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# Sensualism – A Theoretical Proposal by Aleksander Kumor and Danuta Palczewska

## Keywords:

Aleksander Kumor;  
Danuta Palczewska;  
history of film theory;  
sensuous theory

## Abstract

In the article “Sensualism as a Basis for the Study of a Film Work,” Aleksander Kumor and Danuta Palczewska analyse film as an art uniquely affecting the viewer’s senses. The development of film and new possibilities for intensifying sensory perception greatly influence the universalization of film language. The commentary on the article includes a brief reconstruction of the theory proposed in 1963, as well as an attempt to place it in the structural-semiotic paradigm of the time. Above all, however, “Sensualism...” is assessed here as a pioneering exposition significantly foreshadowing changes in film theory that would occur several decades later. A reflection on the development of the sensuous theory, introduced in the 1990s by Vivian Sobchack, allows us to conclude that the early proposal of Polish researchers is fundamentally different from contemporary approaches. For example, today’s language is marked by the individual perspective and experience of the researcher; the viewer’s perception depends on numerous biological, social, and cultural factors; and finally, separate senses, including the sense of touch, have become the subject of specialized, interdisciplinary research. **(Non-reviewed material).**

When reading the subsequent volumes of the first edition of *Film Quarterly* (*Kwartalnik Filmowy*), Aleksander Kumor and Danuta Palczewska's article *Sensualism as a Basis for the Study of a Film Work (Some Preliminary Proposals)* [*Sensualizm jako podstawa badania dzieła filmowego (Niektóre wstępne propozycje)*] appears to be exceptional for at least three reasons. Firstly, it is a subject of reflection that is virtually isolated in the output of these distinguished authors of Polish film studies in their individual as well as their relatively often undertaken collaborative work. Secondly, the subject matter raised in the article (precisely delineated as film theory and the project of its research), actually did not appear as a subject of separate, in-depth reflection until the first reactions of Polish researchers to the development of the so-called sensual theory of cinema, i.e. already in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, in the context of the aforementioned theory, the proposal of the authors of *Sensualism...* remains almost forgotten. In this short commentary, it is not possible to address all the threads of this dense and saturated with theoretical complications text. However, several issues warrant separate attention.

The starting point of the considerations is the search for *the universal criteria for the mass appeal of film*<sup>2</sup> extending beyond the sociological and cultural categories used so far. They, as the authors claim, are not sufficient to speak of *the autonomy of film and its peculiar effect on the mass audience*.<sup>3</sup> Such a universal criterion turns out to be the 'sensualism' of the title, understood here *as the film's striving towards that ideal limit for which we consider pure sensual qualities*.<sup>4</sup> Thus the formula of 'cinematic sensualism' first suggests that we are talking about the 'nature' of film, its 'materiality,' its *element*,<sup>5</sup> its distinguishing or even defining characteristics. In this way, both silent and sound films, made in realist and non-realist conventions, are separately discussed with emphasis on the changing sensual dominants in the reception processes. The 'sensual' level of reception of the latter may be somewhat stronger, especially if this is the aim of the artistic experiment. The authors make it clear, though, that they are interested in feature cinema intended for a wide audience.

Kumor and Palczewska are therefore looking for characteristic qualities of film that will affect specific senses in a particular way. Of course, in the case of film it is always about their juxtaposition. The phrase, repeated several times, about *intensifying sensual experience* expresses *de facto* the main premise of the argument. It concerns film as an art that develops artistically and technologically, in order (among other things) to strengthen the connections between the viewer's senses and what happens on and off the screen. Therefore the most relevant to this conception appears to be this relationship since film (depending on its saturation with the relevant sensual factors) evokes particular sensations in the viewer.

The authors find the analogy of sensual cognition of reality and art as particularly helpful. The formulation of statements based on the tenets of cognitive psychology and appropriately confronted with the reception processes occurring during a film screening, allow us to speak of an analogous cinematic *quasi*-sensual experience. In the background of these considerations, there remains a 'natural' aspiration of cinema to identify these two processes, to make the viewers experience the film in a similar way as they experience the space that surrounds them. However, such a 'duplication' of the world by means of the film and the condi-

tions of its 'reception' would be related to the involvement of all the senses. Hence the references to experiments in (among other things) scent cinema which did not cease in the following decades, but which (in the unveilings of the successive 'D's) moved further and further away from art cinema or even cinema telling interesting stories. As the authors point out, the sensual experience in the reception of moving images is always either incomplete or stronger than that given by reality. And therein, too, lies the strength of film as art. This notion can be taken as an unspoken manifesto of 'sensualism.' But also, I think, as a foreshadowing of the development of a sensual theory of cinema and all the difficulties it will encounter in descriptions of films and sensual reception processes.

The authors, analysing the contribution of the senses to the film reception, refer to the key theme of the difference in the effects of understanding: sensual and semantic. In the model outlined in this way, these appear to be two extremes, but, in fact, it is a matter of dissecting a kind of gradation. Thus, the researchers, starting from the immanent features of a film considered on three levels, simultaneously delineate the boundaries of the reception processes. In fact, these levels (unlike the layers, *which are exclusively objectified in a film work*<sup>6</sup>) define precisely three different, although mechanically impossible to demarcate, types of relationship between a viewer and a film. The model is built on changing proportions: pure sensual qualities and all kinds of devices (to use a formalist term), such as signs, symbols or metaphors, which reduce qualities accessible through the senses to concepts and intersubjectively comprehensible messages. As a matter of fact, the whole argument tends to justify a specific sequence: during a film screening, first of all, sensual qualities appear, directly given and accessible to all. Only later do the processes of perceiving/signifying take place (*sensual experiences immediately become encased in concepts*<sup>7</sup>). Admittedly, there is, as in Husserl or Bergson, a reference to the senses as self-sufficient ways of knowing. Obviously, this is not developed in the way already familiar from the contemporary sensual theory in which experience and the body would become the dominant themes and in which existential phenomenology remains a main source of inspiration.

Thus, depending on the saturation of sensual qualities, the authors in turn discuss the sensual-semantic level, the semantic-sensual level and the semantic level. The conceptual shifts of the formulas themselves are suggestive. In the case of the sensual-semantic level, cinematic visible objects *must be in partly a sensual stimulus and, to some limited extent, they must also mean something*.<sup>8</sup> The signifying-sensual level may be indicated when, *as it were, the objects are forced to communicate to us something more than their natural properties allow as when the various expressive means of film come into play*.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the semantic level focuses mainly on the word, but, the authors add, *that not all concepts involving words reach the mass audience in equal measure. Yet, those concepts that are so closely linked to the sensual sphere can be taken in by all*.<sup>10</sup>

In Kumor and Palczewska's article published in 1963, there are intuitions (in a somewhat different context) coinciding with Roland Barthes's proposal contained in his article "The Problem of Meaning in Film" ["Le Problème de la signification au cinéma"] (1960) conventionally regarded as the beginning of film semiotics.<sup>11</sup> *The creation of signs takes place within certain boundaries, which the author cannot cross*

*under the threat of being unintelligible*.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the author of *Mythologies* emphasises that the signifying element of the sign appeals primarily to the senses of sight and hearing.<sup>13</sup> In any case, in the relationship occurring between the conventionalised central part of the sign and its more individualised peripheral part, any crossing of this boundary by the director risks misunderstanding. However, it remains creative for the development of the language of film and interpretively invigorating. In Kumor and Palczewska's article, especially on the sensual-semantic level, there is a similar game of signification, which the authors call *precarious stability*<sup>14</sup> being between pure sensualism and a *fuller conceptuality* or *the accumulation of signs*.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the question of the 'film intelligibility' considered at the semantic-sensual level, where the conventionality and cultural conditions of the symbol and the need to learn it are important, leads the authors to the conclusion that *the requirements of the universal mass appeal of film*<sup>16</sup> are not met here.

A cursory reconstruction of the argument and the evocation of one of the many possible contexts (Barthes) allows a somewhat more general remark to be made. From a historical perspective, a methodological feature seems particularly interesting. While the authors are, as it were, ahead of film scholars' interest in the sensual contexts of film itself as well as its reception (which led to the establishment of a sensual theory of cinema), their reflection remains, understandably, firmly rooted in the structural-semiotic paradigm. There are at least two reasons for this. The first relates to the theoretical spirit of the time: the exquisite development of this way of thinking in the 1960s and beyond made it possible to 'handle' virtually all areas of human life and its creations. From a strictly theoretical perspective, the level of refinement and conceptual sophistication of semiotics made it possible to analyse extremely complex cultural processes, phenomena in art or, as in the case under discussion, issues related to the matter of film. And above all, made it possible to analyse, referring to the 'sensual' film-spectator relationship, non-obvious problems of a communicative character. What do we understand from the film, i.e. what sensual qualities do we transform into concepts, and what remains at the 'purely sensual' level?

The second reason is of a more institutional character. The strongest theory at the time is also a kind of guarantee that lends academic credibility to the emerging film studies, an extremely important point of reference in the process establishing a new research methodology on a particular field of art. It is worth recalling here that in 1949, Jerzy Toeplitz established the Zakład Historii i Teorii Filmu [Department of Film History and Theory] within the structure of the Państwowy Instytut Sztuki [State Art Institute] that later became Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk [The Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences].<sup>17</sup> It was the first research centre of this kind in Poland and the home institution of Aleksander Kumor and Danuta Palczewska, as well as of many other authors publishing in the first edition of *Kwartalnik Filmowy*.

In their search for traditions in film studies for the subject under discussion, the authors of the article under discussion point first and foremost to Karol Irzykowski's *X Muse* (*X Muza*) and his reflection on film movement<sup>18</sup> – a quality leading to 'concentrated visibility.' Irrespective of the fact that movement did indeed remain an essential feature of film in the 'sensualism' postulated here,

the question arises as to whether in the early 1960s it was actually possible to claim that only Irzykowski, forty years earlier, had anything significant to say on the matter. Vivian Sobchack, the founder of the contemporary sensual cinema theory, reconstructed this part of the tradition of cinematic thought in the early 1990s in her revolutionary and subversive theoretical project. She found in it early foreshadowings of a 'sensual' approach to the viewer and his 'understanding' body (Hugo Münsterberg or Rudolf Arnheim, among others, but also the avant-gardists of the 1920s and 1930s, who were fascinated by cinema as an art of expression).<sup>19</sup>

In Kumor and Palczewska's interpretation the question of the universal language of cinema was made possible by the assumption of sensualism as that feature of film which allows it to be understood universally. Supported by the intuitions formulated by Jean Epstein in the 1920s, it turns out to be much more present in the thought of world film studies.<sup>20</sup> This kind of verification, however, is not necessary or even possible. In the various historical and geopolitical conditions, scholars look for possible arguments or inspirations that allow them to justify their objectives. It is worth emphasising that Kumor and Palczewska's article (as a proposal not only describing a specific *direction of film's aspirations*, but equally postulating a specific research approach to 'sensualism') remains in the Polish context and within a certain scientific framework of the epoch a pioneering and fully authorial argument. It is an isolated harbinger of much later tendencies of theoretical reflection, which nevertheless exploded with great momentum. Today these tendencies function as a spectrum of fully-fledged discourses of academic reflection on film, approaching the specificity of particular senses in the reception of film in a detailed way and using the latest knowledge.

Of course, there are also further differences between the early foreshadowing of the theoretical problems and their subsequent development. First and foremost, the structural and semiotic background of Kumor and Palczewska's reflections is closely connected to the language they use: analytical and distanced. In the context of subject under discussion and from today's perspective, this seems to be a juxtaposition condemned to a paradoxical incompatibility. The very attitude of the researchers towards the subject matter they take up is also related to this. Today the sensual theory of cinema is informed by the writer's own experience of the 'self' and supported by the interdisciplinary studies of the audience, whereas then it was a rather theoretical model. The contemporary proposal falls somewhere between autoethnographic recording and empirics. This audience is no longer a generalised recipient of meanings created on the basis of sensual experiences. It is made up of diverse groups in terms of age, gender, class and race, including myriad of individuals, for whom a variety of conditions must be taken into account in researching the participation of the senses in film perception. It can be said that the aspirations of the cinema to intensify sensual experiences, as indicated by the authors of *Sensualism...*, go much more intensively today in tandem with the aspirations of those writing about these experiences to find the most adequate language to describe complex and fascinating processes.

Well-constructed theoretical models have it that they could work virtually all the time. One may notice the potential of a fixed rule. Particularly in the tensions generated at the sensual-semantic level and evolving according to the os-

cillation between pure sensualism and conceptuality, yet each time subject to the principle of stability. The development of cinema (which the authors would define as its striving for the intensification of sensual reception, and the limits of which are today rather determined by the concept and experience of immersion) is accompanied by a simultaneous process of educating the viewers in terms of the cognitive mechanisms to which they are subject and in relation to the changing language of film. Apart from recalling Aleksander Kumor and Danuta Palczewska's precursory proposal, it is the relationship between pure sensualism and the intellectual reception of film that must be regarded as its particularly important element. It constitutes, after all, the constant guarantee of understanding film: *this truth is communicated in such close connection with matter that it speaks to us primarily through sensual concreteness.*<sup>21</sup>

Transl. Artur Piskorz

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the individual articles, see books whose subject matter touches upon the issues mentioned here: P. Kwiatkowska, *Somatografia. Ciało w obrazie filmowym*, Korporacja Ha!art, Kraków 2011; J. Budzik, *Dotyk światła. O zmysłowym doznawaniu kina*, Wydawnictwo FA-art, Katowice 2012; R. Koschany, *Zamiast interpretacji. Między doświadczeniem kinematograficznym a rozumieniem filmu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wydziału Naukowych UAM, Poznań 2017; S. Jagielski, *Przerwane emancypacje. Polityka ekscesu w kinie polskim lat 1968-1981*, Universitas, Kraków 2021; M. Stańczyk, *Filmowe sensorium. Teoria zmysłów i jej krytyczny potencjał*, Universitas, Kraków 2023. In the latter volume one will find the most up-to-date bibliography that directly relates to the sensual theory of cinema.

<sup>2</sup> A. Kumor, D. Palczewska, "Sensualizm jako podstawa dzieła filmowego", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1963, no 3, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> See: R. Barthes, "Problem znaczenia w filmie", transl. M. Hendrykowska, M. Hendrykowski, in: A. Helman, J. Ostaszewski (eds.), *Film: język – rzeczywistość – osoba*, Polskie Towarzystwo Semiotyczne, Warszawa 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> A. Kumor, D. Palczewska, op. cit., p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 45.

<sup>17</sup> Today it is the Department of Film Studies, Audiovisual Arts and Cultural Anthropology.

<sup>18</sup> In Irzykowski's case it is rather intra-shot and belongs to the world presented. In the later stages of the film's development it is also used to evoke intense sensual reactions thanks to subsequent technical inventions such as increasingly mobile camera, faster editing, etc.

<sup>19</sup> Marta Stańczyk also undertakes such a 'rewriting' of the history of film thought in her book. See: M. Stańczyk, op. cit., pp. 19-74.

<sup>20</sup> Ricciotto Canudo's comments come from the same era; a few decades later, the theses about the 'primitive' language of cinema or film Esperanto were formulated by, among others, Jean Mitry and Edgar Morin.

<sup>21</sup> A. Kumor, D. Palczewska, op. cit., p. 40.

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**Słowa kluczowe:**

Aleksander Kumor;  
Danuta Palczewska;  
historia teorii filmu;  
zmysłowa teoria kina

**Abstrakt**

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**Sensualizm – propozycja teoretyczna Aleksandra Kumora i Danuty Palczewskiej**

Aleksander Kumor i Danuta Palczewska w artykule *Sensualizm jako podstawa dzieła filmowego* przeprowadzają ana-

lizę filmu jako sztuki w sposób szczególnie oddziałującej na zmysły widza. Rozwój filmu i nowe możliwości intensyfikacji zmysłowego odbioru w dużym stopniu wpływają na uniwersalizację języka filmowego. Komentarz do artykułu zawiera krótką rekonstrukcję zaproponowanej w 1963 r. teorii, a także próbę umieszczenia jej w ówczesnym paradygmacie strukturalno-semiotycznym. Przede wszystkim jednak *Sensualizm...* został tu oceniony jako wykład pionierski i w dużym stopniu zapowiadający zmiany w teorii filmu o kilka dekad późniejsze. Refleksja nad rozwojem zmysłowej teorii kina, zapoczątkowanej w latach 90. XX w. przez Vivian Sobchack, pozwala jednocześnie stwierdzić, że wczesna propozycja polskich badaczy w sposób zasadniczy różni się od współczesnych propozycji (m.in. dzisiejszy język naznaczony jest indywidualną perspektywą i doświadczeniem badacza; sensualny odbiór widza zależy od licznych uwarunkowań biologicznych, społecznych i kulturowych; wreszcie przedmiotem specjalistycznych, interdyscyplinarnych badań stają się oddzielne zmysły, w tym zmysł dotyku). **(Materiał nierecenzowany).**