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The Immortal Faust

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archetype;
film told

Abstract

The author places Aleksander Jackiewicz's text from 1953 in the context of historical and cultural events that took place then, including the death of Joseph Stalin. Against this background, Jackiewicz's essay was an expression of an escape from the political pressure of the socialist realist doctrine that dominated art (including film) at that time, towards a fascinating archetype of European culture. He focused primarily on René Clair's film *Beauty and the Devil* (*La beauté du diable*, 1950). The author confronts Jackiewicz's theses with the point of view of literary scholar Stefania Skwarczyńska. Then she reflects on the durability of the Faust myth and its contemporary incarnations in film and the cultural transformations of its meaning. **(Non-reviewed material).**

*Satan, though he grants himself wisdom and strength,
Knows he lies and does not give himself credence;
Glad therefore to spread lies among men,
On hearing them from others, he may believe them himself*
Adam Mickiewicz, *Sentences and Remarks*

The year 1953 was a dark time in Poland, but also significant from the perspective of later historical events. The authorities intensified their efforts to reinforce the doctrine of socialist realism. Rada Kultury i Sztuki [The Council for Culture and the Arts], chaired by Włodzimierz Sokorski, expressed their concern in their journal, *Przegląd Kulturalny* [Cultural Review], about *the weakening of the ideological offensive in the assessment of trends emerging in creative circles which in individual cases brought the threat of anti-realist aesthetic theories*.¹ Elsewhere, Sokorski suggested a need to oppose the phenomenon of *smuggling old post-impressionist forms under the banner of seeking a new expression for the art of socialist realism*.² Jerzy Putrament, an ardent eulogist of socialist realism, also in the name of the struggle for a new aesthetics, proclaimed that *we regard [sic!] the realist conception of beauty as objectively supreme*.³ Political vigilance was not waning, but an undercurrent of centrifugal movements was already making itself felt. An unofficial avant-garde art group St-53 (named after Władysław Strzemiński, who died in 1953 and became its ideological patron with his theory of seeing⁴) started to operate in Katowice. Such initiatives, however, were then threatened with serious consequences, including loss of freedom.

On 5 March, the news of Joseph Stalin's death was announced. This was commemorated with numerous press articles written by prominent representatives of Polish culture as well as with events of nationwide mourning. The city of Katowice was renamed Stalinogród. *Żołnierz zwycięstwa* (Soldier of Victory), Wanda Jakubowska's film about General Karol Świerczewski was released. The trial, ending in prison sentences, of a group of priests accused of sabotage and acting to the detriment of the USSR took place. In September, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, who had received a cardinal's hat at the beginning of the year, was interned. In October, there were debates in the press and at the meetings of the Związek Literatów Polskich [Polish Writers' Union] about domestic inter-war literature, depreciating all manifestations of avant-gardism. Yet, the mere fact of invoking certain names and phenomena had its significance. In November, academic departments of Marxism and Leninism were opened at all art colleges.

Two outstanding poets passed away: Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński and Julian Tuwim. The staging of Juliusz Słowacki's *Balladyna* at the Teatr Nowy in Warsaw, directed by Aleksander Bardini, made history by changing the play's ending: *out of fear of the 'supernatural world,' the divine thunderbolt was replaced by the heroine's death from a heart attack*.⁵

It was under such circumstances that Aleksander Jackiewicz, a lover of French literature and western films that could only be seen at closed screenings – for example at the Łódź Film School or the Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy [Association of Journalists] – published an essay on Faust in *Kwartalnik Filmowy* [Film Quarterly] in an attempt to make up for the years lost in this respect.⁶ One could argue that he used an escapist procedure, offering with his text a respite from a difficult reality. And, in part, this was probably the case, especially since he

devoted most of his text to the analysis of René Clair's comedy *Beauty and the Devil* (*La beauté du diable*, 1950), with fantastic roles for the beautiful Gérard Philipe and the demonically ugly Michel Simon. The film only premiered in Poland in 1955 to the delight of the general public and many critics. At that time, 14 western films out of a total of 54 had already been screened in cinemas.⁷ In 1953, only 9 were released including Christian-Jaque's *Fanfan la Tulipe* (with the aforementioned Gérard Philipe) and Vittorio De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* (*Miracolo a Milano*).

Jackiewicz's fascination with Clair's work found its fuller expression in his book on the director published a few years later.⁸ He would frequently return to *Beauty and the Devil* and to Faust, filtering the subject over the years through his own cultural experiences and changing historical circumstances. Stanisław Grzelecki, a reviewer for *Życie Warszawy* [*Life of Warsaw*], when discussing *Beauty and the Devil* considered René Clair to be one of the most outstanding living filmmakers who had managed to give an old legend a new dimension. The critic, in keeping with the spirit of the times in which he lived, stated: *The devil is very human, hell exists on earth, only humans can unleash it.*⁹ In the atmosphere of the Cold War, the threat of a nuclear conflict seemed quite real on both sides of the Iron Curtain. This was hinted at by Jean Marcenac, the French writer and philosopher (quoted by Grzelecki and earlier by Jackiewicz) with strong communist inclinations, whose book *La beauté du diable* [*The Devil's Charm*] had been published earlier in Polish.¹⁰

In the film, the conflict between good and evil and the scholars' dilemma concerning the limits of human knowledge, the ethical determinants of science and invention prove to be relevant, as well as typical of the time. Noteworthy, however, is the fact that Grzelecki – aware of the compactness of the newspaper formula – recommended the viewers a chance to experience the film on a deeper level by reaching out (in addition to Marcenac's book) to two other supplementary readings: to Aleksander Jackiewicz's text published in *Kwartalnik Filmowy* under discussion here and to Stefania Skwarczyńska's article "Współczesne opracowanie tematu Fausta (film i opowiadanie filmowe wobec Goethego)" ["Contemporary Study of the Faust Theme (Film and Film Story in Relation to Goethe)"] also referring to the film.¹¹ There is no tangible evidence that the two scholars had had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with each other's interpretative proposals (they were published roughly at the same time), but the confrontation of their humanistic attitudes seems as interesting as their recommendation in a daily newspaper.

The scholars had already watched the film at a screening at the Film School where they taught literature courses. Yet, they had to take into account the fact that Polish audiences had not seen the film. For some reason, Marcenac's slim volume, containing a literary plot of the film and an interview with its director, was published in Poland when the film had not yet been released; Jackiewicz and Skwarczyńska, in their own ways, made use of this publication.¹² Jackiewicz adopted a tone of free-form storytelling, a tone of, one might say, wandering, through cultural references, although focused on the figure of the eponymous character, juxtaposing the film image with earlier versions, including literary ones. The author considered how *a new, not-so-long-ago fairground art can realise, within its means, one of the central motifs of world literature.*¹³ However, due to the aforementioned circumstances, he summarised the film for the readers, providing the argument with comments. Jackiewicz was interested in the range of cinematic

means used, the construction of characters and plot deviations from the works of Goethe and Marlowe. He also confronted the ideological stance of Marcenac and Clair. He analysed the situational and dialogical wit pointing out the function of corporeality in the contrasting figures of the young man and the old man. The literary and cultural tradition set the context, it gave the author a string of associations with Montaigne, Rousseau, Rabelais or Romain Rolland. Yet what he valued most was Clair's inventiveness and consistency with his overall idea of cinema. Jackiewicz had no problem with the fact that Clair decided to radically transfer Faust from the fog-shrouded North of Europe to the sunny South of Italy to make it more 'Mediterranean,' to give it lightness and energy.

For Skwarczyńska, this issue was unacceptable and the literary scholar made it the flywheel of her entire, solemnly conducted scholarly argument on Faust as an archetype of crucial importance for European identity. She radically opposed Clair's statement included in Marcenac's book and its interpretative line. The scholar accused Clair of unsuccessfully depreciating the German tradition¹⁴ in a bid to restore France's seriously shaken cultural position after the Second World War and, in addition, ahistorically quoting Stendhal's opinion on Goethe. Skwarczyńska pointed out inconsistencies, errors and deficiencies in Clair's erudition. Significantly, she also questioned the subordinate role Clair attributed to Margaret (in the text: Gretchen) in Goethe's work; she recognised the unresolvable drama of a woman in Goethe's time, deprived of her right to self-determination. Therefore, Clair's 'Mediterranean' cavaliness on this issue was unacceptable to her. Skwarczyńska dealt ruthlessly with the director's successive theses about Goethe and his work, not only on the level of character construction, but also on the level of poetics and form, because she saw the function of great literature extremely differently. She recognised Clair's right to artistic freedom in the name of the principles of using film material. However, the replacement of the fatalistic conception of Faust with a rationalistic and pragmatic motivation leading to a love's happy ending seemed to her a misunderstanding, especially as Clair had abandoned the aura of the fantastic in favour of realism.

Jackiewicz valued tradition for its inspirational potential and its ability to develop a network of connections that the artist can use creatively for his own purposes. Film art creates such possibilities, as he wrote a few years later with enduring enthusiasm about the 'philosophical film' which for him was *The Devil's Charm* by combining comedy and seriousness and *reaching for issues that had not yet been covered in this way by any of the old arts, either literature, drama or visual art*.¹⁵ Skwarczyńska questioned the very relevance of the director's commentary, which positions a rather light and entertaining film in the difficult position of a clash with Goethe's masterpiece. To sum up, these two critical approaches, Jackiewicz's affirmative one and Skwarczyńska's polemical one, in an interesting way illuminated the two sides of the Faust myth and its incarnation.

In a sense, Jackiewicz's thought allowing for the *iconoclastic memory of the split metaphor of a canonical text*,¹⁶ such as *Faust*, seems more modern, although it still clashes with defenders of the canon. One should appreciate his research intuition, as he insisted on the autonomous position of film and its uniqueness from other arts, while at the same time appreciating the cultural power of the medium and its ability to absorb and process traditional themes, myths and archetypes. The conviction of the autonomy of the film work seems to be crucial for his reflections on film,¹⁷ which he



Beauty and the Devil, dir. René Clair (1950)



Beauty and the Devil, dir. René Clair (1950)

expressed as early as in 1961 in his article "Uwagi o metodologii dzieła filmowego" ["Notes on the Methodology of the Film Work"] published in *Kwartalnik Filmowy*.¹⁸ The text is primarily postulatory in its character: *The methods must be conceived in such a way that, while preserving in the analysis the overarching principles which every work can fit, they always offer a chance to grasp its peculiar and singular characteristics.*¹⁹

In later years, this attitude led him to make various explorations in this area and to follow the successive stages of the development of film studies as well as experiment with their proper tools in an invigorating rotation. However, he was far from any orthodoxy that could stifle his sensitivity and openness to what was new in cinema and could not be closed in rigid formulas. This is probably why he never abandoned film criticism, and perhaps it was this type of writing that he practised most passionately. He advocated a type of reflection that he called *the cultural aesthetics of cinema*²⁰ developed, in part, out of the spirit of Edgar Morin,²¹ and with time firmly established on an anthropological basis. Yet, with the specificity and uniqueness of the film medium preserved.

We probably do not fully realise how the myths transmitted by cultural texts impinge on visions of the world and on the consciousness of their audiences, since they overlap so many layers. This is what cultural anthropology and intertextual studies try to identify.²² Janina Abramowska, in her text on thematic series, provides an interesting clue. She introduces the notion of namesake or mythical themes. They are constituted by the presence of a specific hero, such as Prometheus, Job or Faust: *each of these names functions as a figure referring as much to a certain basic situation or a plot development as to a certain character or attitude... The hero is unique and exceptional, but the experience encoded in his fate is universal.*²³

Jackiewicz's essay on Faust can be seen as an attempt at such an approach, still very preliminary and sketchy, but intellectually promising, especially when one considers how firmly the myth of Faust has become embedded in film art. In later years, Jackiewicz recalled in this context Jerzy Kawalerowicz's *Mother Joan of the Angels* (*Matka Joanna od aniołów*, 1961), Stanisław Różewicz's *Lynx* (*Ryś*, 1981),²⁴ Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (*Smultronstället*, 1957)²⁵ and the cinema of Edward Żebrowski or Krzysztof Zanussi. In a recently published interview with Zanussi entitled *Samotność Fausta* [*The Solitude of Faust*],²⁶ the director is inclined to interpret his entire oeuvre through the prism of this myth. Perhaps Miklós Jancsó, Werner Herzog or Jan Švankmajer could have said the same as Alexander Sokurov with his film *Faust* (2011). Today it is difficult to count the faithful adaptations and the huge group of Faustian films that refer to the original, evoking it either literally, or indirectly. Alicja Helman recalled some of them in her essay on Faust as part of the "Portrety filmowe" ["Film Portraits"] cycle published in *Kino* [*Cinema*] at the beginning of the 21st century.²⁷ This cycle included, in addition to Faust, such characters as Frankenstein, Dracula, Orpheus, Hannibal, Tristan and Isolde, and many others.

Kazimierz Wyka, in his literary sketch "Faust w ruinach" ["Faust in Ruins"] (1946) included in the volume *Życie na niby* [*Life as If*],²⁸ evokes an incident that resulted in his coming into possession of a partly burnt copy of the German edition of *Faust*. It was found in the ruins of a German reading room in Krakowskie Przedmieście in Warsaw destroyed during the Uprising. He did not quite know what made him buy it, since he already had *Faust* in his collection. As he writes: *Because it was in burned-out Warsaw – I bought it. Because it was Holy Week –*

*I bought it.*²⁹ An overnight reading of the volume provoked a reflection on the reality decimated by war, which, however, did not lead to the end of the world. *Far from the collapse of human civilisation, so many Fausts have sat on the ruins and wept with the voices of the Jerusalem weepers. They do not know that even from ruined Warsaw one can bring a black-bound copy and have a guide for nocturnal thought.*³⁰ Phrases from *Faust*, given in classical German, make up the structure of this text. They give it a rhythm. Almost like verses from the Bible, they entail a series of associations and references with universal significance. But universal does not mean fixed once and for all. The archetypes of Faust, Ulysses, Hamlet, Don Quixote or Don Juan are subject to evolutionary, or revolutionary, reinterpretations in successive incarnations, historical epochs, different environments and cultures. Today, perhaps more violently than ever before, as the very sanctioning of a cultural archetype that establishes the dominance of the white, male hero moulded on European tradition or Western experience is questioned.³¹

There is no doubt that the endurance of these mythologies is nowadays sustained primarily by the texts of visual popular culture, with film at the forefront, but also by TV series,³² computer games, comic strips, and all forms of electronic media circulating on the web (the belief that in the face of an unprecedented proliferation of images literature is less effective remains, unfortunately, not entirely without foundation). This, certainly, does not close the case. If we assume that culture is a blurry, ever-changing amalgam of values and practices, and that any striving for its unified coherence is always political and axiologically laden,³³ the range of possible sense readings and their subsequent configurations seems infinite. But it may be, as Grzegorz Sinko perversely concludes, that *in fact the tragedy of Faust happens very often – only not to geniuses, but precisely to Wagners and Zeitbloms*³⁴ – *to hapless studiosis, to whom at some hour the emptiness of mediocrity and wasted years comes before their eyes, and for whose diligent souls no Mephisto quivers with the gifts of knowledge, art and life.*³⁵

Transl. Artur Piskorz

¹ *Przegląd Kulturalny* 1953, no. 5. As quoted by M. Fik, *Kultura polska po Jalcie. Kronika lat 1944-1981*, Polonia, London 1989, p. 175. This publication is still an invaluable source in recognising the order of historical events of the communist times in Poland and it contains information that will serve here as my guidelines.

² *Przekrój* 1953, no. 411, p. 8.

³ J. Putrament, "Przemyślnictwo ideologiczne w krytyce", *Nowa Kultura* 1953, no. 7, p. 2.

⁴ The group met in private flats. It consisted of artists from various fields: primarily painters and architects (Stefan Krygier, Urszula Broll, Hilary Krzysztofiak, Waldemar Świerzy), but also writers and poets (Andrzej Wydrzyński, Krystyna Broll) or theatre director Konrad Swinarski.

⁵ See: M. Fik, op. cit., p. 190.

⁶ He reprinted this text including an updated section in the volume *Moja filmoteka. Literatura i teatr w filmie*, WAIiF, Warsaw 1989, pp. 181-208.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 191.

⁸ A. Jackiewicz, *René Clair*, Filmowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Warsaw 1957.

⁹ S. Grzelecki, "Urok szatana", *Życie Warszawy* 1955, no. 143, p. 4.

¹⁰ J. Marcenac, *La beauté du diable*, Les Éditeurs français réunis, Paris 1950. Polish edition: *Urok szatana*, transl. J. Hartwig, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1951.

¹¹ S. Skwarczyńska, "Współczesne opracowanie tematu Fausta (film i opowiadanie filmowe wobec Goethego)", in: eadem, *Studia i szkice literackie*, Pax, Warszawa 1953, pp. 243-277.

¹² Stefania Skwarczyńska analyses the full original title, which was not translated in the Polish edition: *La beauté du diable raconté, suivi d'un entretien avec René Clair sur le problème de Faust*. The key aspect for her is the word *raconté*. She associates it with the then new (ephemeral?) genre of French epic, *le film*

- raconté*, the 'film told,' which is Marcenac's work. In this way, literature ... lends a kind of longevity to a film that has won an audience, but which by its very nature, having made its way around the screens, becomes a museum object after a short while – and a quick one at that. Ibidem, pp. 244-245. Such a 'film told' may become a special souvenir for the viewer, a creative reworking of a film work. The matter seems particularly interesting to her, especially in relation to adaptations of great literature, as a kind of two-way exchange process then takes place (by the way – not quite successful in Poland, since Polish viewers were not familiar with the film). This issue of the 'film told' was brought to her attention by Bolesław Lewicki. See also: B. Mruklik, "Raconté", *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich*, vol. 4, no. 2.; G. Szymczyk-Kluszczyńska, "Opowiadam? Opisuje? (Poeci surrealiści wobec kina)", in: *Małe formy narracyjne*, ed. E. Łoch, Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin 1991. Incidentally, the French expression "la beauté du diable" refers in colloquial French to beauty that is dangerous because it is permanent and deceptive, masking disreputable traits of character.
- ¹³ A. Jackiewicz, "Wędrówka Fausta", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1953, no. 10, p. 51.
- ¹⁴ Grzegorz Sinko points out that it was on French ground that the two most interesting stage reincarnations of Faustus were developed, created successively after the First and Second World Wars in an ironic counterpoint to Goethe: Michel de Ghelderode's *La mort du Docteur Faustus* (1926, staged in 1928) and Paul Valéry's *Mon Faust* (1946). See: G. Sinko, "Doktora Faustusa podróż przez wieki", *Dialog* 1963, no. 3, pp. 104-116.
- ¹⁵ A. Jackiewicz, *Latarnia czarnoksiężska*, Filmowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1956, p. 165.
- ¹⁶ L. Fitzsimmons, "Introduction: Magian Mnemotechny", in: *Goethe's Faust and Cultural Memory: Comparatist Interfaces*, ed. L. Fitzsimmons, Lehigh University Press, Bethlehem 2012, p. 8.
- ¹⁷ See: A. Jackiewicz, "Uwagi o metodologii badania dzieła filmowego", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1963, no. 51, pp. 3-14.
- ¹⁸ It is also significant since it debates Bolesław W. Lewicki's theses on the literary character of a film work. However, on a completely different note, literature is a permanent point of reference in Jackiewicz's film studies work.
- ¹⁹ A. Jackiewicz, *Uwagi o metodologii...* op. cit., p. 12.
- ²⁰ Idem, "Film jako kultura (IV). Sztuka niewłaściwa", *Kino* 1977, no. 12, p. 27.
- ²¹ See: E. Morin, *Le Cinéma ou l'Homme imaginaire*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1956.
- ²² On intertextual studies, palimpsests and hypertexts, see: R. Lachmann, "Ebenen des Intertextualitätsbegriffs", in: *Das Gespräch*, ed. K. Stierle, R. Warning, München 1984, pp. 133-138. Polish translation: „Płaszczyzny pojęcia intertekstualności”, transl. M. Łukasiewicz, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1991, no. 4, pp. 209-215.
- ²³ J. Abramowska, *Powtórzenia i wybory. Studia z tematyki i poetyki historycznej*, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznań 1995, p. 37.
- ²⁴ A. Jackiewicz, *Moja filmoteka...* op. cit., pp. 181-216. I would like to thank Mr Rafał Koschany for drawing my attention to this proposal.
- ²⁵ Idem, *Film jako powieść XX wieku*, WAI, Warszawa 1968, pp. 187, 390.
- ²⁶ *Samotność Fausta. Krzysztof Zanussi w rozmowie z Jackiem Moskwą*, Znak, Kraków 2023.
- ²⁷ A. Helman, "Faust. Portrety Filmowe", *Kino* 2008, no. 5, pp. 60-61.
- ²⁸ K. Wyka, *Życie na niby*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1957, <https://wolnelektury.pl/katalog/lektura/wyka-zycie-na-niby.html> (accessed: 5.12.23)
- ²⁹ Ibidem, verse 458.
- ³⁰ Ibidem, verse 492.
- ³¹ See: P. Werres, "The Changing Faces of Dr. Faustus", in: *Lives of Faust: The Faust Theme in Literature and Music*, ed. L. Fitzsimmons, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 2008, pp. 1-18.
- ³² The motif of selling one's soul appeared, for example, in the animated series *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-), in a perverse, sarcastic version appropriate to the series in the episode of 8 October 1995 entitled *Bart Sells His Soul*.
- ³³ See: D. Sutton, P. Wogan, *Hollywood Blockbusters: The Anthropology of Popular Movies*, Routledge, New York 2020 (see especially the introductory chapter: "Ethnography, Anthropology and Beyond", unnumbered).
- ³⁴ We are talking about Wagner, the young assistant to Faust from Goethe's masterpiece, and Serenus Zeitblom, the narrator of Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus*, plotting the story of the composer Adrian Leverkühn.
- ³⁵ G. Sinko, op. cit., p. 116.

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Słowa kluczowe:

Faust;
René Clair;
archetyp;
film opowiedziany

Abstrakt

Teresa Rutkowska

Nieśmiertelny Faust

Autorka sytuje tekst Aleksandra Jackiewicza z 1953 r. w kontekście wydarzeń historycznych i kulturowych, które dokonały się w czasie jego publikacji, ze śmiercią Józefa Stalina łącznie. Na tym tle esej Jackiewicza był wyrazem ucieczki przed polityczną presją doktryny socrealistycznej, która dominowała wówczas w sztuce (także w filmie), w kierunku fascynującego archetypu kultury europejskiej. Uwagę poświęcił on przede wszystkim filmowi Reného Claira *Urok szatana* (*La beauté du diable*, 1950). Autorka konfrontuje tezy Jackiewicza z punktem widzenia literaturoznawczyni Stefani Skwarczyńskiej. Zastanawia się nad trwałością mitu Fausta i jego współczesnymi reinkarnacjami w filmie oraz kulturowymi przemianami jego znaczenia. **(Materiał nierecenzowany).**