

„Kwartalnik Filmowy” no. 127 (2024)

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

<https://doi.org/10.36744/kf.2969>

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Teresa Rutkowska

Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2888-9206>

Film and the Inexorable Wheels of History

Keywords:

Władysław Jewsiewicki;
prehistory of cinema;
history of cinema;
archaeology of cinema;
New Cinema History;
Polish pre-war cinema

Abstract

The author describes the figure and work of Władysław Jewsiewicki, who is considered a pioneer of the prehistory and history of Polish pre-war cinema. After Poland regained statehood in 1918, until the outbreak of World War II, no synthetic history of film or cinema was created, nor was there a film archive. In the early 1950s, Jewsiewicki compiled the first list of fictional, documentary, advertising, propaganda, educational, and animated films created in 1896–1939, as well as texts about film; he described the history of the first cinematographic inventions and wrote a synthetic history of silent and sound film in pre-war Poland. Subsequent generations of film historians referred to his documentary works. Currently, the trend of regional histories of pre-war cinema is developing dynamically in the New Cinema History, as well as in reference to the archaeology of film and media inspired by Thomas Elsaesser. **(Non-reviewed material).**

Władysław Jewsiewicki's *Polish Science and Technology in Relation to the Invention of the Cinematograph and the Formation of Modern Film* is, to some extent, a continuation of his previously published popular science book *Prehistoria filmu* [*Prehistory of Film*].¹ This work presents the creative efforts of generations of inventors striving to depict the visible world through a series of images creating the illusion of motion,² highlighting the crucial experiments and projects associated with 19th-century optical discoveries that led to the emergence of cinema. The article discussed here supplements this list of issues and names with Polish contributions, less commonly known but certainly worth noting. The author later expanded on the topic in his short monographs of the most important figures mentioned in the article such as Jan Szczepanik,³ Kazimierz Prószyński,⁴ and Władysław Starewicz.⁵ The references to these books still appear in the literature on the subject, including foreign publications.⁶ The first two were reissued with additions, and Jewsiewicki also served as a consultant for Vadim Berestovsky's film documentaries about Starewicz.⁷ His next area of research interest became the early period of Polish cinema.

It was not without reason that Jewsiewicki was called a pioneer of Polish film history. Until the outbreak of the war, this field of study was practically non-existent in Poland, lacking well-developed methodologies, relevant studies, and systematic state film collections and documentation.⁸ Tadeusz Lubelski noted that in the early 1950s, Jewsiewicki was considered a *harmless eccentric*⁹ as he was practically the only researcher of pre-war film history. Jewsiewicki's scholarly resources at that time were highly insufficient. He recalled that since 1946, he had been collecting and organising film documentation on his own. In 1950, in the introduction to his doctoral dissertation *Przemysł filmowy w Polsce w okresie międzywojennym (1919-1939)* [*Film Industry in Poland in the Interwar Period (1919-1939)*] he wrote: *When undertaking research on the history of film in Poland, the issue of sources is essential. These include, above all, the archives of censorship authorities and the records of public administration offices overseeing the film industry. Many materials are also contained in the archives of other offices, such as tax records related to municipal dues from public film screenings, customs and currency office records, commercial registers, etc. Extremely valuable are also the archives of film industry trade associations, such as the National Film Industry Council, Film Industrialists, Short Film Producers, Light Theatre Association, as well as other film associations. A lot of materials and information are also contained in the archives of individual film studios and film rental offices, and sometimes even cinemas. Currently, we are deprived of the vast majority of these archival materials. The war and the long Nazi occupation caused terrible destruction of film archives. With the destruction of Warsaw, the primary sources for film history were also destroyed, as the film industry during the interwar period was primarily concentrated in the capital.*¹⁰

Therefore, in his findings, he used (in his own words) derivative materials such as published government communiqués, legal acts of the state and industry institutions, statistical yearbooks, press enunciations (incomplete, as part of the film press was also destroyed or considered lost), memoirs, and – a practice he often used as a historian – interviews and correspondence with living witnesses and participants of events.

For the sake of accuracy, it should be mentioned that the only book published before the war on this subject that Jewsiewicki could refer to was Władysław Balce-

rzak's *Przemysł filmowy w Polsce* [*Film Industry in Poland*] (1928) describing the period of 1895-1925. In the book, Balcerzak described *the manifestations of economic life that begin with the processing of raw film (unprojected film tape) and end with its projection on the screen*,¹¹ such as film studios, film copying companies, laboratories preparing Polish subtitles for foreign films, sales and rental agencies, and, of course, cinema theatres.

The inability to access sources, which comprise the basis of all reflection for a historian, was not the only problem Jewsiewicki faced in his passion for searching for traces of the past. The attitude of Jerzy Toeplitz was also significant. As the director of the Łódź Film School, he had decisive influence on the direction of historical film research. He did not value pre-war Polish films, expressing this opinion as a co-creator and activist of the "Start" Association of Lovers of Artistic Film, which fought for the social utility of films and against the prevailing principles of the film production system in Poland in the 1930s.

Jewsiewicki's *Materiały do dziejów filmu w Polsce (cz. 1 i 2)* [*Materials for the History of Film in Poland (Parts 1 and 2)*] was published in 1952 in the form of a duplicated typescript. The first volume contains a list of films from the period of 1908-1939 (in chronological order, with the production personnel listed): full-length, medium-length, shorts, features and documentaries, educational, travel, experimental, and other types of productions. In the second volume, the author included a bibliography of texts on film. It was the first publication of the film section of the State Institute of Art (later the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences) and the first compilation of this kind in Poland. While acknowledging the necessity of such studies for film research, in his introduction Jerzy Toeplitz emphasised the fact that pre-war Polish cinema was subject to censorship and the dictate of profit-oriented private American producers and distributors. According to him, at the same time it was an *apologia and glorification of the nobility, landed gentry, and the gentry manor style*...¹² Jewsiewicki's achievements in collecting documents were eventually appreciated years later in the introduction written by Toeplitz to the first volume of *Historia filmu polskiego* [*History of Polish Film*]. He confirmed, among other things, the pioneering status of Jewsiewicki's research. *Working in difficult, solitary conditions, based on his own limited resources, he provided the first essential components for the history of Polish cinema*.¹³ The information gathered by Jewsiewicki was helpful to the authors of this volume, although it was subject to some verification, which was possible due to a much richer filmographic database than before.¹⁴

Władysław Jewsiewicki was also an educator, and a significant part of his writing activity had an educational message aimed at students of the Łódź Film School. This was the purpose of the scripts *Uwagi o polskim filmie. Wypisy źródłowe* [*Notes on Polish Film: Source Materials*],¹⁵ *Historia filmu polskiego. Wprowadzenie do historii polskiej kinematografii 1894-1939* [*History of Polish Film: Introduction to the History of Polish Cinema 1894-1939*],¹⁶ as well as *Historia filmowej sztuki aktorskiej okresu niemeo* [*History of Film Acting in the Silent Period*] – an interestingly conceived selection of statements by foreign and Polish theorists and actors on acting styles in early films.¹⁷

Two subsequent books summarised numerous years of his historical research in the field of cinema: *Polska kinematografia w okresie filmu niemeo (1895-1929/1930)* [*Polish Cinema in the Silent Film Period (1895-1929/1930)*]¹⁸ and *Polska*

kinematografia w okresie filmu dźwiękowego (1930-1939) [*Polish Cinema in the Sound Film Period (1930-1939)*].¹⁹ He concisely recorded film events of that period based on information gathered over the years. However, he was well aware that his *source capital was rather oral and memory-based than written*.²⁰ Jewsiewicki was convinced that *film art, as the ultimate result of the cooperation of many diverse factors that make up the entirety of cinema and the other spheres of culture that remain closely related to it, is one of the most faithful reflections of real social relations and ideological tendencies*.²¹ In 1966, in a coincidence unfortunate for Jewsiewicki, the first volume of the aforementioned *History of Polish Film* was also published as part of a much broader and more ambitious project started by the Film Department of the Institute of Art. Yet, those two inconspicuous volumes, standing on the shelf in the reference library of the National Film Archive, show signs of frequent use. Jan Olszewski, a critic from the *Film* magazine, accused the author of *not being particularly interested in the value of individual films of that period – not a single Polish film was analysed in this book*,²² even though Jewsiewicki noted that, in these works, he explored the history of cinema rather than individual films. Perhaps these studies did not meet their time. Olszewski's disappointment reflects the conviction present in Poland at the time that film was, above all, an art and that film research should focus on this aspect, which mostly became the case in the following years. This attitude was supported in the 1960s by the exceptional expansion of artistic and *auteur* cinema,²³ and the generations of film scholars raised on this output dedicated their attention to the history of masterpieces and outstanding filmmakers. Meanwhile, Jewsiewicki, according to his predispositions, shifted the emphasis to technical, structural, and organisational issues, to facts rather than interpretations, which was facilitated by his laconic, factual writing style.

National film histories usually combine aesthetic, technical, systemic and production, as well as cultural issues in a multifaceted way. Polish historians during the Polish People's Republic era were under the additional pressure of political censorship. These restrictions left their mark on the aforementioned *History of Polish Film*²⁴ – a collectively edited publication in six volumes (under the scientific editorship, first of Jerzy Toeplitz, then of Rafał Marszałek) covering the years 1895-1972. The work on its continuation was abandoned for various reasons: the exhaustion of the formula, generational and personnel changes in the research team, and finally, the political upheaval of 1989, which generated the need to reassess previous findings and fill in blank spots rather than continue with Toeplitz's approach. Such initiatives, on a smaller scale and fragmentarily, were quickly undertaken in various research centres in the country, facilitated by the strengthening of film studies and its growing importance as an academic discipline. A comprehensive and original version of the issues related to domestic cinema was only presented by Tadeusz Lubelski. His *Historia kina polskiego. Twórcy, filmy, konteksty* [*History of Polish Cinema: Creators, Films, Contexts*]²⁵ thoughtfully combines the account of film as an artistic expression and of cinema as a significant segment of culture embedded in social and political processes. However, after six years and Poland's accession to the European Union, the author himself felt the need to update the book, make corrections, and additions – hence the decision for a new edition, entitled *Historia kina polskiego 1895-2014* [*History of Polish Cinema 1895-2014*].²⁶

Thus, writing history is an endless task, a constant return to the sources, constructing a palimpsest where successive layers of research, new discoveries, personal findings, and observations are overwritten on the works of predecessors. In this sense, the pioneering works of Jewsiewicki and successive generations of historians, even if they require corrections and additions, will remain points of reference, both overt and often hidden or even unrecognised. Barbara Gierszewska convincingly writes about this in her text “O potrzebie klasycznych badań dokumentalnych nad życiem filmowym w Polsce (pomimo ‘zwrotu historiograficznego’)” [“On the Need for Classical Documentary Research on Film Life in Poland (Despite the ‘Historiographical Turn’)”] in the edited volume *Konteksty źródłowe w badaniach filmoznawczych* [*Source Contexts in Film Studies Research*]²⁷ where we find an extensive discussion of many of the issues signalled here.

One of the more important lines of research in Polish film historiography since the early 1990s has been a series of publications documenting regional manifestations of pre-war film life. The research was initiated by Małgorzata Hendrykowska and Marek Hendrykowski and followed by many others: Andrzej Gwóźdź, Urszula Biel, and Jan F. Lewandowski writing about cinema in Silesia, Hanna Krajewska – about film life in Łódź, Anna Mikonis – about Vilnius, Barbara Gierszewska – about Lviv, Andrzej Urbańczyk – about Kraków, Monika Bator – about cinemas in Kielce, Mariusz Guzek – about filmic Bydgoszcz,²⁸ and finally Wojciech Świdziński – about the foreign repertoire of pre-war Warsaw cinemas.²⁹

The common feature of these studies is the adoption of the New Cinema History perspective, as well as, owing to the incomparably greater availability of sources (digitised press materials, archives, museum resources, private collections made available to the public, correspondence, and diaries, both domestic and foreign), the incorporation of new research methodologies, including film history theory. It is worth mentioning the work of German researchers, Siegfried Zielinski, and especially Thomas Elsaesser, who, using the concepts of “media archaeology” or “cinema archaeology,” refers to Michel Foucault and his “archaeology of knowledge.”³⁰ Without delving into the details of this complex issue, it should be acknowledged that the archaeological principle concerning traces of the past recommends taking a descriptive rather than interpretative stance. Elsaesser proposes that the earliest film achievements should be treated in this way: *Media archaeology has to do with recovering the multiple origins and deeply embedded media contexts of what came to be known as cinema.*³¹ *So, it is a complicated relationship that we enter into when we think of the past as an archaeological site to be unearthed and delicately to be preserved and put on display...*³²

It is sometimes worth thinking of the first historians of the earliest Polish cinema as cinema archaeologists – while keeping in mind that this skilful blend of concepts that is the “archaeology of knowledge” can also refer to historical writings on cinematography and film as testimonies of former historiography. This was our goal when we decided to recall the work of Władysław Jewsiewicki.³³

Transl. Artur Piskorz

- ¹ W. Jewsiewicki, *Prehistoria filmu*, Filmowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1953. His earlier text "Leonardo da Vinci – prekursor kinematografii" was published in *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1952, no. 5-6, pp. 86-92. See also the following review: W. Banaszkiwicz, "'Prehistoria filmu' W. Jewsiewickiego", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1954, no. 14, pp. 66-69.
- ² W. Jewsiewicki, *Prehistoria filmu*, op. cit., p. 11.
- ³ Idem, *Polski Edison Jan Szczepanik*, Wydawnictwo Interpress, Warszawa 1972.
- ⁴ Idem, *Kazimierz Prószyński*, Wydawnictwo Interpress, Warszawa 1974 (1st edition: 1954).
- ⁵ Idem, *Władysław Starewicz. Pionier sztuki filmowej i twórcza filmu lalkowego*, Wydawnictwa Radia i Telewizji, Warszawa 1977; idem, *Ezop XX wieku: Władysław Starewicz – pionier filmu lalkowego i sztuki filmowej*, Wydawnictwa Radia i Telewizji, Warszawa 1989; idem, "Władysław Starewicz – nieznanym pionier sztuki filmowej", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1961, no. 43, pp. 3-34.
- ⁶ See: S. Skaff, "Early Cinema and 'the Polish Question'", in: *Early Cinema and the "National"*, eds. R. Abel, G. Bertellini, R. King, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2008, p. 76.
- ⁷ *Władysław Starewicz* (1986) and *Lalki Władysława Starewicza* (1988).
- ⁸ In *Historia filmu polskiego*, vol. 1, the authors recall Ryszard Biske (1895-1938), the director and film history enthusiast, whose extensive collection of stills, programs, and film posters was irretrievably lost during the war. See: W. Banaszkiwicz, W. Witczak, *Historia filmu polskiego. 1895-1929*, ed. J. Toeplitz, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1989, p. 8.
- ⁹ T. Lubelski, "Jerzy Toeplitz jako historyk filmu", in: *Filmowe ulice Jerzego Toeplitza*, ed. R. Marszałek, Studio MTM, Warszawa 2015, p. 40.
- ¹⁰ W. Jewsiewicki, *Przemysł filmowy w Polsce w okresie międzywojennym (1919-1939)*, Łódź 1951, manuscript, pp. 10-11.
- ¹¹ W. Balcerzak, *Przemysł filmowy w Polsce*, Drukarnia Zrzeszenia Samorządów Powiatowych, Warszawa 1928, doctoral dissertation, p. 1, <https://polona.pl/item-view/c130e-893-8f5c-4a45-9501-dd4d8966c02c?page=6> (accessed: 1.05.2024).
- ¹² J. Toeplitz, "Wstęp", in: W. Jewsiewicki, *Materiały do dziejów filmu w Polsce (cz. 1 i 2)*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1952, p. 2.
- ¹³ J. Toeplitz, "Wstęp", in: W. Banaszkiwicz, W. Witczak, op. cit., pp. 9-10.
- ¹⁴ This was due to, among other things, the Central Film Archive, established in 1955 and renamed the Polish Film Archive in 1970, and then, in 1987, the National Film Archive.
- ¹⁵ W. Jewsiewicki, *Uwagi o polskim filmie. Wyписы źródłowe*, Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Teatralna i Filmowa, Łódź 1955.
- ¹⁶ Idem, *Historia filmu polskiego. Wprowadzenie do historii polskiej kinematografii 1894-1939*, Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Teatralna i Filmowa, Łódź 1959.
- ¹⁷ Idem, *Historia filmowej sztuki aktorskiej okresu niemego*, Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Teatralna i Filmowa, Łódź 1959.
- ¹⁸ Idem, *Polska kinematografia w okresie filmu niemego (1895-1929/1930)*, Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, Łódź 1966.
- ¹⁹ Idem, *Polska kinematografia w okresie filmu dźwiękowego (1930-1939)*, Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, Łódź 1967.
- ²⁰ Idem, *Polska kinematografia w okresie filmu niemego...* op. cit., p. 8.
- ²¹ Ibidem.
- ²² J. Olszewski, "Nowe historie filmu", *Film* 1968, no. 15, p. 7.
- ²³ Andrzej Werner expressed it most clearly when he wrote that *those years were the most brilliant, peak period in the history of cinema. It had never reached such heights and such significance and ... it would never return to such a level* (idem, *Dekada filmu*, Wydawnictwo IBL, Warszawa 1997, p. 7).
- ²⁴ *Historia filmu polskiego*, eds. J. Toeplitz, R. Marszałek, vol. 1 (1895-1929), Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1966; 2nd edition: 1989; vol. 2 (1930-1939), Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1988; vol. 3 (1939-1956), Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1974; vol. 4 (1957-1961), Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1980; vol. 5 (1962-1967), Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1985; vol. 6 (1968-1972), Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1994.
- ²⁵ T. Lubelski, *Historia kina polskiego. Twórcy, filmy, konteksty*, Videograf II, Katowice 2009. *Historia kina polskiego*, eds. T. Lubelski, K. J. Zarębski (Fundacja KINO, Warszawa 2006), contained studies on Polish cinema from its beginnings to 2006. It was expanded and reissued a year later.
- ²⁶ T. Lubelski, *Historia kina polskiego 1895-2014*, Universitas, Kraków 2015.
- ²⁷ *Konteksty źródłowe w badaniach filmoznawczych*, eds. B. Giza, B. Gierszewska, M. Bator, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2022.

- ²⁸ For extensive bibliographic information on this subject see: *Konteksty źródłowe w badaniach filmoznawczych*, op. cit.
- ²⁹ W. Świdziński, *Co było grane? Film zagraniczny w Polsce w latach 1918-1929*, Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Warszawa 2015.
- ³⁰ M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, Routledge, London – New York 2002; see also: S. Cichowicz, "Archéologie du savoir" [untitled review], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1972, no. 2, pp. 360-368.
- ³¹ "Film History as Media Archaeology: Thomas Elsaesser interviewed by Fryderyk Kwiatkowski", *Facta Ficta: Journal of Theory, Narrative and Media* 2018, vol. 2, no. 2, p. 183.
- ³² *Ibidem*, p. 186.
- ³³ It is also worth mentioning the last historical

film book by Władysław Jewsiewicki *Polscy filmowcy na frontach drugiej wojny światowej* [Polish Filmmakers on the Fronts of World War II] (Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1972). Here, too, Jewsiewicki consistently avoided assessing and analysing films, and his goal was to describe the history of making documentary photographs in verifiable situations, in relative accordance with historical facts (*ibidem*, p. 196). This book, alongside Stanisław Ozimek's *Film polski w wojennej potrzebie* [Polish Film in Wartime Need] (Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1974), is the most important source of information on Polish film from that period. See also: W. Jewsiewicki, "Polscy filmowcy i Oświęcim", *Kino* 1987, no. 9, pp. 26-29.

Teresa Rutkowska

Former editor-in-chief of *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, translator, now retired. She publishes book reviews in the monthly magazine *Nowe Książki*. Her areas of interest include film narration and the relationship between image and word in film.

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Słowa kluczowe:

Władysław Jewsiewicki;
prehistoria kina;
historia kina;
archeologia kina;
Nowa Historia Kina;
polskie kino
przedwojenne

Abstrakt

Teresa Rutkowska

Film i nieublagane tryby historii

Autorka opisuje sylwetkę i twórczość Władysława Jewsiewickiego, który jest uważany za pioniera prehistorii i historii polskiego kina przedwojennego. Po odzyskaniu przez Polskę państwowości w 1918 r. aż do wybuchu II wojny światowej nie powstała żadna syntetyczna historia filmu i kina, nie było też archiwum filmowego. Jewsiewicki na początku lat 50. sporządził pierwszy spis filmów fikcyjnych, dokumentalnych, reklamowych, propagandowych, oświatowych i animowanych powstałych w latach 1896–1939 oraz tekstów o filmie, opisywał dzieje pierwszych wynalazków kinematograficznych, spisał też syntetyczne dzieje filmu niemego i dźwiękowego w Polsce przedwojennej. Kolejne pokolenia historyków filmu odwoływały się do jego prac dokumentacyjnych. Obecnie żywo rozwija się trend regionalnych historii kina przedwojennego w nurcie Nowej Historii Kina, a także w nawiązaniu do archeologii filmu i mediów z inspiracji Thomasa Elsaessera. **(Materiał nie-recenzowany).**