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INTERACTIVE FILM WITHIN THE PARADIGM
OF INSTITUTIONAL CINEMA

Abstract: In this article I am considering the situation of interactivity and interactive film in the institutional context of the cinema that is outlined by the rules of cinematographic industry. I draw attention to the fact that despite the ongoing digitalization in all cinematographic areas: production, distribution, presentation, and reception, interactivity is seen as a non-film feature and, as a consequence, it is marginalized.

Cinematography opens up to any digital technological innovations that do not violate a standard model of film experience. Interactivity is seen here as a feature of games and not of films. An interactive film that is thrown to the periphery of institutionalized cinema, becomes a phenomenon of audio-visual avant-garde that is a common part of both cinema and art.

Keywords: digital cinema – interactive film – computer game – participatory culture – hybridity.

1.

In the case of art, interactivity is understood as the opening of an artwork to the interference of the recipients that leads to the transformation of a traditional, objectively existing artefact, shaped *a priori*, to an event individualized in the experience of reception[1]; it appeared noticeably[2] in the artistic climate of the 1950s and 1960s.[3] The real boom was noted in the

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[1] R.W. Kluszczyński, *Strategies of interactive art*, "Journal of Aesthetics & Culture", vol. 2, 2010, www.aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/5525.

[2] By this I understand not only the noticeable number of interactive works of art, but also their clarity and the reactions of artistic critique to their appearance. The name itself appeared later on.

[3] The first individual examples of such works of art may be found much earlier; Eduardo Kac points to the works of Guyla Kosice and other artists from the circle of Movimento Madi operating in Buenos Aires, who in the 1940s created kinetic works open to the

subsequent decades due to the development of digital technology. Its increased presence in all areas of artistic practices had its consequences not only for the dynamics and the scale of the development of interactive art. It also gave interactivity a new dimension, new possibilities and qualities, and it ultimately made interactive art one of the most appreciated and widely discussed artistic phenomena of the last decades of the past century. Currently, the status of interactivity in art is slowly beginning to change; it is no longer desired just for its own sake or due to its specific features (e.g. concerning the construction of the interface, the structure of the communicative experience or the architecture of information), but it also begins to be subordinated to the undertaken issues, and used by artists for various new purposes, often as a mere tool for the activities that go beyond artistic creativity (e.g. ecological, political, cognitive-scientific). The results obtained in this way frequently obscure the interactivity of an artwork (or move it to the background), thus directing the recipient's attention to the undertaken issue (also that not necessarily emerging from interactivity). *Image Fulgurator* (2008) by Julius von Bismarck could serve as an example here; a device mounted in a photo camera smuggles visual elements absent from the actual foreground into the photographs taken with a flash at the same time and place by different people (projecting them onto the photographed object), thus taking up the issue of memory in the era of its media recorders and containers. However, despite this change in the attitude towards interactivity, despite its new strategies, aims, and a range of less spectacular activities, what remains unchanged is the fact that it is still an indispensable, extremely important aspect of the most recent art. Its half-transparency, remaining in the background of the structure of art pieces, also results from the social interiorization of its patterns which, in turn, stems from its increased popularization. This is because interactivity is a foundation for the ideas and practices of participatory culture, a basis for the concept of the recipients' participation in the process of creating art and other forms of culture, and these ideas are commonly acknowledged as the basic determinant of contemporary culture, omnipresent in its current practices.

2.

The transformations of contemporary culture pushed cinema in the same direction as had been taken more or less willingly by all other artistic disciplines (first of all visual arts, formerly known as fine arts, but also music,

interference of the recipients. See E. Kac, *Telepresence & Bio Art. Networking Humans, Rabbits & Robots*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2005, pp. 109-110.

literature, dance, architecture and theatre). To an even higher degree than the majority of the above-mentioned creative modes, cinema has undergone deep and comprehensive transformations that took place thanks to the advent of electronic and digital technologies (and this process is still continuing).[4] They have resulted in the appearance of digital cinema that was initially seen solely as one current in the art of film, but that is identified today with cinema *per se*[5] or viewed as an alternative to traditional cinematography.[6] However, despite the spectacular success of digital technologies in the cinema, both in the sphere of the techniques and methods of the production, distribution and presentation of a filmic work of art and in the sphere of the social practices it involves and creates, interactivity seems to play a rather secondary role here, rather than a fundamental one.

There is a reason for such a conclusion, stemming from the analysis of both modern cinematographic industry (the state of the mainstream cinema, original and independent film), and appropriate literature. When talking about interactive film, we are faced with the issue of new, participative strategies of reception in the field of art.

3.

In the book *Cinema in the Digital Age* by Nicholas Rombes, aspiring to be a (small) monograph of digital cinema, the issue of interactivity was not addressed directly, and the notion of interactive cinema itself does not seem to appear there at all. In the chapter on the interfaces of cinema (the analysis of which, if carried out in the context of visual arts, would rather inevitably lead to the issue of interactivity[7]), the discussion did not go beyond the questions that had been raised before with the invention of video tape and the DVD player. It concentrated on taking images out of the context of the cinema halls and transferring them onto digital screens, where they would become the subject of individualized recontextualization; the mechanism of experiencing the film: slowing down the stream of images, omitting certain fragments, stopping, rewinding; or – through the mobility of the screen – involving film in relations with the changing environment[8].

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[4]   See also B. McKernan, *Digital Cinema. The Revolution in Cinematography, Postproduction, and Distribution*, McGraw-Hill, New York 2005.

[5]   See Ch. Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema. Movies in the Age of Media Convergence*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick – New Jersey – London 2009, pp. 5-9.

[6]   B. McKernan, *op. cit*.

[7]   Interface is one of the most important categories of the theory of interactivity.

[8]   N. Rombes, *Cinema in the Digital Age*, Wallflower Press, London & New York 2009, pp. 46-47.

In Rombes' analyses, there is no interactivity of a film work, but only media-conditioned freedom of its reception or, at best, cognitive interaction; the creator of the latter concept – Eric Zimmerman – does not however acknowledge such type of interaction as a property of interactive art, but as an attribute of cognitive processes in general[9]. Similar questions are also raised in the chapter on viewers' participation[10], where the point of reference is the book; the characteristics of the medium bring yet another type of interactivity to Zimmerman's typology – functional interactivity[11] – which is also of little application in the context of the digital media. As Rombes presents it, it practically concerns the interaction of a viewer with a DVD or computer interface and not with film.

In another chapter of *Cinema in the Digital Age*, devoted to the problem of non-linearity, this issue, inherently related to interactivity, is reduced solely to the discussion on non-linear editing, omitting the non-linear aspects of reception.[12]

In the case of the already mentioned coursebook monograph by Brian McKernan, *Digital Cinema: The Revolution in Cinematography, Postproduction, and Distribution,* a book that is regarded as a broad and thorough analysis of the problem of digital cinema, we are also faced with a similar situation. Neither the index or the main text of the book makes use of the notions of *interactive cinema, interactive movie, interactive video* or *random access video*, and the *nonlinear* category that appears, sends us back to the problem of editing, as in Rombes' monograph. And even though McKernan notices the interactive features of digital technologies, by for example outlining their history and analysing the potential of such inventions as *Sketchpad* by Ivan Sutherland, these observations are related only to the questions of film production and not to the experience of digital film from the perspective of the recipient, which allows the author not to bring up the subject of interactivity. One could say that in the view of both authors, McKernan and Rombes, but also numerous others whose concepts I shall not discuss here, such as e.g. Frank Rose or James Hoberman[13] – digital cinema means traditional films in digital form, with all their former basic attributes modified

9   E. Zimmerman, *Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discipline*, in *First Person. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. – London, England 2004, pp. 158-159.
10   N. Rombes, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-141.
11   E. Zimmerman, *op. cit.*
12   N. Rombes, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
13   F. Rose, *The Art of Immersion. How the digital generation is remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the way we tell stories*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York – London 2011; J. Hoberman, *Film After Film. Or, What Became of 21st-Century Cinema?*, Verso, London 2012.

or complemented, but not replaced by the properties of the new computer medium.

The foundations of the viewpoint on interactive cinema adopted by both film theoreticians quoted above, a viewpoint that could also be defined as institutional – representative of the already existing system of cinematography – was very clearly presented by Roger Ebert (d. 2013), an exceptionally influential American film critic, author of over twenty books on cinema and several collections of reviews. His article, entitled "Dim Future for Interactive Film"[14], published in 1994 is a model one as well as expressive and unequivocal, since Ebert wrote is just to answer the question about the possibility of interactive cinema. His answer is a categorical one: interactive cinema has no future because it has no present. It is contradictory to the rules obtaining in the current world of film and accepted by the audience. "This notion ['interactive film' – RWK] is an oxymoron" – says Ebert[15]. Let us analyse his argument in greater detail.

According to Evert, a film is primarily directed at groups of viewers who watch it together at the same time and the movie-theatre is an appropriate place to present it; secondly, it subordinates the viewers to the screen world: by starting the processes of projection-identification it decides what they see, hear and feel; thirdly, it is linear, thanks to which the story can be told.

A film characterised by Ebert in this way is contrasted with an interactive computer game which is addressed to an individual recipient and makes him or her a central figure making all possible decisions, and which also has non-linear structure – it does not tell the story but creates a possibility of exploration or acting in the presented world. Ebert is of the opinion that these forms of art have so little in common that they promote two totally different types of experience. By stressing the fact that he values them both[16], he also claims that "it is important not to mix the two".[17]

Obviously, one argue, and quite successfully, with all the arguments of the American critic. Especially from today's perspective of twenty years later,

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[14] www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/dim-future-for-interactive-film (10.07.2014).

[15] *Ibidem*. Also Bernard Perron reaches out for this term, thus describing the category of interactive fiction, see B. Perron, *From Gamers to Players and Gameplayers: The Example of Interactive Movies*, in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. by B. Perron, M.J.P. Wolf, Routledge, New York 2003, pp. 143-153.

[16] Ebert will soon drop this conviction; on the one hand, he will always be opposed to the idea of interactive cinema, but he will part with the idea of a game being a kind of art, at the same time he will sustain the idea of a deep dissimilarity of both areas; see for example the article he published in 2010 entitled *Video Games Can Never Be Art*, www.rogerebert. com/rogers-journal/video-games-can-never-be-art (11.07.2014).

[17] R. Ebert, *Dim Future for Interactive Film*, *op. cit.* (10.07.2014).

when certain tendencies that back then were hardly visible or marginal, have now gained strength and began to set the tone of the present times.

First of all, films are more and more frequently watched outside a movie theatre, individually or in small groups, using various systems of presentation and engaging various means. Whereas computer games today are becoming multi-player games, frequently experienced on these same screens on which films are watched.

Secondly, by treating the relationships that subordinate a viewer to the screen as permanent and never changing, Ebert reduces the broad spectre of cinematographic genres to the mainstream; however, if one considers the author cinema and the distancing strategies characteristic for example for Brecht's cinema, it might turn out that the relationships between the viewers and the world of the films by Jean-Luc Godard or Glauber Rochy involve certain activities that make this type of film a basis for an interactive experience. Moreover, the exemplary analysis of the film genre undertaken by Ebert, which aims at presenting the impossibility of transforming it into an interactive form and thus at discrediting the idea of interactivity in the cinema, was indeed rather pointless, if not ridiculous, because an interactive film takes on quite a different structure, formulates different expectations towards the recipients, and brings to them a different kind of satisfaction than the film work discussed by Ebert. Claiming that a film representing the conventions contradictory to the paradigm of interactivity cannot become a valuable piece of interactive art is at the same time obvious and useless in the context of the debate that is being carried out.

Thirdly, the linearity of the cinema is not its necessary attribute, but just a stylistic choice. It was Ebert himself who, in 2005, with an acceptance close to enthusiasm, adopted the notion and idea of *hyperlink cinema* proposed by Allisa Quart[18], so that he would be able to analyse the multilinear film *Syriana* by Stephen Gaghan, and later the analogically created works of Alejandro Iñárritu (at the same time promoting the category of *hyperlink cinema*). Clearly, such films have no hypertext structure, nor do they include any real hyperlinks; their name is of purely metaphorical character. However, it was coined solely so as to suggest that the construction of such films has nothing to do with simple, linear narrative structure.

Having thus undermined all of Ebert's arguments, I have good ground to claim that the two types of experience that are discussed here: film and interactive activity, and also the two art genres connected with them – film and computer games – appear to have more in common than Roger Ebert would like to admit.

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[18]   A. Quart, *Networked*, "Film Comment" July–August 2005, No. 4.

I have no intention of arguing with Ebert any more or debating with McKernan and Rombes. The task that I have set for myself here is just isolating and describing the research positions concerning the issue of interactive cinema, but not their verification and evaluation. The above analysis of Ebert's concept was mainly to show that the way of placing interactivity in the context of cinema or in relation to film is absolutely and totally dependent on the assumed concept of cinema and the idea of a filmic work in particular. The monolithic vision of cinema that I refer to as institutional, which is identical with the perspective of the film industry, is struggling to maintain the system of cinema within the frames of traditional parameters, thus it does not allow for the existence of interactive cinema within it because this would be destructive to the whole system; instead it relegates interactivity to the world of games. From among the possibilities offered by the digital technologies, the institutional theory of cinema accepts only those that do not ruin the basis of the traditional system.

Another aim of the above analysis was to draw attention to the fact that the once rigid borders between the various artistic (and cultural) areas that are systematically blurred, contrary to the assumptions of institutional theories, including the areas of film activities and computer games – and their deepening hybridization. More and more phenomena on the borderline present the features of two or more disciplines. This hybridisation as well as technological and media convergence, multi- and transmedialisation, are additional elements of the media world of today.

4.

The question of the relation between film and computer games that was brought up by Ebert, became back then, in the last decade of the 20th century, one of the most widely discussed issues also in the circles of the researchers on games (becoming the basis for a long and loud but also mythologized dispute between narratology and experts on ludics), as a result of the discovery and spread of the CD-ROM (later on DVD-ROM) technology, and later also the improvements in the definition and flow of film sequences that are introduced into the structure of games. Many researchers were not convinced that the opposition of watching and playing (a film vs. interactive experience) could be overcome, and some of the games or at least their fragments (cut scenes) were considered as examples of unjustified inter-ferences of film into the realm of the games, inclusions that interfere with the

experience of playing[19]. Such a perspective – similarly to the analogical viewpoints in the world of cinematography that I have already discussed – attempts to maintain clear and impervious borders between film and game, between the experience of watching and playing[20].

However, contrary to the above concept and following Kevin Veale [21], I will claim, as he did, that the opposition of cinema and computer games cannot be reduced to contrasting passive reception (watching) and active participation (playing); and that it is an opposition that arbitrarily separates these two worlds of audiovisual phenomena. Veale also draws attention to the fact that in both cases we are faced with the recipients' engagement, how-ever, it is carried out differently in each case. Both the technological changes that take place in these two areas and the poetics, stylistics and concepts of the created works result in their reciprocal impact that allow common areas to emerge, where films and games converge and interpenetrate, as a result of which the category of interactive cinema is no longer an oxymoron, but becomes an appropriate notion describing the phenomena which emerge from this dialogue. Veale recalls a number of works which, in his understanding, are good representatives of the hybrid area in which **games become films**, without ceasing to engage the viewers in the activities that are relevant for the course of the events presented on screen and influencing their development, whereas **films take on the form of play** which engages the recipients in the activities that are part of the game, at the same time not ceasing to be "objects" designed to be watched. These works, as Veale stresses, promote experiences that cannot be adequately analysed and described within one research context: that of games or cinema. The way of telling a story which is characteristic for such works – certain order that involves elements of both cinema and game provokes transdisciplinary analysis and reflection. Thus, Veale's standpoint goes beyond the institutional perspective on games, focusing on the paradigm of the cinema-game, within which interactivity is

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[19]   See C. Pearce, T*oward a Game Theory of Game*, in: *First Person. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. – London, England 2004, pp. 143-153.

[20]   Hard contemporary version of concepts that contrast the world of cinema and computer games are more frequently met in the circles of cinema researchers, although they are often accompanied by the awareness of the irreversibility of the changes that touched the whole world of audiovisual culture than they are among the games researchers. The latter ones are generally more open to the processes of interpenetration of both the cinema and games, which is however often accompanied by the opinion that cinema is no longer the most important system of contemporary culture, giving way to games.

[21]   K. Veale, *"Interactive Cinema" Is an Oxymoron, but May Not Always Be*, „Game Studies. The International Journal of Computer Game Research" Volume 12 Issue 1, September 2012.

a real feature of the works that are created and experienced. However, in the context of the institutional paradigm of the cinema governed by the rules of the film industry, such works, like all other experiments with interactivity, are relegated to the margins of film practice. Marginalised and sent to the periphery, they only survive thanks to the deep and constantly advancing transformations of the cultural context in which interactivity becomes one of a few basic principles.

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**FILM INTERAKTYWNY W INSTYTUCJONALNYM PARADYGMACIE KINA
(streszczenie)**

W artykule rozważam sytuację interaktywności i filmu interaktywnego w kontekście instytucjonalnym kina, wyznaczanym przez reguły przemysłu kinematograficznego. Zwracam uwagę na to, że pomimo postępującej cyfryzacji wszystkich obszarów produkcji, dystrybucji i odbioru filmów, interaktywność jest postrzegana jako właściwość niefilmowa i w konsekwencji marginalizowana. Kinematografia otwiera się szeroko na wszystkie innowacje technologiczne, które nie naruszają standardowego modelu doświadczenia filmowego. Interaktywność uznawana jest tu za właściwość gier a nie kina. Film interaktywny, wyrzucany na peryferie instytucjonalnego systemu kina, staje się częścią awangardy audiowizualnej, wspólnej części przestrzeni instytucjonalnych kina i sztuki.

Słowa kluczowe: kino cyfrowe – film interaktywny – gra komputerowa – kultura partycypacyjna – hybrydyczność.