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Architecture, Set Design, and Space in Marian Wimmer’s Film Reflection: A Commentary

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Abstract

The editors of *Kwartalnik Filmowy* begin a series of re-prints of archival articles from the journal’s first edition, published in 1951–1965. This project aims to recreate the history of Polish film thought and re-establish the most significant achievements of past authors, accompanied with a commentary that reconstructs the context of their work and situates them against contemporary trends in film theory and history. Marian Wimmer was an architect who also dealt with architectural and art theory. He was particularly interested in the problem of space, including film space. The author recapitulates his achievements in this field, pointing to his interest in the viewer’s position and the principles of reception and perception of a film work, which later developed in the cognitive and neoformalist trend of film theory. **(Non-reviewed material).**

Marian Bernard Wimmer (1897-1970) was a graduate of the Faculty of Architecture of the Lviv Polytechnic Institute and of painting and drawing at the Lviv Industrial School.¹ In the 1920s and 1930s, he was involved with architectural design and his projects (villas, townhouses, public buildings) were built primarily in the city of Zakopane. He also became known as an interior architect. After the war, Wimmer settled in Łódź, where he co-organized the Higher Film School (Konrad Klejsa and Waldemar Ludwisiak write extensively about his merits in this field, which have been greatly underestimated to date²).

Creating the foundations of the Łódź Film School, he had a vision not only of film education, but also of the art of filmmaking. Wimmer's interest in film studies was first demonstrated in his innovative attempts at film analysis based on graphically drawn-up "scores," as he called them, which recorded the plot scheme of a film. Such a 'cinematic structure' score for Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948)³ has survived (unfortunately, without an authorial commentary). Professor Bolesław Lewicki, one of the pioneers of post-war Polish film studies, found these attempts inspiring and practiced this method of dissecting film works with his students.⁴

Wimmer recognised quite early on that architecture, or more precisely the practice of a space designer, operating at the intersection of artistic creation and technology, should also be combined with reflections of a theoretical nature. He included his thoughts in the book *Przestrzeń jako tworzywo sztuki* [*Space as the Material of Art*]. However, he did not manage to publish it during his lifetime. Wimmer's ideas were unusual for the time due to his far-reaching interdisciplinary approach. It took into account not only aesthetics, but also genetics, biology, physics, and even mathematics. Wimmer focused primarily on the psychological and intellectual aspects of space and their temporal or historical variability. He analysed its elements such as structure, light, colour, shape, lines, sound, as well as the language used to describe these phenomena. The scholar pointed out the relationship between architecture and spatial structures in drama, painting, urban planning, fashion, and – what is important for us – in film.

Marian Wimmer reflected also on the organisation of film space. It was closely related to his architectural experience as well as his perception of set design's function in the film image and on the theatre stage. Movement is the essence of film: the movement of images, of the camera, the movement within the frame. However, in his book, Wimmer writes primarily about the dynamics of the viewer's gaze, which activates in two ways (*In film, the eye of the viewer is the eye of the camera*⁵). It can be "metastatic,"⁶ leaping, when the images subconsciously registered in memory and imagination combine fragments of film space into a whole. Or, it can be continuous, fluid, when the eye follows the movement of objects/figures moving on the screen and then *the eye connected with the object follows its shape, the viewer imitates it internally – it becomes an act of inner feeling, a 'mimesis' of form or movement.*⁷ Wimmer also appreciated the importance of the repeated or repetitive reception of the film, when the element of surprise and emotion as well as identification gradually gives way to intellectual work, to the process of understanding and association, and thus – as we would say – interpretation. This shift in focus from the work to the sensory and mental reception of the film opens up new registers of reflection. The reflexive activity of the viewer can be

seen today as a kind of forerunner of the neoformalist or cognitive trend in film theory, for example that of David Bordwell or Edward Branigan.⁸ Wimmer even writes that there is a coincidence of film reception and the reception of reality as such – ‘on the run’, because this is what the pace of modern life demands. This, in turn, makes film the most appropriate means of artistic expression, which in itself was a statement ahead of its time, since today we are inclined to consider film, audiovisual arts, and media as part of the anthropological process of modernisation.

However, the realm of art, the realm of film is subject to different rules than the direct relationship with reality. Wimmer was not only concerned with the difference between what he called one-eyed and two-eyed vision (camera versus eyes),⁹ or with the boundaries set by the frame of the screen (especially its vertical edges), but also with new emotional qualities, configurations of meaning, and compositional bonds of visual elements. Space is the central category of his considerations, but what is of particular importance here is the positioning of the human being in relation to this space.

The text “Myśli o scenografii filmowej” [“Thoughts on Film Set Design”] was published in the first edition of *Kwartalnik Filmowy* in 1963.¹⁰ A year later, the essay “Plastyka a film animowany” [“Visual Arts and Animated Film”] appeared there.¹¹ *The only really important things during a film presentation are the image glowing on the screen and the viewer’s impressions. Everything that happens in a film serves to generate an impression. Information and impression – these are the two functional layers of a film. Here, we shall limit ourselves to analysing the film image from the point of view of the role played by its set design.*¹² This is how Marian Wimmer begins his text published in *Kwartalnik Filmowy*. Although he defines set design in a rather simple way, as a visual representation of man’s arrangement of physical surroundings constituting the background for his activities in the course of a drama,¹³ in fact, his argument plays out at the interface between theatrical, cinematic, architectural, and set design space in a broader context. Essentially, he treats set design as a component of the *mise-en-scène* (closely linked to the composition of the image, costumes, props, lighting, acting, camera movement, the movement within the frame, and other staging procedures), consistently combining problems of art theory, aesthetics and film form, visual physiology, psychology, and even sociology. He repeatedly refers to the theatrical space, pointing out its similarities and differences to the film space. Wimmer recalls the painterly origins of film imagery and its evolution. However, he consistently emphasizes the specificity of film reception, which provokes the viewer to construct the space and the relations between the characters while looking at it. This is to be achieved by means of set design, both as a background and as a part of the action, in an open or closed arrangement, based on contrast or harmony. This is because set design is *the visible part of the drama, it connects as closely as possible to its characters and spatially forms the course of its events.*¹⁴

It is worth mentioning that an important intellectual inspiration for Wimmer was Aldous Huxley’s essay “Tragedy and the Whole Truth.”¹⁵ Here, the writer, reflecting on two models of expression in art, attributed to tragedy the imperative to isolate a single, unique element from the totality of human experience, while to the art of the “whole truth” (for example, the novels of Gide, Kafka, or Hemingway) – the ability to reproduce, to a greater or lesser extent, the expe-

riences that the audience recognizes as their own. To this end, he invoked the metaphor of tragedy as *an arbitrarily isolated eddy on the surface of a vast river that flows on majestically, irresistibly, around, beneath, and to either side of it*,¹⁶ whereas a “wholly truthful art” encompasses, as he wrote, both the whole river and the eddy. Wimmer focuses his attention on the film, seeing the power of this metaphor in relation to spatiality and movement, that is, to what is causal in film. The river prompts a journey. The reception of a film can be such a journey.

One of the more dynamic concepts in today’s cultural discourse about space is the category of mapping. This concept, which “travels,” in Mieke Bal’s terms, through various areas of the humanities, has also been developed in film thought.¹⁷ Mapping, film cartography, navigation – these are metaphors that signal a ‘spatial turn’ in film studies to an extent not seen before, even in hermeneutic or cognitive approaches. American scholar Tom Conley even writes in *Cartographic Cinema* that film as a whole, as well as individual film images, can be treated as a kind of map, because the viewers, when confronted with it, construct the space they interact with in their own way.¹⁸ This is not an entirely new concept, although Conley’s analyses of films such as *The Rules of the Game* (*La Règle du jeu*, dir. Jean Renoir, 1939), or *The 400 Blows* (*Les Quatre cents coups*, dir. François Truffaut, 1959) are revealing. Such a culturally, ideologically, or politically rooted cartography appears, for example, in Jorge Luis Borges,¹⁹ in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,²⁰ and above all in Fredric Jameson, who discusses the question of cognitive mapping at length.²¹

We have seemingly moved far away from Wimmer’s synthetic proposals. However, it should be borne in mind that at the time film studies on film space was only just germinating, and the issue was not at the forefront of film theory. Yet, Marin Wimmer correctly sensed its potential.²²

Transl. Artur Piskorz

¹ Aleksandra Sumorok and Tomasz Załuski edited a monumental and pioneering monograph dedicated to Wimmer, entitled *Marian Wimmer. Przestrzeń jako tworzywo sztuki* [*Marian Wimmer: Space as the Material of Art*], which was published by the Władysław Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź in 2021. It contains articles dedicated to Wimmer’s various professional activities and comments on his writings, as well as his inspiring, but little-known, scholarly texts. The volume includes his key work “Przestrzeń jako tworzywo sztuki” [*Space as the Material of Art*]. It was written between 1958 and 1968 and its manuscript hitherto remained unpublished. I have drawn biographical information from Aleksandra Sumorok’s article, “Mistrz drugiego planu. Biografia zawodowa Mariana Wimmera” [*Master of the Background: Marian Wimmer’s Professional Biography*] included in the volume (pp. 18-82).

² K. Klejsa, W. Ludwisiak, “Marian Wimmer i niedopowiedziane początki Szkoły Filmowej w Łodzi” [*Marian Wimmer and the Untold Beginnings of the Łódź Film School*], in: *Marian Wimmer. Przestrzeń...* op. cit., pp. 88-128.

³ See: “*Hamlet*, akt X, partytura” [*Hamlet, Act X, scores*], in: *Marian Wimmer. Przestrzeń...* op. cit., pp. 440-472.

⁴ In the aforementioned volume, there is a story by Lewicki about Wimmer, who sent one such score with a description to the editors of *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, but they rejected the proposal and the submitted material was lost. Unfortunately, no trace of this event has survived. See: T. Majewski, “Partytura filmowe Mariana Wimmera” [*Marian Wimmer’s Film Scores*], in: *Marian Wimmer. Przestrzeń...* op. cit., p. 151.

⁵ M. Wimmer, “Przestrzeńjaktworzywosztuki”, in: *Marian Wimmer. Przestrzeń...* op. cit., p. 337.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 336.

- ⁷ Ibidem.
- ⁸ We are speaking here not of a direct correlation, but of a certain direction of thinking about the principles of film reception. Cf. D. Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1989; E. Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, Routledge, London – New York 1992.
- ⁹ However, his ideas on the bio-physiology of vision were somewhat controversial for specialists.
- ¹⁰ M. Wimmer, "Myśli o scenografii filmowej", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1963, no. 4, pp. 3-15.
- ¹¹ Idem, "Plastyka a film animowany", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1964, no. 4, pp. 15-23.
- ¹² Idem, "Myśli o scenografii filmowej", op. cit., p. 3. (compare the English translation of this text in: *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2023, no. 123).
- ¹³ Ibidem.
- ¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 12.
- ¹⁵ A. Huxley, "Tragedy and the Whole Truth", in: idem, *On Art and Artist*, Harper and Brothers, New York 1960, pp. 60-68.
- ¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 66.
- ¹⁷ M. Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto – Buffalo – London 2002.
- ¹⁸ T. Conley, *Cartographic Cinema*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2007, p. 1.
- ¹⁹ J. L. Borges, "On Exactitude in Science", in: idem, *A Universal History of Iniquity*, Penguin Books, London 2001.
- ²⁰ Cf. G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1987.
- ²¹ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham 2013.
- ²² Tomasz Załuski, in his extensive and insightful essay "Work in Progress. Geneza, struktura i konteksty interpretacyjne książki Mariana Wimmera *Przestrzeń jako tworzywo sztuki*" ["Work in Progress: The Genesis, Structure and Interpretative Contexts of Marian Wimmer's book *Space as the Material of Art*"] included in the discussed volume dedicated to Wimmer, convincingly demonstrates that the shaping of Wimmer's spatial ideas developed in many directions.

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Słowa kluczowe:

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Abstrakt

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Architektura, scenografia, przestrzeń w refleksji filmowej Mariana Wimmera. Komentarz

Redakcja „Kwartalnika Filmowego” rozpoczyna cykl przedruków archiwalnych artykułów pochodzących z pierwszej edycji pisma, wydawanej w latach 1951–1965. Celem projektu jest odtworzenie dziejów polskiej myśli filmowej i przypomnienie najciekawszych dokonań dawnych autorów, wraz z komentarzem, który rekonstruuje kontekst ich powstania i sytuuje je wobec współczesnych tendencji teorii i historii filmu. Marian Wimmer był architektem, zajmował się też teorią architektury i sztuki. Interesowała go zwłaszcza kwestia przestrzeni, w tym także przestrzeni filmowej. Autorka rekapitułuje jego dokonania w tej dziedzinie, wskazując na zainteresowanie pozycją widza oraz zasadami odbioru i percepcji dzieła filmowego, co potem zostało rozwinięte w nurcie kognitywistycznym i neoformalistycznym teorii filmu. **(Materiał nierecenzowany).**