

## History of Film Education in Poland – an Outline

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### Abstract

The paper offers a review of Polish discussions on the educational aspects of film. While initially many authors were quite sceptical of film, then viewed primarily as a form of cheap entertainment for the masses, they subsequently started exploring the possibilities for using film in education. The paper discusses the views of early pioneers, such as Matuszewski and Irzykowski, up until more recent developments (such as the New Horizons Association), emphasizing the Polish contribution to the history of film and media education.

*Keywords: history of film education, Poland, cinema, media history*

### 1. Introduction

The history of film education dates back to 1895, when during a public demonstration organized on December 28<sup>th</sup> on the Boulevard des Capucines in Paris in the basement of the Grand Café, the brothers August and Louis Lumière presented their first films such as “Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory” or “The Arrival of a Train at the Station”<sup>1</sup>. With the invention of the cinematograph, new technical possibilities were created for the application of film in education, as pointed out already in 1901 by the French film producer Charles Pathé, who postulated that in the not too distant future film should become a theater, a journal and a “school of the future”. The dream of the Parisian creator of newsreels did not come true immediately, because technically this was not an easy task, thus even as rich

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<sup>1</sup> J. Płażyński, *Historia filmu 1895–2005*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, Warszawa 2010. Cf. also *Kino nieme. Historia kina*, volume 1, (edit.) T. Lubelski, I. Sowińska, R. Syska, Kraków 2009.

a superpower as France – with an ambition to lead the world of the time also in the field of education and culture – could not afford this type of an experiment for a long time. However, the seed had been planted and it only had to wait for a more propitious moment for film to become a full-fledged educational material, knowingly used in the education system by prepared teachers.

## **2. Polish pioneers of film education**

Although Poland was not a global pioneer in the educational use of film, the Polish are entitled to claim the leadership in the field of creating the theoretical basis of film production. Already in 1898, thus three years after the first public screening of “Animated Photographs”, Boleslaw Matuszewski (1856 – ca. 1943), the court photographer and cinematographer of Tsar Nicholas II, in Parisian “Le Figaro” advocated and anticipated the establishment of a Repository of Historical Cinematography designed to collect, store and disseminate films documenting important historical events<sup>2</sup>. From today’s perspective, these actions are considered as a typically educational project, serving not only the historical education through film, but also the innovative form of media education of contemporary audience of the first cinematographic productions. In the same year Matuszewski published in France a collection of philosophical treatises “New Source of History” and “Animated Photography, What It Is and What It Should Be”, in which he argued that film is an excellent historical source because it can reproduce and preserve reality in the form of images and relatively accurately describe it, but also disclose and communicate to its recipients, which was not achievable with the use of other, traditional written media<sup>3</sup>. Seen today, the novelty of this type of interpretation of the film amazes, as for many years it was not appreciated, and was not only denied any artistic value, but the first filmmakers were even blamed for creating vulgarity, lack of any aesthetic motives of their work, focusing on entertainment, fairground pedigree of the new art dominated by dubious circus and cabaret entrepreneurs, wandering jugglers and actors displaying their skills at fairs, festivals, rural markets and town squares. Views and postulates proclaimed by Boleslaw Matuszewski<sup>4</sup> are nothing more than a proposal to create a modern

<sup>2</sup> I. Kurz, (edit.), *Film i historia. Antologia*, Warszawa 2008.

<sup>3</sup> M. Kuźmicki, *Bolesław Matuszewski – pionier odkrywany na nowo*, “Kino” 1996, no. 5.

<sup>4</sup> B. Matuszewski, *Bolesław Matuszewski i jego pionierska myśl filmowa (dokumenty i wstępne komentarze)*, Warszawa 1980.

film archive or film library, collecting documents, in a form of first movies, still underestimated back then, treated mostly as a technological innovation, interesting only to the uncouth mob hungry for entertainment but unable to afford to go to the theatre or opera. Philosopher and aesthetician Mieczyslaw Wallis described the first reaction of aesthetics to film as embarrassment caused by a German aesthetician Konrad Lange, who expressed his belief that film was not and would never be art, and reiterated this view even in 1920<sup>5</sup>. Reversal of these negative trends took several decades and a significant role in this process was played by the philosopher and aesthetician Karol Irzykowski (1873–1944), whose book “The 10<sup>th</sup> Muse – Aesthetic Issues of Cinema” (1924) was an innovative work not only in the aesthetics of film, but also an avant-garde of film education of spectators, who should demonstrate an elementary knowledge of the art of film prior to the arrival at film screening. With the publication of this book, for the first time in the history of world cinematography, film became the object of scientific inquiry, because until the release of the groundbreaking work by Irzykowski, cinema was considered tawdry entertainment unworthy of scholarly reflection. Irzykowski wrote: “It made me happy to think of cinema as an area still untouched by thinkers. What I sometimes read in professional journals was mostly advertising or aesthetic dilettantism. [...] I do not have to draw from the literature sources, because I am the source. I declare that my work has no predecessors, it comes out with a completely new idea, and is ready to compete for preeminence with all other attempts to explore the problems of cinematography, wherever they arise. In Los Angeles, London or Paris”<sup>6</sup>. An impressive range of Irzykowski’s considerations pointed to new areas of research into the fledgling film criticism and began the development of a new research discipline that in the future would become film studies. The discussion of the issue of the educational application of film in school started when Poland regained independence in 1918. In 1919 the poet as well as theatre and film critic, Jan Sokolicz-Wroczyński, published one of the first articles on the subject, proposing educators to closely follow the development of cinematography, aware that cinema is slowly becoming one of the most popular forms of entertainment among pupils<sup>7</sup>. As I wrote in 1994, analyzing the progress of film education in Poland at the end of the twentieth century, already in the interwar period the Polish were very diligent observers of the foreign theoretical

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<sup>5</sup> M. Wallis, *Odkrycie filmu*, “Przegląd Filozoficzny” 1949, no. 3.

<sup>6</sup> K. Irzykowski, *X Muza – zagadnienia estetyczne kina*, Warszawa 1977, pp. 26–28.

<sup>7</sup> J. Sokolicz-Wroczyński, *Kinematograf w szkole*, “Kino” 1919, no. 8, pp. 66–67. Cf. also J.Bocheńska, *Polska myśl filmowa do roku 1939*, volume 2, Wrocław 1974, pp. 68–72.

thought on our territory, as numerous pedagogical journals reported the development of film outside the Republic of Poland, believing that news popularized among teachers would be important for the possible onset of introducing film to schools in Poland<sup>8</sup>. This type of publication included, e.g., a description of the book by W. H. George “The Cinema in School”, showing the British experience in this field, yet completely unimplemented in our country<sup>9</sup>. Teachers did not appreciate the importance of film in the process of modern education. Film was treated as a “thief of time” of youth, distracting from school by theatre houses, shaping bad taste, propagating licentiousness and “moral rot”, shocking with scenes full of sex and violence. At the same time, cinema was a cumbersome technical novelty. Although already in 1929 voices were heard promoting the introduction of film didactics to teacher training institutions, they went unnoticed.

### **3. Overcoming fears. School vs. film in the interwar period**

Timid voices of educators advocating the use of film in education were difficult to hear, dominated by the vast majority of views stating that film has a detrimental effect on young people. The words of Wincent Sierakowski may serve as a characteristic statement, which refer to the unknown studies, where he wrote: “Observations of educators, criminal statistics and research, and not less theoretical investigations of psychologists argued convincingly that the brilliance and one-sidedness of the impact of cinematographic productions on the soul of man, presents a great moral danger even for an adult, let alone for young people”<sup>10</sup>. Promoting this type of opinion did not serve well the proposal of the possible introduction of film classes in school. It also hampered the film business entrepreneurs, running the cinemas, harassed by all types of commands and prohibitions, as to which category of recipients specific screenings should be directed. Probably most of these interventions, efforts and concerns directed towards the protection of endangered moral education of young people were ineffective against the spontaneous development of cinema networks and the increasing popularity of leisure at the cinema. Therefore, in 1918, Ludwik Skoczylas stated with regret,

<sup>8</sup> M. Sokołowski, *Film w obszarze zainteresowań pedagogiki*, [in:] S. Kawula, A. Moździerz, (edit.) *O nowy model wychowania. Część pierwsza (potrzeby i możliwości)*, Olsztyn 1994, pp. 211–223.

<sup>9</sup> (J. Mirski) JM, *Z literatury filmowej, omówienie pracy W.H. George’a “The Cinema in School”*, London 1935, “Oświata i Wychowanie” 1937, pp. 405–407.

<sup>10</sup> W. Sierakowski, *Kinoteatr a młodzież*, “Miesięcznik Pedagogiczny” 1916, p. 16.

admitting at the same time educational defeat: “Education systems of famous authors of pedagogy, are today replaced by cinema entrepreneurs. Who does not believe, let him do the test. Let him visit all cinema theatre businesses, let him be informed by entrepreneurs. Who mainly visits their halls? The audience is our school youth”<sup>11</sup>. The quoted author emphasized in the characteristic stylistic manner of contemporary publications that cinema does not develop feelings but wild instincts, it simplifies and strips adapted literary works of their value, chasing sensationalism and thanks to it attracts a young recipient susceptible to the influence. The study conducted by Skoczylas among junior secondary school pupils largely confirmed his opinions on film, because students admitted their fascination with cinema and the desire to imitate the characters they watched in motion pictures. In such a specific atmosphere, shaped in the sense of fight with the enemy threatening the pupil, most educational debates were carried out during the interwar period. Another thing was the fact that the contemporary artistic offer of Polish cinema was miserable and could not compete with the outstanding works of world cinematography. This resulted in part from the fact that Polish cinematography was a completely private industry, oriented only to gain maximum profit in the shortest possible time. Its main task was primarily providing unsophisticated entertainment, preferably in the form of simple in the making comedy films, which had a significant impact on the shape of the entire domestic film production, negatively evaluated by critics<sup>12</sup>. Another limitation resulted from technology; an audio breakthrough that accompanied the cinematography in the 1930s was a technical phenomenon due to which the Polish cinema of those years became obsolete. The rapid development of the economic crisis, which started in 1929, caused the sound revolution in Poland to take place with several years of delay in comparison to other countries and European cinematography<sup>13</sup>.

#### **4. Post-war period. New look at the film education**

The issue of film education, known in the early publications as application of film in school, despite the discussion that began in the post-war period in Western Europe, passed over the Polish pedagogical thought of the 1950s, highly ideological and subjected to indoctrination. However, the emergence of new trends and

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<sup>11</sup> L. Skoczylas, *Kinoteatr. Nowy wróg młodzieży*, Lwów 1918, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> T. Lubelski, *Ilustrowana historia kina polskiego*, Chorzów 2008, p. 62.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. M. Hendrykowska, *Kronika kinematografii polskiej 1895–1997*, Poznań 1999.

directions in film, such as Italian neorealism, showing a natural outdoor-scenery, non-professional actors, portrayed in the works revealing a previously unknown picture of Italy, full of conflict, poverty and human dramas, the Russian formalist school, American “film noir” portraying gangsters, police and private investigators, the French “new wave” and finally the Polish film school fostered the recognition of the artistic, aesthetic and educational role of cinema. The diversity of genres and film types, narrative methods, craftsmanship of acting, the role of scenery and costumes, set lighting, the use of music in film, camera work, personality of the film director, seen as the main creator of a film, made the sense of the value of film rise, it was not underestimated any more, and increasingly appreciated. The reception of film, like any work of art in the form of music, painting, theatre or literature, had to be learned. The initiative in this regard came from the circle of film scholars, a part of the Polish centre of film studies at the Lodz Film School, where under the supervision of Professor Bolesław W. Lewicki began to shape the foundations of the future model of film education of youth, seen as education to become a part of the curriculum of the aesthetic education of students<sup>14</sup>.

## **5. The origins of pedagogical reflection on film**

The result, not fully successful, which was the outcome of the first scientific interests of Polish teachers in educational opportunities of films, was the works of Janina Koblewska-Wróbłowa, including the book “Film Fabularny w Szkole” (“Feature Film in School”), written in 1964 under the editorship of Professor Wincent Okoń in the scope of the work of the Institute of Education. The book read from the contemporary perspective strikes with the naivety of many observations, lingering in psychological and pedagogical thoughts of the time, such as the belief about the negative impact of fairy tale films on children. An important task that this book fulfilled was drawing the exploratory interest of educators to the area previously unrecognized, important in the lives of children and young people, as evidenced by the steadily increasing popularity of cinema in the environment of school youth and students.

The book by Janina Koblewska-Wróbłowa proposed inclusion of film education in the scope of aesthetic education, and only realized the importance of the issue

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<sup>14</sup> Z. Gawrak, *Wychowanie a wulgarny dydaktyzm w filmie*, “Kwartalnik Filmowy” 1955, no. 1, and by the same author: *Spór łódzki, czyli o różnych funkcjach społecznych kina*, “Kwartalnik Filmowy” 1955, no. 4.

of the presence of film in school, not really trying to determine how, in the context of what type of classes, the educator could implement this subject in the school practice. The author of the book did not suggest a finalized curriculum, she did not indicate how to acquire the necessary knowledge of the history and theory of film, the formation of genre and types of films, the film production technology, development of specializations and film schools or film language<sup>15</sup>.

## **6. “The Youth and the Film”. Koszalin concept of film education**

This approach assumed undertaking great work of self-education of the candidates to the profession of educator, virtually impossible due to the unavailability on the domestic publishing market in the 1960s of important monographic positions in the field of a new discipline formulating its scientific status, which cultural studies and film studies were becoming. Although collections of essays and film reviews of renowned film critics were published (Kaluzynski, Toeplitz, Eberhardt), the canonical core of specialized film literature was just shaping, we also did not have access to many valuable positions on the methodology of working with film that were published in Western Europe. Entering the 1970s, the Polish pedagogy began the next stage of lively theoretical discussions on the new school programme and upcoming reorganization of the education system, designed to introduce a mandatory ten-year secondary school. In this programme, a specific role was ascribed to the means of mass communication, including film and television, fulfilling an increasingly important role in the process of both ideologizing and indoctrination of society.

A significant problem emerged during programme formulation, namely where to place the elements of film education, as it was possible to assign the teaching of film and television to the school teacher of Polish language or create a new subject, such as aesthetic education, the task of which would be the teaching about all the media and arts together, but only in terms of their aesthetic significance, without taking into account the cultural, political, communicational or strictly informational context. Finally, as a result of many discussions held in specialized pedagogical magazines, the concept conventionally named the “Koszalin proposal” prevailed<sup>16</sup>. Assumptions of this concept were presented during the national courses of film teachers, which since 1973 were held in Koszalin within Koszalin Film Meetings

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<sup>15</sup> J. Koblewska-Wróblowa, *Film fabularny w szkole*, Warszawa 1964, pp. 200–201.

<sup>16</sup> S. Frycie, J. Koblewska, *Edukacja filmowa młodzieży w Polsce*, “Polonistyka” 1978, no. 2.

“The Youth and the Film”, attempting to confront the film about youth and for youth and indicate the way and possibilities of a wider impact of film in educational work programmes for young people<sup>17</sup>. The Koszalin Meetings attracted a lot of interest from the environment of educators, for the few years of their existence, a large group of teachers was trained who gained basic competence in the conduct of film education. The dilemma was also resolved of where to place this type of education, by assigning it to Polish studies, because issues discussed in the process of theoretical and literary education, e.g., the screen adaptation of literature, remain in certain association with the problems of film theory. Professor Ewelina Nurczyńska-Fidelska remarked optimistically: “If we are now ready to search for the most appropriate methodological solutions, it means that we are already far ahead of the time of discussions on the question that was quite recently still valid whether film as an art should even become the subject of interest in school. Therefore, it is not the time to remind here all the voices spoken for and against this eventuality. The final argument was in fact the programme of the ten-year secondary school of general education, in which a wide, compared to the tradition, trend of knowledge of film and television has been introduced within the scope of the learning content of the subject “Polish language”<sup>18</sup>. Thus, one of the four functioning in the world models of film education was adopted in Poland, and thus the one in which film is an important element of teaching of the mother tongue.

Elements of knowledge about film and television were introduced as early as in the fourth year of primary school and were expanded in successive years with respect to the content of education and the selection of obligatory film readings. They were subject to two basic principles: gradation of difficulty, and the correlation with the literary and theatrical educational programme. An important drawback of this film programme was the dispersion throughout the entire subject of “Polish language” and practical unpreparedness of most of the teachers to take on new educational tasks, because while minding the education of students, the education of future teachers of the Polish language was “forgotten” by not introducing a new course to the academic education that could provide an elementary knowledge of the film art.

The activity of the major proponents of film education at school slightly faded with the collapse of the idea of ten-year school (and the liquidation of the Koszalin

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<sup>17</sup> H. Depta (edit.), *Analiza i interpretacja utworu filmowego w szkole*, Warszawa 1980, pp. 12–13.

<sup>18</sup> E. Nurczyńska-Fidelska, *Główne problemy metodyki pracy z filmem w szkole*, [in:] *Problemy teorii dzieła filmowego*, (edit.) J. Trzynadłowski, Wrocław 1985, p. 153.

Meetings). However, differently named classes, which also included film, were gradually introduced to the curriculum of university studies and graduate schools of education, preparing to teach film classes of future teachers<sup>19</sup>. The symbolic closing of the previous period, not only in terms of film education, was a publication prepared already during the socio-political transformation “Edukacja Filmowa w Kontekście Programów Szkolnych” (“Film Education in the Context of the School Curriculum”), released in 1990 as a collection of materials from the methodological film sessions, containing many valuable suggestions on working with film in school environment and beyond.<sup>20</sup>

## **7. Contemporary areas of film education. Summary**

One of the most ambitious, large-scale contemporary programmes in the field of film education is the project that has been successfully organized for many years under the name *School Cinematheque. New Horizons of Film Education*, implemented by the New Horizons Association. The Association was founded in 2003 by Roman Gutek. With such significant achievements in the promotion of artistic cinema through the organization of successive editions of the festival, acclaimed not only by the audience, but also cultural animators, film critics and filmmakers environment, activists of the Association thought years ago about the creation of a specialized educational programme, designed to help young spectator in their film education. This is how the project *School Cinematheque* was born. *New Horizons of Film Education* is currently organized in 40 cities across the country and every year it brings together more than 1,000 schools, 2,000 teachers, and from 35 to 43,000 pupils. This is an innovative educational project, perfectly fitting in the programme of aesthetic and media education.

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<sup>19</sup> A. Wiech, *O filmie – dla szkoły*, Słupsk 1990.

<sup>20</sup> E. Nurczyńska-Fidelska, *Nurt edukacji filmowej w programach szkolnych*, [in:] *Edukacja filmowa w kontekście programów szkolnych*, Poznań 1990.

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