours to instrumentalize, replace, and perhaps even liquidate it. Myśliwski's works, his words, carry in them a cautionary and redeeming quality – if only we care to seek out, decipher, and heed the meaning trapped in their many folds.

<sup>1</sup> I want to thank Professors Paul Coates, Dudley Andrew, Robert Rothstein, and in particular Michael Cramer for their feedback and contribution to this piece. I also want to thank Wiesław Myśliwski and his wife for the time they gave me in January 2022, during which they provided most illuminating comments regarding their rapport to cinema and moviegoing. Lastly, I want to thank their son, Professor Grzegorz Myśliwski (a cinephile much like his father!), and all the people at Znak Publishing House for facilitating this interview. I dedicate this article to Ewa Gawelczyk, who introduced me to Mr. Myśliwski's prose.

<sup>2</sup> W. Myśliwski, *W środku jesteśmy baśnią. Mowy i rozmowy*, Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, Kraków 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, pp. 276-277; 368. In the interview I conducted with the writer in January 2022, he confessed that this cinephilia lasted at least until the mid 1980s, and that while he no longer goes to the movie theater, he still enjoys watching films on TV.

<sup>4</sup> W. Myśliwski, *Widnokrąg*, Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, Kraków 2019.

<sup>5</sup> I will be quoting here from the excellent English translation of the book by Bill Johnston (W. Myśliwski, *A Treatise on Shelling Beans*, trans. B. Johnston, Archipelago Books, New York 2013).

<sup>6</sup> W. Myśliwski, *W środku...* op. cit., p. 368. See also: Ibidem, pp. 276-277. While *Sun Valley Serenade* was released in 1941 in the USA, Myśliwski saw it in Poland in 1946, when he was 14 years old.

- <sup>7</sup> In this case, the images are from a *Michel Strogoff* adaptation (1936), as well as an image of Charles Boyer as Napoléon bidding farewell to Madame Walewska (Greta Garbo) in *Conquest* (1937) (W. Myśliwski, *Widnokrąg*, op. cit., pp. 32-33).
- <sup>8</sup> It is one of the very few film titles which make it to his collection of interviews (W. Myśliwski, *W środku...* op. cit., p. 389).
- <sup>9</sup> W. Myśliwski, *A Treatise...* op. cit., p. 257.
- <sup>10</sup> Myśliwski himself often invokes, almost like a mantra, Wittgenstein's motto whereby language is the limit and creator of one's world. References to Wittgenstein abound in interviews with the writer, which is all the more noteworthy that he hardly ever mentions any other philosopher.
- <sup>11</sup> The protagonist remembers a film he saw with his mother, but this time not by title or an actor's name, but rather by a situation involving a couple arguing and smashing kitchenware in the process, to a comedic extent (W. Myśliwski, *Widnokrąg*, op. cit., pp. 216-217).
- <sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze expands at length on the notion of the virtual image in film, which to him is *opposed not to the real but to the actual*. *The 'virtual' is fully real in so far as it is 'virtual'*. (G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton, Bloomsbury, London 2014, p. 272.) See also: Idem, "The Actual and the Virtual", *ANY: Architecture New York*, 1997, no. 19/20, pp. 19.6-19.7, and, of course, Idem, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989.
- <sup>13</sup> W. Myśliwski, *Widnokrąg*, op. cit., p. 51.
- <sup>14</sup> See: H. Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, Greenwood Press, Connecticut 1941; Idem, *Creative Evolution*, Random House, New York 1944.
- <sup>15</sup> Although it is anything but that, Myśliwski being legendary for his protracted and most careful writing process, wherein the manuscript is first written in pencil, then corrected with pen and ink, then typed on a mechanical typewriter, and edited several more times before making it to the galleys.
- <sup>16</sup> Including an award-winning adaptation of his novel *Nagi sad – Przez dziewięć mostów* [*Across Nine Bridges*] (dir. Ryszard Ber, 1971) and an adaptation of his play *Klucznik* (*The Housemaster*, dir. Wojciech Marczewski, 1980). Myśliwski himself singles out Izabella Cywińska's *W poszukiwaniu zgubionego buta* (*In Search of the Lost Shoe*, 1997), based on a fragment of *Widnokrąg*, as the best film adaptation of his work. We can add another adaptation by Cywińska, the filmed play *Saksofon* (*Saxophone*, 2012).
- <sup>17</sup> In a conversation with the author from January 2022, Myśliwski confirmed that the 'hat store' scene was a figment of his imagination, not an authentic film he saw as a youth.
- <sup>18</sup> W. Myśliwski, *A Treatise...* op. cit., p. 232.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 361-362.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 362.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 370.
- <sup>22</sup> "Rebelle ou servile? Histoire et histoires dans *Cendres et Diamant*", *L'Avant-Scène Cinéma*, February 2020, no. 670, pp. 44-49.
- <sup>23</sup> From a conversation of the author with Wiesław Myśliwski.

## Jeremi Szaniawski

Assistant Professor of film studies and comparative literature at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he is also the Amesbury Professor of Polish Language and Culture. Author and editor of several volumes in film studies, including the monograph *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov: Figures of Paradox* (2014), as well as the edited volumes *The Global Auteur: The Politics of Authorship in 21st Century Cinema* (2016), *On Women's Films Across Worlds and Generations* (2019), *After Kubrick: A Filmmaker's Legacy* (2020), and *Fredric Jameson and Film Theory: Marxism, Allegory, and Geopolitics in World Cinema* (2022). He is currently working on a monograph on contemporary Polish literature and cinema.

## Bibliography

- Deleuze, G.** (2014). *Difference and Repetition* (trans. P. Patton). London: Bloomsbury.
- Myśliwski, W.** (2007). *Traktat o łuskaniu fasoli*. Kraków: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak. (First published 2006)
- Myśliwski, W.** (2013). *A Treatise on Shelling Beans* (trans. B. Johnston). New York: Archipelago Books.
- Myśliwski, W.** (2019). *Widnokrąg*. Kraków: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak. (First published 1996).
- Myśliwski, W.** (2022). *W środku jesteśmy baśnią. Mowy i rozmowy*. Kraków: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak.

**Słowa kluczowe:**  
Wiesław Myśliwski;  
modernizm;  
adaptacja filmowa

### Abstrakt

Jeremi Szaniawski

#### **Idealne kino Wiesława Myśliwskiego**

Autor eseju szuka śladów potwierdzających wpływ kina na życie i twórczość Wiesława Myśliwskiego. Mimo że pisarz otwarcie mówił o swoim zamyśleniu do kina, aspekt ten jest pomijany w omówieniach jego dorobku. Sam Myśliwski również nie poświęca mu zbyt wiele miejsca w wydanym niedawno zbiorze tekstów i wywiadów *W środku jesteśmy baśnią. Mowy i rozmowy* (2022). W niniejszym artykule autor poświęca szczególną uwagę motywom filmowym w powieści *Traktat o łuskaniu fasoli* (2006), filmowej wyobraźni, która się w tej książce ujawnia, a także roli historii w twórczości Myśliwskiego.