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Rafał Koschany

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9343-9885>

Genealogies of Polish Film Studies: From Juliusz Kleiner to Bolesław W. Lewicki

Keywords:

Bolesław W. Lewicki;
Juliusz Kleiner;
history of film theory;
film studies;
comparative studies

Abstract

The text is a commentary on Bolesław W. Lewicki's article "Teoria badań humanistycznych Juliusza Kleinera w zastosowaniu do nauk o sztuce filmowej" ["Juliusz Kleiner's Theory of Humanistic Research as Applied to Film Studies"]. Lewicki returns to Kleiner's important statement from 1929, which he considers separate and progressive for its time. He points to the ennobling of film in the context of both academic reflection and social life and the emphasizing of new principles of creation within the existing system of art fields. In the later part of the article, the film scholar takes inspiration from Kleiner's other works and considers it possible and necessary to transfer the methodology of literary research to film studies. This commentary includes a recapitulation of these two themes from the perspective of contemporary film studies and, at the same time, raises questions about the possibility of further inspiration from the theses of both Kleiner and Lewicki (e.g., concerning the issue of memory and, more broadly, comparative research). **(Non-reviewed material).**

At the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, intense theoretical discussions were held among Polish scholars with a research interest in cinema, and the most important problems covered at the time included the definition of film as an art discipline and as a subject of academic study, as well as the clarification of research methodology and, consequently, the establishment of film studies as an independent, fully-fledged academic discipline and degree course. It was also very important to identify the domestic tradition in this respect. It was rather unanimously emphasized that scholars of the interwar period for the most part neglected the issue of film as an art form and cinema as a social phenomenon.¹ One of the few exceptions, very progressive and at the same time prophetic, resonating with the most interesting recognitions of foreign film theories of the time, was a short statement published by Juliusz Kleiner in 1929, entitled “U wrót nowej estetyki” [“At the Gates of a New Aesthetics”].² In 1957, in issue 28 of *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, Bolesław Włodzimierz Lewicki devoted a separate study to this text, placing it within the framework of the methodological and theoretical considerations outlined above.³

Kleiner’s essay was not often cited in postwar film studies as, for example, an important source of inspiration in the process of the discipline’s constitution or in interdisciplinary research carried out at the junction between literary theory and film theory. Instead, it recurred very consistently in the academic work of Lewicki himself – one of the institutional and scholarly founders of postwar Polish academic film studies. It is worth recalling his article not only because it has never been reprinted since its publication in *Kwartalnik Filmowy* and has rarely been more widely discussed within the context of the author’s output, but also because – alongside his other academic contributions, of course – it constitutes a very interesting fragment of the intellectual trajectory of Polish film thought: from its prewar genealogies, through the difficult postwar times, up to the present day.

At this point it is worth mentioning that Juliusz Kleiner, who lived in 1886-1957, was an eminent Polish philologist, extremely prolific academically throughout virtually the entire first half of the 20th century: a scholar of the works of Juliusz Słowacki, Adam Mickiewicz, and Zygmunt Krasiński, a theoretician and methodologist of literature, a humanist and educator of great stature. As a very conscious and ‘early’ participant in the antipositivist turn,⁴ he focused on the work of art and its aesthetic aspects, while at the same time not forgetting the work’s dependence on social and cultural conditions. His study “U wrót nowej estetyki” is therefore not surprising as a declaration of an intellectual interested in a changing reality and the art that responds to it – however, as a voice on cinema and film, it remains an isolated statement. It is true that the author was already familiar with Karol Irzykowski’s *Dziesiąta muza* [*The Tenth Muse*],⁵ and was certainly inspired by the thinking of Tadeusz Dąbrowski, with whom he worked in Lviv, but his views on cinema were formulated in an intuitive and certainly original way. In his study, Lewicki also refers to the seemingly obvious circumstances of the text’s creation (which Kleiner himself, however, does not explicitly mention): the advent of sound, which in a sense closes *the first, exploratory period of theorizing on film matters*,⁶ when an attempt was made to place film within the known divisions of the arts and aesthetic systems, which relied to a large extent on the achievements of silent cinema. Kleiner, however, immediately goes a step further and performs

a kind of shift, focusing attention on film in relation to the new principles of making art and the new – because of the way the medium works – nature of reception. Both of these issues in fact concern a broader social context for the functioning of film as art and its relationship to reality.

The first decades of the 20th century were a time of accelerated technological development (*the machine, the cinema, electric light, and the phenomenal mastery of space, which was also the overcoming of time*⁷ – according to Kleiner's subsequent points), but above all of the accelerating pace of life, which had never before so radically outpaced art and the visions of artists. In this situation, only film *keeps pace with life*.⁸ For Lewicki, Kleiner's essay is, in short, an important gesture towards the recognition of film as a strictly 20th-century art, a gesture that is, furthermore, convincingly substantiated. Thus, in his article, he reconstructs arguments in favour of Kleiner's ennoblement of film: the new art *expanded the sphere of illusion and brought it closer to everyday reality, it blurred the boundary between the visual and rhythmic arts, and, above all, it changed the hitherto prevailing foundations of artistic creation, i.e. the principle of selection and the principle of transformation of material, and replaced them with the principle of arranging reality*.⁹ While appreciating the importance of this last assertion, Lewicki polemically indicates a certain doubt about the radicality of this change, adding his very own commentary on literary epic as a source for film art – a well-known theme, if only via Sergei Eisenstein's remarks, but one which Kleiner simply did not take up.

In the context of Kleiner's essay from the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, Lewicki draws attention to the ennoblement of film – as a 'watched' artform (the attitude of intellectuals towards cinema in the interwar years was, after all, not uniform¹⁰) and, above all, as a subject of research, disregarded and/or ignored by academics of the time.¹¹ The exceptions included Karol Irzykowski, Stefania Zahorska, Leopold Blaustein, and Zofia Lissa (prewar film thought was shaped mostly by publicists and – indeed – literary scholars). The situation began to improve somewhat in the postwar period, but – and this is already the pertinent point of view in Lewicki's thought at the end of the 1950s – even then, *film studies is still not a university-type discipline in Poland*.¹²

For the Łódź-based researcher, Kleiner's isolated and pioneering (Lewicki's terms) text, or more precisely its short fragment devoted to cinema, was in fact a pretext for considerations much more serious and far-reaching from the point of view of the history of science. *At the gates of a new stage of filmological research in Poland*, stricter than before¹³, Juliusz Kleiner's thought, taken as a whole, was to inspire researchers and even be a kind of model and testimony of the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach. An indirect form of an answer to the question of whether this objective was achieved can be found in Lewicki's later accomplishments, both strictly administrative and scientific, in which – and this is particularly interesting at this point – references to Kleiner's humanistic and literary writings were vividly and constantly present. In his 1964 book *Wprowadzenie do wiedzy o filmie [Introduction to Film Knowledge]*, but also later, especially in his meta-scientific considerations, for example in his texts devoted to film studies and its genealogy, Lewicki often referred to his teacher's theoretical work – including, of course, "U wrót nowej estetyki" – as one of the most important initiatory points of

this type of reflection. He named its author (along with Irzykowski, Henri Bergson, and Ricciotto Canudo) among *the precursors of true film theory*¹⁴ and thus repeated his convictions from the 1957 text.

In keeping with the title of the article, Lewicki assigned himself the task of drawing *conclusions regarding the methodology of film research* from Kleiner's work in literary studies; moreover, as he wrote, *we can do so without any reservations*.¹⁵ Labelling Kleiner's choices and methods as universal and, in a broad sense, humanistic allowed Lewicki to conclude that they are applicable to film research: *The complex nature of film art, its aesthetic diversity, and at the same time, its physical-chemical and technical background, its physiological-perceptual conditioning, indeed postulates the complexity and diversity of research methods. However, the fact that film knowledge belongs to the family of humanities is determined by the fact that it is knowledge about valuation – of both works and creative processes*.¹⁶

The main core of the article is thus an attempt at the titular "application": not a *mechanical transfer of the laws of one discipline to another*, but rather a *confrontation which, given the fundamental affinity between the two fields, literature and film, can become a fertilizing methodological and research impulse*.¹⁷ Lewicki reads Kleiner's essays in the field of literary studies in a way that is immediately comparative, replacing the concepts of "literature" and "language" – in a gesture of shifting into the area of film research – with the concepts of "art" and "expressive means." He devotes his attention to what he considers the three most important issues that, in the film studies he postulates, should build on the findings of Kleiner and of philology as such. The first of these concerns *a n a l y s i s* – as a basic cognitive disposition that relates to a work that is individual, but historically conditioned and dependent on viewer concretisation (and requiring the effort of valuation). This postulate is summarized in the neat formula of *interpretive philology*.¹⁸ The second issue is *h i s t o r y* or the theory of the film history process, which, apart from its interest in a particular work, should also include a social component. Finally, the third issue, most important for the essay, strictly *m e t h o d o l o g i c a l*, covers the process of the constitution of film studies, the fundamental beginnings of which should be sought in prewar film thought rooted in interdisciplinary approaches.

It is another matter that *the transfer of research methods*, which for Lewicki was, in a way, self-evident, stemmed from his deep belief in *the expressive issues of literature which are close to film*.¹⁹ It is worth adding, however, that such inspirations were not limited to the case of this one researcher; the postwar, pioneering attempts at film studies drew heavily on the achievements and 'position' of philology – for example, as a model of *the ability to correctly read and interpret a literary work*.²⁰ Certainly, an important context for these methodological decisions was also the administrative location of the efforts made at the time for the constitution of a new academic discipline: after all, Lewicki opened his Department for Film Knowledge in the Chair of Theory of Literature at the University of Łódź in 1959 (such is the history of many Polish centres for film studies – subsidiary to literary studies).

The sheer value of Lewicki's article is the very possibility – admittedly mediated (but supplemented by a reprint in the issue of *Kwartalnik Filmowy* from 1957) – of re-reading Kleiner's forgotten text critically. The eminent philologist's modern and common-sense approach to technological developments – which must be un-

derstood because they determine the ways to change the world, to change man, and finally to change the principles of art creation – is striking from today's perspective. It is, in several passages, an exceptionally progressive and avant-garde approach, certainly one that could be compared, for example, with the theses of Walter Benjamin's famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* from 1936, assimilated into Polish, in the broader perspective of this eminent humanist's thought, only since the 1970s (with a veritable explosion in the 1990s).²¹

Lewicki therefore recalls Kleiner's essay as an important stage in the formation of Polish film thought, which dates back to the interwar years, and places it in the context of the exploration of the different directions, including current ones, of development of contemporary film studies. He proposes a project of film thought with a clear literary inclination; moreover, he considers it a necessity. In fact, until the end of his academic journey, Lewicki maintains similar views, including the very early claim of the interdisciplinarity of film studies at the time – while also, in his efforts to establish it as an academic discipline, he equally often emphasizes the achievements of French filmology, both in the field of aesthetics (film as a work of art) and comparative studies (film theory and other scientific disciplines).

In the article published at the end of the 1950s in *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, Bolesław Włodzimierz Lewicki reintroduced Juliusz Kleiner's text to postwar Polish film thought. He wrote elsewhere much later: *The field of film studies in the prewar years is also a long list of achievements and insights*, and the following remark appeared alongside notes on Irzykowski, Blaustein, Bolesław Matuszewski, and Eugeniusz Cękański: *Kleiner defining film as the leading art of the 20th century and designating its compositional specificity*.²² Thus, as the 1970s were about to begin, the author's fundamental opinion about Kleiner's pioneering observations had not changed. The question remains as to how binding it would be today and, above all, whether Lewicki's work itself – with its reconstructions and postulates about film studies, with its method of comparative "transfer" – provides any opportunities for contemporary research. At least three different inspirations can be identified here.

Firstly, it should be stated that the issues so pressing for Lewicki at the time, considered after several decades in relation to the processes of institutionalisation and methodological validation of film knowledge, constitute an important contribution to the self-reflection of a discipline that has had a turbulent history. In short, it is a fascinating moment in the history of Polish film thought, when its earliest stages are recapitulated, with the participation of the greatest intellectuals and artists of the era,²³ and the question of where it is situated currently (i.e., in the late 1950s) is posed. It can be added that today – in the face of successive technological transformations, constantly changing (in connection with these processes) definitions of film, and new configurations of scientific disciplines – it is also worth making such attempts at self-reflection in the context of research practice.

Secondly, some of the detailed themes taken up by Lewicki deserve separate consideration. I would highlight the role of memory *in the reception of a work and in its structure*,²⁴ as the author repeats after the title of one of Kleiner's works. This is an is-

sue still unsatisfactorily elaborated in film studies. It seems that – after the dominance of the phenomenological paradigm in reflection on memory and the development of Roman Ingarden's theory of concretisation – the achievements of today's cognitive science could especially contribute a great deal to the study of 'film memory.' As an aside, we might add that this includes the role of memory in the processes of analysis, the nature of which has changed radically due to the availability of equipment, starting with the VCR, which made it possible to 'control,' verify, and 'retain' memory at home – just as today, in everyday research practice, films and their fragments are retained, preserved, stored, or collected (Lewicki's famous film scores, i.e., his attempts to 'record' a film in his teaching practice, are an interesting testimony to similar processes, precisely because of functioning in particular technological conditions²⁵).

Thirdly and finally, and this is a kind of summary of the previous two threads, contemporary film studies, after a period of constitution and stabilisation as an independent scientific discipline, still demand further interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary revisions, and sometimes even the establishment of completely new relations in the field of science. This, of course, is necessitated by the advancements of the medium, the transformations of which, however, do not fundamentally affect the basic observation that film and its new incarnations, as well as cinema and its new spaces, are still among the most important elements of the culture that is transforming before our eyes – while simultaneously influencing the shape of this culture. At the same time, however, it is worth emphasizing and remembering that the roots of Polish film studies are literary in spirit, and Bolesław W. Lewicki was a very conscious promoter of such a marriage: his take on contemporary film studies, while scattered, is one of the most interesting – and accomplished – interdisciplinary projects in the history of film thought both in Poland and abroad.

Transl. Jeremy Pearman

¹ Cf. J. Bocheńska, *Polska myśl filmowa do roku 1939* [*Polish Film Thought up to 1939*], Ossolineum, Wrocław 1974, p. 207. cf. also: B. W. Lewicki, "Teoria filmu w Polsce (1945-1955)" ["Film Theory in Poland (1945-1955)"], *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1955, no. 18-19.

² J. Kleiner, "U wrót nowej estetyki", *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* [*Illustrated Weekly*] 1929, no. 4 (and reprints in: J. Kleiner, *W kręgu Mickiewicza i Goethego* [*In the Circle of Mickiewicz and Goethe*], Towarzystwo Wydawnicze "Rój", Warszawa 1938, pp. 280-285; *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1957, no. 28, pp. 18-22 / as an appendix to Lewicki's study /; *Polska myśl teatralna i filmowa. Antologia* [*Polish Theatre and Film Thought: An Anthology*], ed. T. Sivert, R. Taborski, PWN, Warszawa 1971, pp. 652-656; *Polska myśl filmowa. Antologia tekstów z lat 1898-1939* [*Polish Film Thought: An Anthology of Texts From the Years 1898-1939*], selection and ed. J. Bocheńska, Ossolineum,

Wrocław 1975, pp. 155-160). Bocheńska includes Kleiner's text in the third part of her anthology (*Okres 1929-1939* [*Period 1929-1939*]) and in her accompanying study quoted above – in the chapter "Rozwój badań filmologicznych" ["Development of Filmological Research"]. In the same anthology, Bolesław W. Lewicki, who was a generation younger, was also included among the prewar classics of Polish film thought (it features a fragment of his text "Budowa utworu filmowego" ["Construction of the Film Work"] from 1935).

³ Certainly – apart from purely factual considerations – the personal history linking the two authors (Lewicki was a student of Kleiner's in Lviv), as well as the death of Professor Juliusz Kleiner on 23rd March 1957 is not without significance (although it is reported neither in the text nor elsewhere in the issue).

- ⁴ Cf. S. Skwarczyńska, "Juliusz Kleiner jako metodolog i teoretyk literatury" ["Juliusz Kleiner as a Methodologist and Theoretician of Literature"], in: *Juliusz Kleiner. Księga zbiorowa o życiu i twórczości* [Juliusz Kleiner: A Collective Book on His Life and Works], ed. F. Araszkiwicz, Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, Lublin 1961, pp. 55-56.
- ⁵ Cf. K. Irzykowski, *Dziesiąta muza: zagadnienia estetyczne kina*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1960 [bibliographical entry completed by the editors].
- ⁶ B. W. Lewicki, "Teoria badań humanistycznych Juliusza Kleinera w zastosowaniu do nauk o sztuce filmowej", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1957, no. 28, p. 5.
- ⁷ J. Kleiner, "U wrót nowej estetyki", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1957, no. 28, p. 19.
- ⁸ B. W. Lewicki, "Teoria badań...", op. cit., p. 6.
- ⁹ Ibidem.
- ¹⁰ Cf. P. Sitkiewicz, *Gorączka filmowa. Kinomania w międzywojennej Polsce* [Film Fever: Cinema Mania in Interwar Poland], słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2019.
- ¹¹ Lewicki refers here to Mieczysław Wallis's 1949 study "Odkrycie filmu" ["The Discovery of Film"] (*Przegląd Filozoficzny* [Philosophical Review] 1949, vol. XIV, no. 1-2), which incidentally omitted Kleiner; cf. B. W. Lewicki, "Teoria badań...", op. cit. pp. 4, 6.
- ¹² B. W. Lewicki, "Teoria badań...", op. cit., p. 5.
- ¹³ Ibidem, p. 16. Danuta Palczewska suggests that in his 1948 text "U progu nowej epoki kultury. Film – narzędziem postępu" ["On the Threshold of a New Cultural Era: Film – An Instrument of Progress"] (*Gazeta Filmowa* [Film Gazette] 1948, no. 9, p. 1) Lewicki – in the very title – refers to Kleiner (admittedly, Palczewska misrepresents the title of his essay as "U wrót nowej epoki" ["At the Gates of a New Era"], but other associations remain). She emphasizes that film, by using completely new means of expression and storytelling, simultaneously changes the viewer's relation to the world, provides a new and different structure of thinking, and thus, one could say, opens a new era in culture (D. Palczewska, *Współczesna polska myśl filmowa* [Contemporary Polish Film Thought], Ossolineum, Wrocław 1981, p. 84).
- ¹⁴ B. W. Lewicki, *Wprowadzenie do wiedzy o filmie*, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1964, p. 20.
- ¹⁵ B. W. Lewicki, "Teoria badań...", op. cit., p. 7.
- ¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 9.
- ¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 8.
- ¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 14.
- ¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 12.
- ²⁰ Ibidem, p. 13.
- ²¹ Cf. W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J. A. Underwood, Penguin Books, Harlow 2008.
- ²² B. Lewicki, "Polskie badania nad filmem" ["Polish Film Studies"], *Kino* [Cinema] 1970, no. 7, p. 26.
- ²³ As new publications show, further research in this area is necessary. Two important works can be mentioned here: J. Lachowski, *Anatola Sterna związku z kinematografią* [Anatol Stern's Relationship to Cinema], Universitas, Kraków 2021 and S. Zahorska, *Pisma filmowe* [Film Writings], selection, introduction and compilation by M. Hendrykowska, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2021.
- ²⁴ Cf. J. Kleiner, "Rola pamięci w recepcji dzieła literackiego i w jego strukturze" [*The Role of Memory in the Reception of a Literary Work and in Its Structure*], in: idem, *Studia z zakresu teorii literatury* [Studies in Literary Theory], Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, Lublin 1956.
- ²⁵ Cf. R. Koschany, "Powroty (do) Lewickiego, czyli co nam zostało z analityki filmowej?" ["Returning (to) Lewicki, or What Is Left of Film Analytics?"], *Pleograf. Kwartalnik Akademii Polskiego Filmu* [Pleograph. Polish Film Academy Quarterly] 2020, no. 3, <https://pleograf.pl/index.php/powroty-do-lewickiego-czyli-co-nam-zostaloz-analityki-filmowej/> (accessed: 10.09.2023).

Rafał Koschany

Associate Professor at the Institute of Cultural Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. He specializes in the theory of interpretation, the semiotics of culture, as well as research at the crossroads between literary and film studies. Author of the books *Przypadek. Kategoria artystyczna i egzystencjalna w literaturze i filmie* [Chance: Existential

and *Artistic Category in Film and Literature*] (2006, 2nd ed. 2016) and *Zamiast interpretacji. Między doświadczeniem kinematograficznym a rozumieniem filmu* [*Instead of Interpretation: Between Cinematographic Experience and Understanding of Film*] (2017), numerous journal articles and book chapters; co-editor of several collective volumes, among others: *Musical. Poszerzanie pola gatunku* [*The Musical: Widening the Genre Field*] (2013).

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Słowa kluczowe:

Bolesław W. Lewicki;
Juliusz Kleiner;
historia teorii filmu;
filmoznawstwo;
komparatystyka

Abstrakt

Rafał Koschany

Genealogie polskiego filmoznawstwa: od Juliusza Kleinera do Bolesława W. Lewickiego

Tekst stanowi komentarz do artykułu Bolesława W. Lewickiego *Teoria badań humanistycznych Juliusza Kleinera w zastosowaniu do nauk o sztuce filmowej*. Lewicki wraca do ważnej wypowiedzi Kleinera z 1929 r., uznając ją za wówczas odosobnioną i progresywną. Wskazuje na nobilitację filmu w jego rozważaniach – zarówno w kontekście refleksji akademickiej, jak i w życiu społecznym – oraz na podkreślenie nowych zasad tworzenia w dotychczasowym systemie dziedzin sztuki. W dalszej części artykułu filmoznawca sięga do pozostałego dorobku Kleinera i uznaje za możliwe oraz konieczne przeniesienie metodologii badań literaturoznawczych na grunt myśli filmowej. Niniejszy komentarz obejmuje rekapitulację tych dwóch wątków z perspektywy współczesnego filmoznawstwa, a jednocześnie stawia pytania o możliwość dalszych inspiracji tezami i Kleinera, i Lewickiego (na przykład w odniesieniu do problematyki pamięci i – szerzej – badań komparatystycznych). **(Materiał nierecenzowany).**