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Images
vol. XXII/no. 31
Special Issue
Poznań 2017
ISSN 1731-450X

Historia żółtej cizemki – *architectural space seen through the child's eye*

ABSTRACT. Świt-Jankowska Barbara, Historia żółtej cizemki – *architectural space seen through the child's eye*. "Images" vol. XXII, no. 31. Poznań 2017. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. Pp. 13–20. ISSN 1731-450X. DOI 10.14746/i.2017.31.02.

This article focuses on the interdependencies between the film images and architectural education of the youngest. The author has attempted to define what sort of background preconditions the film image to gain the status of a source for psychoeducation, with particular emphasis placed on spatial education. The article includes a case study of Sylwester Chęciński's film: *Historia żółtej cizemki* [The Story of a Yellow Crakow] (1962).

KEYWORDS: architecture, education, film, film image, space

Darkness falls. Whispers have stopped, breath dies. On the screen emerges the first movie shot, a musical phrase resounds... A mystery begins. And when after the screening, a little confused, we are sitting in the chair – lonely, though in the crowd, separated in their own sensations – the other world, almost as real as the one that is waiting for us on the doorstep, is recording in our memory. Forever.

What is the essence of cinema? When on December 28th of 1895 the Lumière brothers publicly launched a cinematograph for the first time, they did not suppose how quickly this invention would gain popularity around the world. Despite initial doubts about the creative capabilities of the new medium at the beginning of the twentieth century, it turned out that film production permanently entered the canon of fine arts. The potential impact on the viewer was the real deal for the new generation of artists (directors, screenwriters, actors), as well for as activists, social activists, and politicians. The experience of the first sessions, in which disbelief mingled with horror, were soon extended with a whole spectrum of sensations and feelings – in effect, a modern form of catharsis. Screenplays related to increasingly complex issues, and the sound, colour, film gags and special effects made it possible to multiply the means of expression in the use of this medium.

An important element of a new art form was set design, which is derived from theatrical scenery, and soon began to rule in its own right. Light, color, space and frame composition are the building blocks of the story, which are important factors influencing the way it is received. In 2011, Grzegorz Ratajczyk, professor at the University of Fine Arts, in his evaluation of the doctoral dissertation of Michał Hrisulidis, wrote:

**The relationship
between
architecture and
the cinematography**

“the movie, like painting, is almost pure visuality, a carefully constructed space, a story in the image”.[1] This poetic definition perfectly captures the complicated bilateral relationship that occurs in film between the content presented and its visual representation on the screen. On the one hand, space is an additional actor, which supports the director in his intentions, carries non-verbal content, and builds the desired mood, while on the other hand, film, frame by frame, pours life into dead set design, allows it to exist in the same way as it does in real life.

It is difficult to determine whether, and to what extent, extent the famous French architect Le Corbusier (1887–1965), one of the leading modernist of the 20th century, was influenced by cinema. Nonetheless, in his way of describing architectural space one can recognize the content that architecture shares with cinematography. Exploring architecture and experiencing it is a process which consists of a sequence of consecutive images linked inextricably in time and space. An experienced designer controls the subconscious of the user, skillfully directing his gaze in the right direction, allowing him to receive the space programmed by his script. Good architecture “in itself” guides the recipient naturally: his sight moves gently along the lines of cornices and eaves, he stops at the planes, is fascinated by the play of light and shadow on the walls. A gentle movement of the head gives an impression of three-dimensionality. Moving deep into the building allows us to discover spatial relations invisible at first glance. The architect becomes a kind of director and set designer of everyday life.

The relationship between architecture and and film goes beyond a simple system of dependence and subordination. Each party brings their own content to the dialogue, simultaneously enriching and mutually strengthening their impact. Deprivation of scenography in film will always be interpreted in the context of its possible presence (presence of absence). And though architecture does not need cinema to exist immediately, indirectly, it is film that can become an effective tool to stimulate the viewer to reflect on its meaning – a capsule in which, like libretto, the idea of the designer is framed. With appropriately assembled sequences, polished frames and the proper “running” of the camera, viewers will experience a momentary delight, will understand what they do not know how to call and learn how to look at the surrounding area.

With regard to the issue of architectural education, film may also become an important element in fostering and contributing to the growth of the spatial sensitivity of the audience. The impact on the viewer can be considered on two basic levels: literal and indirect.

Through literal (rational) activities, assembled footage can record the space that is presented along with its physical characteristics: color, texture and scale. It can expand specific knowledge and present good practice, stimulating the viewer to reflect upon their own environment

[1] <<https://www.asp.wroc.pl/?module=Common&-controller=Get&file=44077>> [accessed on: 1.04.2016].

and the spatial solutions applied in it. Scenography can direct the viewer's feelings either through positive examples, or open criticism. It can also become a source of inspiration and stimulate creativity.

Using indirect (emotional) operation, film provides an opportunity to look at emotions, both positive and negative. The way in which a space is presented can change the existing views of the spectator, emphasizing seemingly less important details and thus increasing the sensitivity of the viewer to similar elements seen in reality. The possibility of temporary identification with the character gives a chance for the safe release of blocked and unconscious emotions. It allows them to work on indirectly, using metaphor and symbol to induce a therapeutic change (agoraphobia, claustrophobia, acrophobia) or to identify complex, non-obvious spatial relationships.

In psychoeducation^[2] film can be used with any age group from preschoolers, through school students, to adults. However, in the case of architectural education, the best results are achieved by working with the youngest, which means children in preschool and early school. Art knowledge, including architecture, does not come naturally, like the ability to walk does. A sense of aesthetics arises as a result of being repeatedly exposed to beauty, discussions with and guidance from the more experienced. The state of Polish cities is a result of decades of urban chaos – work on the quality of the space in a certain sense, work at the core, carrying of a torch of education. Early childhood seems to be the best moment for acquiring basic spatial competence, and film for children in this context is an especially valuable educational tool.

The first films intended primarily for young audience appeared with the wave of interest in developmental psychology and pedagogy in the 1950s and 1960s. Unlike the previous productions, which were usually intended to entertain adults, movies for children have usually taken up subjects dear to younger viewers, often using sources that were rich and proven to be valuable – children's literature.

In this respect, Polish cinema in the sixties was the equal of Western productions, and with the exception of some less successful works. Also several interesting proposals have appeared, fortunately without excessive sentimentality and intrusive instruction. Films that appeared on the big screen included: *Król Maciuś I* [King Matthew I] (1958), directed by Wanda Jakubowska, *Awantura o Basię* [Argument about Basia] (1959) and *Szatan z siódmej klasy* [Satan from the Seventh Grade] (1960), by Maria Kaniewska, *O dwóch takich, co ukradli księżyc*

**Case study: Sylwester Chęciński's film
Historia żółtej ciżemki
[*The Story of a Yellow Crakow*] (1962)**

[2] Psychoeducation is a process that applies tools that allow one to gain an insight into oneself, a better understanding of one's behaviour, and also ways to correct them. It should not be confused with psychotherapy. Its primary goal is not to resolve existing problems related to how the individual functions in the world, but to help adults, adolescents or children

acquire the necessary skills that will help them better understand the world around them and to improve relationships with others. One of the tools used during such workshops is film – using on-screen emotions to work, inter alia, on shaping the attitudes and well-being of the recipient.

[The Two Who Stole the Moon] (1962), by Jan Batory, and finally, *Historia żółtej cizemki* [The Story of a Yellow Crakow], a historical and biographical fantasy about the creation of Saint Mary's Altar by Veit Stoss.

Due to its original visual expression and specific way of presenting space, this film stood out from others and in the context of the considerations mentioned above, has been chosen for close analysis with regard to the relationship between cinema and architectural education, as it may constitute an interesting case study. The semi fairy-tale world created by Lidia Mintycz-Skarżyńska and Jerzy Skarżyński, who were themselves an outstanding artistic couple, seems to be the perfect example of a place where the rational and literal are combined with the metaphorical and emotional.

The screenplay, based on motifs from a book by Antonina Domańska's book (1913), was written by Zdzisław Skowroński and Wanda Żółkiewska, and later directed by Sylwester Chęciński, making his directorial debut. The film skillfully combines fiction with historical fact about the creation of a work of art. This simple story of a boy endowed with exceptional talent for sculpture, whose fate cast him at the threshold of a master, Veit, was on the one hand criticized for its naivety, banality and excessive commercial viability. On the other hand, though, it emphasized the courage, uniformity and consistency in the implementing the adopted concept of artistic work. Despite a series of unfavourable reviews initially, in subsequent years the picture proved to stand the test of time: it moved and entertained, but also taught consecutive generations of younger Poles about great art.

A particular challenge for the set designers was certainly the unusual pictoriality of Domańska's prose. The book is rich in colourful descriptions of the wealthy costumes of the burghers, courtiers and rulers. The author also paid great attention to the city, the appearance of individual buildings and interior design. Transferring the written word into film follows its own rules. During filming, the extensive plot of Domańska's novel was shortened and simplified, and the screenwriters were faced with the necessity of finding an appropriate artistic convention which would properly reflect the ambiance of the novel. The choice of the Skarżyńskis ultimately determined the formal expression of the work. Lidia Mintycz-Skarżyńska's unconventional way of presenting historical space and costumes has been widely discussed. According to some experts, those aspects mainly contributed to the relative success of the movie. With or without the approval of critics, – children have grown to love and accept *Historia żółtej cizemki* and the character of little Wawrzek in particular.

The scenery for this movie was built entirely at the Łódź film studio. On the one hand, this was to prevent a lack of consistency in style, which Skarżyński had feared in the context of Laurence Olivier's film (9). On the other hand, however, it allowed a closed world to be created, which was not based on literal meaning and constructing an illusion of reality but on a certain symbolism and simplification. The

main inspiration came from fifteenth-century Polish and European paintings. The composition of individual shots and the colour scheme chosen colour scheme refers to the style of Gothic miniatures.

For the Skarżyńskis, colour is an important element of building scenic tension. In the *Historia żółtej ciżemki* a contrast between the neutral background and extremely colourful costumes was used; mockups of buildings were decorated in various shades of gray, moving from violet to brown, with a few stronger tones. This allowed for additional dramatic expression and emphasize the most important elements of space.

Space – architecture and its immediate surroundings play a dual role in Chęciński's film. In addition to providing the backdrop for the story, it carries additional meanings. The authors' intention was not to document a bygone era, but to create its abstraction in the minds of young viewers. In the film, we are simultaneously dealing with carefully mapped elements of space: the Kraków street on which Veit Stoss's house and studio is located, or residential facilities of the Master's chambers; and with simplified shots, in which the lack of detail is compensated for by the frame composition and purity of visual expression. The space of the medieval town, shown in such a manner, is recorded in the child's imagination. Thus it creates a base image, on which later education may impose additional layers.

In contrast to the historical facts, the theme of Mary's Church tower appears in the movie. Its distinctive shape accompanies the characters in a quite arbitrary way, often incompatible with the topography of the area. It plays a dual role: it allows the viewer to continuously identify the city where the action occurs, and at the same time serves as a symbolic reference to the main theme of the film – the altar.

Producing the movie in an atelier and previous experience in the field of theatrical scenery helped to introduce less conventional solutions. In one scene, Wawrzek (played by the eleven-year-old Marek Kondrat) is comes out of a room in Veit Stoss' house and passes through the yard to the workshop. The stylistic convention adopted allowed the creators to remove the front walls of the buildings in a way that made what was happening inside visible to the viewer. The moment in which the viewer has the possibility to peek into both interiors, with the main character suspended in the space "between" (all the more unreal because of the falling snow), is magical. The symbolic significance of this scene can be interpreted on several levels. Firstly, as a reference to the most popular children's toy – a doll's house, as an element which was well-known and safe for the film audience; secondly, as a desire to show to the young viewer the structure of a living space in a medieval town (here one should remember that Jerzy and Lidia Skarżyński studied at the Faculty of Architecture at Kraków University of Technology); thirdly, as a reference to Gothic miniatures or to the convention in which St. Mary's Altar was made, with a combination of several independent scenes, each of them telling its own story.

In his work, Veit Stoss merged mysticism with naturalistic realism. Along with sublime scenes, he showed ordinary, everyday life, giving his characters blemishes and imperfections characteristic of Kraków burghers. To some extent, the aforementioned frame from the film is a symbolic representation of the works of Veit Stoss: the realm of the profane is mixed here with the sacred. On one side of the courtyard a workshop with the usual disarray and hard working craftsmen is shown, on the other side, a living room, which houses a scene as if “pulled out” of one of the parts of the Altar (the birth of Mary).

Conclusions

Today’s world is filled with architecture. Modern man is born, lives and dies in the context of buildings and their surroundings. What is more, it is the constructed environment that provides a framework for behaviour, builds or destroys human relationships, generates and solves problems related to their everyday life. Architecture is an art, but one on which we rarely reflect on a daily basis. Only few give it as much attention as books, paintings and films. Only occasionally does some detail, an unexpected view of the magnificent proportions of a building, arouse fleeting happiness, which though hard to define, is in fact obvious. As Witold Rybczyński writes: “for most people, justifications made by architects are generally unreliable, closer to persuasion than to explanation,”^[3] and yet research shows that the quality of life (also determined by the quality of architecture and urban design) affects the feeling of happiness.

Architectural education teaches us to understand complex spatial relationships, to see the correlations between proportions, textures and colours, to appreciate the beauty contained in space. It should concern not only architects and people connected with space design. In fact, it is the attitude of the people living in a given area that the things depend on the most: their sense of aesthetics and their knowledge allow the advantages or to expose disadvantages of a particular environment to be emphasized. A lack of public engagement and concern about a common space, which unfortunately characterizes most Polish cities, is, indirectly, the cause of the poor quality of such space. Social involvement and responsibility are not, however, features that can be acquired as a result of a one-time action. They should be instilled from the earliest childhood, along with other educational content. Unfortunately, the very limited scope of courses in arts in public schools and the low level of teachers’ awareness in this matter do not give much hope for a rapid improvement.

Finding many independent tools that can support the development of spatial sensitivity of today’s children, and tomorrow’s future investors, is extremely important. The above analysis of *Historia żółtej cizemki* shows little (or perhaps how much?) is needed for a feature film for children to become one of them. Although many questions about

[3] W. Rybczyński, *Jak działa architektura. Przybornik humanisty*, Kraków 2014, p. 10.

the intentions of the scenography artists, Jerzy and Lidia Skarżyński, remain unanswered, based on the knowledge contained in interviews, articles and books a cautious conclusion can be formulated: that it was the sensitivity of the artists and their sense of space and aesthetic sensitivity, their commitment and serious approach to the subject of works for children that allowed them to obtain the effect described above. The strength and timelessness of the film's message may be confirmed by the fact that it remains attractive to the young generations. Despite the passage of time and growing competition in the market, the movie of Sylwester Chęciński is still admired and eagerly watched.

Contemporary cinema for children has changed: as times have changed, so have the audience and the films themselves. Today's 3D technology facilitates previously unimaginable spatial effects, but in many contemporary productions one can hardly find the values mentioned previously. Movie after movie echoes and disappears, both from posters, as well as from memory of viewers. Few Polish productions take the trouble to bring something more to the cinema for children, and unfortunately in this field there are no significant achievements. Let us hope that the truth is not proved by the words that Pola Negri (1896–1987) uttered a few years before her death: "In my times the cinema was a substitute for art wrongly considered to be fairground shed. Currently, it is a substitute for a brothel, wrongly considered to be the sanctuary of art." We can only hope that all is not yet lost.

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