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Rafał Koschany

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

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

Phenomenology and Film Studies: Stefan Morawski's Commentary on Roman Ingarden's Theory

Keywords:

Roman Ingarden;
Stefan Morawski;
history of film theory;
film studies;
phenomenology;
aesthetics

Abstract

In the article “Ingarden's Concept of Film Art,” Stefan Morawski analyses two texts devoted to film, written by the great philosopher in 1931 and 1947. He places them in the context of the world film theory of the time and asks questions about their originality. On the one hand, Ingarden's works largely coincide with the intuitions of other scholars, but on the other hand, they are an important stage in the field of comparative studies (film vs. other arts). Above all, however, they played a huge role in the development of Polish film thought and in the attempt to apply the assumptions of phenomenological aesthetics to research on the ontology of the film work and the processes of its reception. **(Non-reviewed material).**

Stefan Morawski was an eminent Polish philosopher, art theorist and aesthetician, one of the most important researchers of the 20th century artistic avant-garde movements and of postmodernism as a direction in art and the humanities. His scholarly legacy is impressive in its erudition, his knowledge of contemporary, Polish and foreign, reference literature, and his diverse interests in various fields of art, including film.¹ Morawski's thoughts on the latter were reflected in his critical and theoretical writings on film, which he continued, with varying degrees of intensity, throughout his professional career. Morawski's first reviews date from the late 1940s and early 1950s.² His book *Jak patrzeć na film* [*How to Watch a Film*] was published in 1955. In the following years, the author, less and less often, wrote critical texts and theoretical treatises. In 2000, Morawski published a short text "Kino etosu czy akcji" ["The Cinema of Ethos or Action"] in *Kwartalnik Filmowy*. It was symbolic and closing in its character, since it was contained in the volume dedicated to the Professor on the occasion of his 80th birthday as well as because it referred to Morawski's articles on film printed in the first period of the publication of the journal between 1951 and 1965. In this text, the philosopher contrasts the tendencies in film production of the time with *traditional, thoroughly ethical cinema*, though it should not be regarded merely as an expression of nostalgia. For example, the author expressed his appreciation for Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999), describing it as a *tragedy reflecting our times*, [which] *touches upon the issues of good and evil not directly, but through a reflection on the meaning of existence that permeates the whole story*.³

The publication of the articles in the first period of *Kwartalnik Filmowy* came at a time when Morawski's academic and teaching career was gaining momentum. It was also during this period that his conviction about the relevance of Marxism and Marxist aesthetics was strengthening. This stance was later regarded as an attempt at searching for a common denominator for different philosophical orientations, or even as an interdisciplinary dialogue,⁴ although in the 1980s the author himself criticised his own choices, even speaking of his having once *turned Marxism into gospel*.⁵ A decade later, emphasising his *great sensitivity to social injustice*,⁶ he added: *I chose this worldview because, after the Holocaust, it seemed to me the most appropriate project for building human bonds on a global scale*.⁷

Morawski's texts on cinema certainly call for re-reading and deeper analysis, also in biographical and institutional terms. But it can already be stated that his treatise *Ingarden's Concept of Film Art* appears to be a unique and important one. In it, the author presents this concept for the first time in Poland in a holistic manner, while not shying away from its criticism. Perhaps it was the strongly theoretical discourse on the ontology of film art that allowed Morawski to break away from ad hoc speculations on dialectical materialism. However, it certainly posed an intellectual challenge and introduced an interesting polarisation of beliefs between the theorist and the cinephile.

Roman Ingarden published two articles on cinema. Both of them were, after Morawski's earlier analysis, repeatedly discussed.⁸ The first of the articles comes from 1931 and made a short section of the book *Das literarische Kunstwerk*, only translated into Polish in 1960.⁹ The fragment entitled "Widowisko kinematograficzne (»film«)" ["The Cinematographic Spectacle (»Film«)"] is included in the

chapter "Wypadki graniczne" ["Borderline Cases"] among the sections on the art of theatre, pantomime and the scientific work. A film work is treated here as a layered and temporal construct, which brings it closer to literature and distinguishes it from painting. In the case of the former, the author also refers to the literary work, but he points out that there are fewer layers in the case of film and that the process of 'reading' it is different. Since it is no longer determined by schematised language, one can speak of a *sharper semblance of reality*.¹⁰ Ingarden phrased his proposal on the basis of his knowledge of silent cinema causing accusations of the a-historicity of his views. Yet, it is worth remembering that the text was written in 1927. Here, the phenomenon of cinema as art is reduced to a single formula, that of art film, which depicts quasi-real objects and events instead of real ones. At the same time, abstract film does not show objects at all, while scientific film or news-reel is focused on real objects.

In turn, in "Kilka uwag o sztuce filmowej" ["A Few Remarks on Film Art"], a fully-fledged scientific article published for the first time in France in 1947,¹¹ the subject of the research changes to sound film. However, certain elements of the earlier considerations remain the same, such as temporality, the question of the appearance and semblance of reality (the assumption of the quasi-reality of represented objects), the situating of film on the borderline of other arts and its reference to reality as such. Ingarden emphasises here that character speech is a necessity in presenting the human world, while he questions the use of the narrator and subtitles as elements not belonging to diegesis. He concludes with the idea that cinema is the art that can most reliably show the complexity of human fate in time and space.

Stefan Morawski, regardless of the master-apprentice relationship between him and Ingarden, repeatedly referred in his research to the phenomenological foundations of Ingarden's aesthetics. His intense interest in cinema and film theory, especially in the first decades of his academic work, must have led him to confront the ideas of the author of *The Literary Work of Art*. Morawski's treatise discussed here turns into a 'check' of sorts in relation to Ingarden's proposals. Firstly, the originality of this proposal is tested against others formulated at that time. In this context, an interesting thesis emerges concerning the disproportion existing in Poland in the 1920s between the high level of theorising and the low level of artistic-film production itself, whereas in the West, theories were rather born as a reaction to film production. According to the author, most of the ideas formulated in Poland were rather a repetition of, or a response to the studies coming from abroad. Their dominant theme remained the 'sensualist trait' indicating the treatment of film as an anti-intellectual art. Morawski's opinion on the section of "The Cinematographic Spectacle (»Film«)" was: *These ideas were not new; what was new was how they were framed against the background of the structural analysis of the literary work and how they were grounded in the concept of the work of art as a multilayered and intentional creation*.¹²

However, according to the scholar, there is no doubt that Ingarden's concept, phenomenological in spirit, had a great influence on the further development of film thought (for example on the works of Leopold Blaustein, Zofia Lissa or Bolesław W. Lewicki). In addition to the difference indicated earlier,

Morawski notes that in the second text the author's reasoning is already clearly moving towards an 'intellectual cinema' influenced by the films themselves and the subsequent important writings of Béla Balázs, Rudolf Arnheim and Gilbert Cohen-Séat. All of them, however, emphasised the role of montage more strongly than Ingarden and, above all, were ahead of him in formulating views on the specificity of film art.

Secondly, Morawski reflects on the validity of Ingarden's assumption regarding the layering and intentionality of a film work, objecting to his proposal to separate three layers (appearances, depicted objects and events) presented in the text published in 1947. For Morawski believed that in film there are *only depicted objects, which, of course, look somehow and create certain specific situations and events. ... The layered division can be maintained only if we separate the components that are diverse in terms of material: visual, aural, verbal.*¹³ Morawski's main objection to the concept of intentionality (understood as a specific meeting of transmitting and receiving acts constituting a particular aesthetic work) is the omission of cultural context in the processes of perception. Most of the appearances of things, people and spaces recognised in the film, together with their functions, are familiar to the viewer from everyday life. In this way, Ingarden's thesis of the irrationality of the work (its quasi-reality) is also undermined: we do not compare the world presented in the film with itself, but with the reality we already know. Incidentally, it is worth mentioning that Morawski's polemic with Ingarden goes much further, thus the former's approach turns out to be unexpectedly close to contemporary methodological contexts. Just as Ingarden wrote about the finished film work, his interpreter argued that in similar analyses one should take into account the aspect of *techné* (from the script to the work on the set to the montage), as well as the socio-cultural conditions of the creation and reception of the film work.

At the end of the considerations, there is a 'check' addressed to Roman Ingarden's phenomenological aesthetics in its entirety as pure theory which refers to a certain model of a work of art and a schematic mode of its reception. Morawski counts on the verification of this concept through artistic practice and the application of the tools thus developed in analytical and interpretative procedures.

Admittedly, Ingarden's film reflection is very limited in terms of volume and actually constitutes only the nucleus of some potential deliberations 'on a film work.' However, it has had an enormous impact on subsequent generations of researchers, being an important inspiration for them. Not only methodological, placing reflections on film in the context of a particular philosophical and aesthetic paradigm, but also identity-related, allowing film studies to develop and become institutionally established thanks to its affinities with a recognised scientific discourse. However, the reception of Ingarden's thought was for quite a long time dominated by a descriptive-reconstructive mode, in which the foundational character of both of the philosopher's texts was taken for granted. The polemical tone, as in the case of Morawski's treatise, occurred much less frequently.

Perhaps the greatest contribution to the contemporary reception of the film thought of the author of *The Literary Work of Art* was made by Alicja Helman. She was one of the heirs (at least in the early period of her scholarly activity) to Ingarden's efforts to apply phenomenology to film studies. Helman was an author

of 'Ingardenian' chapters in textbooks¹⁴ and entries in dictionaries¹⁵. In the more recent Polish reception of film phenomenology *en bloc*, Andrzej Zalewski's considerations are particularly interesting, even if not in the form of the author's conception but of a critical reflection on the paradigm itself and the achievements within its boundaries. The scholar dealt with Husserlian themes in film studies.¹⁶ In his two-part treatise "Inspiracje fenomenologiczne w myśli filmowej" ["Phenomenological Inspirations in Film Thought"]¹⁷ he discussed the proposals of Vivian Sobchack and Allan Casebier, having first outlined the tradition and horizon of the title inspirations and with references to such authors as Amédée Ayfre, Edgar Morin, Jean Mitry, André Bazin, Stanley Cavell, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and, of course, Roman Ingarden.

Morawski emphasised the extraordinary potential of the analysed concept for future research within comparative approaches as well as at the level of detailed aesthetic issues. In retrospect, and irrespective of the proposals contained in the discussed article, it is worth drawing attention to the problem of the relationship between the theory of the literary and filmic work. In both of Ingarden's texts, it is actually not so much the film that is referred to but the spectacle understood as projection (along with technical conditions) and the processes occurring on the part of the viewer. This gives an opportunity to create an analogy with *c o n c r e t i s a t i o n*, described on the grounds of theoretical and literary reflection, which was defined by the phenomenologist as a specific consequence of linguistic schematisation, present at the level of all four layers of the work (sound, meaning, subject and appearance). The question of the concretisation of a film must, of course, include an assumption of its quasi-reality quite different from the operation of literary description. However, there is no doubt that certain questions remain valid. As individuals, why do we perceive the same image differently? Why do our concretisations differ? How, and with what language, can we communicate about these concretisations?

Furthermore, Ingarden's fundamentally different conceptions of the specificity of the literary and cinematic work could be given a common denominator (*tertium comparationis*). For example, following the conviction that the ontology of the work influences the nature of its perception, in the area of *f i l m a d a p t a t i o n*. What is at stake here is a special case of the order of concretisation that is important for the aesthetic experience of the viewer: first the literary, then the filmic, or vice versa. In this context, it seems interesting to ask what, in the case of these possible configurations of acts of reception, is the role of memory and imagination.

Finally, Ingarden derives the thesis of the intentionality of the work from assumptions developed within his reflection on literature and its ontological conditions. However, while a literary work without preservation (for example, in memory) will always remain the same work, *t h e r e l a t i o n s h i p o f f i l m a s a r e c o r d i n g a n d f i l m a s a p r o j e c t i o n* is shaped quite differently. Ingarden was not alone in such suppositions, for many of his early theories referred to a fascination with art that was described as a play of shadows or spectres. It seems, however, that the application of the tools of describing film spectacle offered by phenomenological aesthetics is a potential that

can still be exploited. In this context, the topic of the increasing expansion of “electronic cinema” and “digital image” taken up by Morawski in his article published in 2000 seems particularly interesting because of possible updates. The author wrote in it that *the presence of artistic qualities is thus being eroded, undermining the notion of art and the ontology specific to it*.¹⁸

Stefan Morawski, in the conclusion of his extended commentary, first and foremost appreciated Roman Ingarden’s comparatist approach, much more competent in this respect than the work of world scholars: *He did not intend to give anything more than what he gave, i.e. preliminary proposals for the study of film against the background of other arts*.¹⁹ A glance at the history of the early reflection on film reconstructed by the commentator makes it possible to treat the proposal of the author of *The Literary Work of Art* as convergent with the achievements of Western theorists and, in the Polish context, as a momentous and extremely inspiring statement of an aesthete and philosopher on cinema – even today. At this point it is worth posing a question about the role and significance of Morawski’s earlier proposal which is, after all, one of the first and most comprehensive attempts to deal with Ingarden’s idea: a concept often quoted and eagerly treated as a point of reference, and today almost legendary. Taking into account Morawski’s expanding field of interest over time, the 1958 work appears as an early but important voice in the reflection developed at the interface of aesthetics, philosophy of art, phenomenology and comparative studies. For the scholar, film was not the most important point of reference, although it appeared regularly in his work, practically until the end of his scientific activity. The juxtaposition of Ingarden’s and Morawski’s texts and the ways in which the two philosophers understood cinema provides a basis for comparing two fundamentally different perspectives: an ontology of the film work abstracted from external contexts and, embedded in the analysis of specific works²⁰ and critical activity, a (cultural) theory of film as art created and received under specific political, economic, social and aesthetic conditions.

Transl. Artur Piskorz

¹ See: P. J. Przybyś, “Stefan Morawski. 1921-2004,” in: *Monumenta Universitatis Varsoviensis 1816-2016. Portrety uczonych. Profesorowie Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego po 1945. L-R*, eds. W. Baraniewski, W. Tygielski, A. K. Wróblewski, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2016, p. 303; P. J. Przybyś, *Fenomenologia, film i awangarda. O inspiracjach Stefana Morawskiego*, in: “Przeгляд Kulturoznawczy” 2001, no. 3, p. 569.

² This period was analysed by Jakub Zajdel, who shows the level of the aesthetician’s involvement in film criticism: *In the years*

1948-1956, Morawski wrote 245 reviews and reports from film reviews and festivals for “Gazeta Krakowska”, “Echo Krakowa” and “Echo Tygodnia”. J. Zajdel, “Stefan Morawski on Film and Film Criticism”, *Przeгляд Kulturoznawczy* 2001, no. 3, p. 602.

³ S. Morawski, “Kino etosu czy akcji”, *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2000, no. 29-30, pp. 6-7.

⁴ See: P. J. Przybyś, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, “Stefan Morawski – wstępny szkic do portretu”, in: S. Morawski, *Wybór pism estetycznych*, eds. P. J. Przybyś, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, Universitas, Kraków 2007, p. XVII.

- ⁵ S. Morawski, "Ukażenia i przeciwtoksyny albo omamy i ocucenie" in: *Stefan Morawski – szkic do portretu. Materiały z okazji jubileuszu 60-lecia*, ed. Polskie Towarzystwo Filozoficzne – Uniwersytet Łódzki – Galeria Art Forum, T. Porada, Łódź 1984, pp. 15-16.
- ⁶ *O filozofowaniu, perypetiach dzisiejszej kultury i "rebus publicis". Ze Stefanem Morawskim rozmawiają Andrzej Szahaj i Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska*, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 1995, p. 65.
- ⁷ Ibidem.
- ⁸ Also in English: A. Helman, "Influence of Ingarden's Aesthetics on the Theory of Film", in: *Roman Ingarden and Contemporary Polish Aesthetics*, eds. P. Graff, S. Krzemiń-Ojak, PWN, Warszawa 1975; A. Helman, W. M. Osadnik, Ł. Plesnar, E. Wilk, "Some Remarks on the Application of Ingarden's Theory to Film Studies", in: *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research*, ed. A.-T. Tymieniecka, Springer-Science+Bussines Media, London 1994.
- ⁹ I used the edition: R. Ingarden, *O dziele literackim. Badania z pogranicza ontologii, teorii języka i filozofii literatury*, transl. M. Turowicz, PWN, Warszawa 1988, pp. 400-405. The reprint was also published under the shortened title as "Widowisko kinematograficzne" (German edition: *Das kinematographische Schauspiel*), in: *Polska myśl teatralna i filmowa*, eds. T. Sivert, R. Taborski, PWN, Warszawa 1971, pp. 658-664, and also with a shortened title in: *Polska myśl filmowa. Antologia tekstów z lat 1898-1939*, selected and edited by J. Bocheńska, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1975, pp. 226-231.
- ¹⁰ See: S. Morawski, *Ingardenowska koncepcja sztuki filmowej*, *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1958, no. 4, p. 20.
- ¹¹ The text was first published in Polish in: R. Ingarden, *Studia z estetyki*, vol. II, PWN, Warszawa 1958, pp. 297-316; reprinted in: *Aesthetics and Film*, ed. A. Helman, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1972, pp. 201-222.
- ¹² S. Morawski, *Ingardenowska koncepcja sztuki filmowej*, op. cit., p. 23.
- ¹³ Ibidem, p. 26.
- ¹⁴ See: A. Helman, "Roman Ingarden", in: A. Helman, J. Ostaszewski, *Historia myśli filmowej, słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2007, pp. 117-129.
- ¹⁵ See: A. Helman, "Dzieło sztuki – filmowe", in: *Słownik pojęć filozoficznych Romana Ingardena*, eds. A. J. Nowak, L. Sosnowski, Universitas, Kraków 2001, pp. 38-42.
- ¹⁶ See: A. Zalewski, "Obecność Husserla w współczesnej myśli filmowej", *Fenomenologia* 2004, no. 2, pp. 101-110.
- ¹⁷ See: Idem, "Inspiracje fenomenologiczne w myśli filmowej (I)", in: *Prace Naukowe Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie* 2013, vol. X, pp. 7-29; idem, "Inspiracje fenomenologiczne w myśli filmowej (II)", in: *Prace Naukowe Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie* 2014, vol. XI, pp. 41-59.
- ¹⁸ S. Morawski, *Kino etosu czy akcji*, op. cit., p. 6.
- ¹⁹ Idem, *Ingardenowska koncepcja sztuki filmowej*, op. cit., p. 30.
- ²⁰ See: Morawski's answers in a survey organised by the editors of *Kwartalnik Filmowy* as part of the *Stulecie kinematografii* series. *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1993, no. 3, pp. 213, 219.

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 journals articles and book chapters; co-editor of several collective volumes, among others: *Musical i historia* [The Musical and History] (2023).

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Słowa kluczowe:

Roman Ingarden;
Stefan Morawski;
historia teorii filmu;
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estetyka

Abstrakt

Rafał Koschany

Fenomenologia i filmoznawstwo. Stefana Morawskiego komentarz do koncepcji Romana Ingardena

Stefan Morawski w artykule *Ingardenowska koncepcja sztuki filmowej* analizuje dwie wypowiedzi wielkiego filozofa poświęcone filmowi: z 1931 i 1947 r., umieszcza je na tle ówczesnej światowej myśli filmowej i zadaje pytanie o ich oryginalność. Z jednej strony prace Ingardena w dużym stopniu pokrywają się z intuicjami innych badaczy, z drugiej – stanowią ważną część badań porównawczych (między filmem a innymi dziedzinami sztuki). Przede wszystkim jednak refleksje te odegrały ogromną rolę w rozwoju polskiej myśli filmowej oraz w próbie zastosowania założeń estetyki fenomenologicznej do badań nad ontologią dzieła filmowego i procesami jego odbioru. **(Materiał nierecenzowany).**