

Anthropology of Film. Introduction

In the wake of a special monographic issue about the theatre going back to its sources, the “theatre contaminated with ethnology”, and texts focused on the anthropology of the theatre (cf. “Polska Sztuka Ludowa. Konteksty” no. 3-4/1991) we present a fascicle on the anthropology of film and photography. It seems that there is no need to justify this topic (or its selection). For some time the encounter of anthropology and film, the anthropology of culture and scientific, critical and humanistic reflection on the cinema has been quite natural. Multiple sources, reasons, and testimonies of such meetings can be cited. Suffice to mention the remarks made by Yuri Lotman in an introduction to the Polish edition of his *Semiotics of Cinema*, where in an astonishing comparison of the Athenian rite and myth with Roman Polanski’s *Knife in Water* the author spoke laconically (and such could have been the response and justification in the case of every ethnographer and anthropologist of culture concentrating his attention on the cinema) that even the most contemporary film can be decoded with the assistance of the myth deeply concealed within. *There comes to the fore*, Lotman wrote, *one of the most characteristic features of the cinema, which elevated it to the rank of avant-garde art of the second half of the twentieth century. True, the inclination towards neo-mythologism, the process of stirring the deep strata of culture are a phenomenon characteristic for art of the last decades. Nonetheless, nowhere outside the cinema do assorted types of the organisation of the material – from genre forms totally absorbed with a credible recreation of daily existence to the form of the generalised structure of the myth - blend so organically while penetrating each other.* Further on, Lotman drew attention to the specific duality of the film: *In this fashion, the language of the film unites extreme logical rungs – from the sensual experiencing of the actual perception of things (a feeling of a direct reality of the world shown on screen) to extreme illusionariness. At the same time, there takes place a merge of historical stages – from the most archaic forms of artistic consciousness to the most contemporary ones. Such unification does not by any*

means obliterate extremity; on the contrary, it accentuates it as much as possible.

This duality of film corresponds to the specific bipolar nature of anthropological perception simultaneously focused on the archaics, the structure of long duration, and the contemporary. In this case too we are not dealing with the blurring of differences and extremities, just as in the equally concise definition of ethnography: *Ethnography is a science about that, which connects people of different societies, cultures and epochs.*

We may come across this dialogical perspective of ethnography also in the admission made by Levi-Strauss, who described it as history whose two extremities touch the history of the world and personal history, and which at the same time discloses their joint rationale by considering differences and transformations of importance to all concerned.

Within this context a similarly laconic definition of ethnography as a way of reaching a different world should not come as a surprise; the same holds true for the declaration that ethnography is predominantly a rendition of the topical, an expression of vitality. This is the way in which the natural, obvious, and multifaceted interest in the film on the part of the anthology of culture becomes understandable. The anthropologist is absorbed with the film, first and foremost, as a myth, an expression of currently emergent mythology, and a domain of the occurrence (frequently in a concealed manner) of eternal mythological motifs and deep symbolic structures. It is precisely the film in its capacity as a myth-creating carrier (a domain of the continuation, transformation, and “revival of meanings”) and as a record of contemporaneity (the film registers customs, gestures, motions, models of beauty, fashions, thematic tendencies, the mental structures of a given period, etc.) as well as owing to the reflection of differences, rendered indelible within it or the mixture (or levelling) of cultural diversity, that matches a specific sensorium moulded within the range of the anthropology of culture.

Characteristically, we may find theses about the inclination of contemporary art towards neo-mythologism also amongst many researchers studying culture. In this instance, film is not alone but is accompanied by the experiences of the theatre and literature, as Mircea Eliade mentioned in his conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet in *Ordeal by Labyrinth*.

It is a well-known fact that literature transmitted orally or written is the offspring of mythology and inherits the latter’s functions: to recount adventures and to tell about important global occurrences. Why is something that takes place so important, why do we want to find out what happened to the marquise drinking her five o’clock tea? All narration, even if it describes the most commonplace facts, continues the traditions of the grand narratives presented in myths

and explaining the beginning of the world and the origin of man. Interest in narration and the story is an element of human condition and existence in the world. Man wants to find out what people have accomplished and of what they are capable: risk, adventures, assorted trials. Our existence is not that of motionless stones, flowers or insects whose life follows a precisely delineated track. Our existence is an adventure. Man will never cease listening to stories.

Nevertheless, it is also highly characteristic that Eliade was ready to grant special place and significance to film and its capability of bringing us closer to the myth. He gave a determined answer to a question posed by his interlocutor, suggesting that by turning away from the novel avant-garde literature had also rejected something that appears to be an essential element of mankind, and that the myth could have survived in the cinema. Eliade claimed that the cinema preserved the ability to tell myths and to camouflage them not only in the secular but also in areas of degradation and decline. Cinematographic art makes excellent use of the symbol, and even if the latter remains invisible it continues to affect emotions.

The leaning towards neo-mythologism, the process of coming closer to the myth, the attainment by the cinema and film of the dimensions and functions of a myth appear to be part (just as fascinating for the anthropology of culture) of a wider process of contemporary remythisation, described by Gilbert Durand, a researcher studying symbolic imagination and drawing attention to a certain paradox. The same iconoclastic and scientifically oriented civilisation that often mixes demystification and demythisation at the same time proposes a huge demythisation procedure to be carried out on a planetary scale, and with such means at its disposal, which no society has enjoyed throughout the entire history of mankind. It is to André Malraux's great credit that he demonstrated that rapid means of communication, a mass-scale distribution of the masterpieces of art *via* photographs of prints, cinematography, books, colour reproductions, gramophone records, telecommunication and the press, made possible a global confrontation of culture and a gathering of themes, works, and images in some sort of a Museum of the imagination, focused on all symptoms of cultural life. Faced with the enormous activity of a scientific and iconoclastic society, the same society proposes means for restoring equilibrium. The inclination towards neo-mythologism appears to be still topical despite the proclaimed (or actual) crisis of the cinema as an institution, as evidenced at the very least by the film-television version of Brooke's *Mahabharata*, the worldwide success of Kieślowski's *Decalogue*, and, earlier, the "mythology of Town and World" contained in Fellini's works, the "mythology of childhood" in *Fanny and Alexander* and the whole Bergman *œuvre*, the

works of Tarkovsky, Pasolini, Paradjanov, Herzog, Kurosawa, Buñuel, Wajda and many others.

The cinema recreates and revives the myth. But there are some areas in which the anthropology of culture and the cinema meet in an equally natural manner. Keep in mind that their beginnings belong to an almost identical epoch (the origin of scientific anthropology is dated differently and spans from 1851 – the publication of *League of the Iroquois* by Morgan, 1877 – his *Ancient Society*, and 1871 – Taylor's *Primitive Culture*, to 1895 – the establishment of "L'Année Sociologique"; its worthwhile recalling within this context that when Bronisław Malinowski was conducting his studies on the Trobriand Islands, Robert Flaherty, known as the father of the documentary film, made his first film in the Far North (1917), while his second film - *Nanook of the North* - originated in 1922, the same year as Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*). These natural connections between anthropology and the cinema, the initial impact exerted by photography on the shaping of anthropology and, in time, the cinema, which today bears fruit in the truly distinct domain of Visual Anthropology, have been vividly outlined by James Clifford in his book *The Predicament of Culture*, discussing ethnography against the backdrop of twentieth-century literature and art, and comparing the title page of the *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* with the frontispiece of Father Lafitau's work on the American Indians. The frontispiece of *Moeurs des Sauvages Amériquains* from 1724 portrays ethnography as a young woman at a writing pulpit surrounded by works of art from the New World, classical Greece and ancient Egypt. She is accompanied by two cherubs assisting her in the task of making comparisons, while a bearded figure representing Time points to a table featuring the ultimate fount of truth flowing from the writer's pen. The image at which the young woman is gazing shows the edge of clouds amidst which there appear Adam, Eve, and the serpent; above, a second human couple – man and woman free of sin and mentioned in the Book of Revelation, flank a radiant triangle carrying the inscribed Hebrew name of Jehovah.

The title page of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* displays a photograph capturing A Ceremonial Act of the *Kula*, with a shell necklace being offered to a Trobriander chief standing in the doorway of his dwelling. Behind the man presenting the necklace there is a row of six young men, bowing and one holding a conch. Shown from the profile they are clearly concentrating on the exchange ritual, an actual event from Melanesian life. A closer look, however, discloses that one of the men is staring at the camera. Clifford proposed the following commentary: the Lafitau allegory seems to be more distant and its author conducted a transcription - he moulded and created. In contrast to Malinowski's photograph, the illustration does not

make any references or evoke ethnographic experience although five years of studies conducted among the Mohawk tribe ensured esteemed rank among field researchers of all generations. The description does not appear to be the outcome of first-hand observation but the result of writing in a cramped study. The title page of *Argonauts* - similarly as all photographs – proves presence and assures about the existence of that, which had been captured by the camera lens; it also suggests a different presence, that of an ethnographer actively composing this particular fragment of Trobriand reality. The Kula exchange ritual – the topic of Malinowski's book – is described with perfect visuality and shown in discernible takes, and the above-mentioned glance of the participant of the ritual draws our attention once again towards the viewpoint of an observer in which we, the readers, co-participate, towards the ethnographer and his camera. Emphasis is placed on the dominating course of contemporary field studies and their authority: *You are there... because I was there.*

There exists yet another feature of anthropology, which in a special manner makes it possible to link it with film. Alongside the specific sensorium of the archaic, the primeval, and the fundamental and that, which is contemporary, anthropology is linked with film the strongest by a penchant and interest for the concrete. An anthropologist reaching for the camera, in various ways dealing with films, and asking: "Why Anthropology of film?" might, just as we could, seek help in Wim Wenders' reply to a questionnaire (*Why do you make films?*). I take the liberty of citing copious fragments:

Ever since this terrible question was put to me, I've done nothing but think of how to answer it. I have one answer in the morning and one at night, one at the editing-table, one when I'm looking at stills of earlier films of mine, another when I'm speaking to my accountant and yet another when I think of the team I've been working with for years now. Every one of these different answers, these reasons for making films, is sincere and genuine, but I keep saying to myself there must be something "more fundamental", some "commitment", or even a "compulsion".

I was twelve years old when I made my very first film, with an 8 mm camera. I stood by a window and filmed the street below, the cars and pedestrians. My father saw me and asked: "What are you doing with your camera?" And I said: "Can't you see? I'm filming the street". "What for?" he asked. I had no answer. Ten or twelve years later, I was making my first short film in 16 mm. A reel of film lasted three minutes. I filmed a crossroads from the sixth floor, without moving the camera until the reel was finished. It didn't occur to me to pull away or stop shooting any earlier. With hindsight, I suppose it would have seemed like sacrilege to me.

Why sacrilege?

I'm no great theorist. I tend not to remember things I've read in books. So I can't give you Béla Balázs's exact words, but they affected me profoundly all the same. He talks about the ability {and the responsibility} of cinema "to show things as they are". And he says cinema can "rescue the existence of things".

That's precisely it.

I have another quote, from Cézanne, where he says: "Things are disappearing. If you want to see anything, you have to hurry".

So back to the awful question: why do I make films? Well, because ... Something happens, you see it happening, you film it as it happens, the camera sees it and records it, and you can look at it again, afterwards. The thing itself may no longer be there, but you can still see it, the fact of its existence hasn't been lost. The act of filming is a heroic act (not always, not often, but sometimes). For a moment, the gradual destruction of the world of appearances is held up. The camera is a weapon against the tragedy of things, against their disappearing. Why make films? Bloody stupid question! (The Logic of Images).

Myth – Literature – Film – Photography – these are the cardinal themes of this issue of "Konteksty". We present essay by Clifford. His study compares two "Polish refugees" (whom he described as the fathers of contemporary anthropological reflection) penetrating a different world and offering dramatic testimony of the confused meeting of representatives of European civilisation and primal culture - Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*) and Bronisław Malinowski (*Argonauts of the Western Pacific*); in doing so, it deliberates on falsehood and truth in the cultural meaning of those terms, the question of the "saving lie" protecting values and a cohesive image of culture. Clifford also revealed the literary aspects of ethnography creating cultural fictions (it does not mean: that they are untrue) and indicated the great role played by the biographical and subjective element as well as the creative dimension present in scientific work pursued by the anthropologist. The essay by Teresa Rutkowska about Fellini's "journeys" analyses the motif of wandering and the road in his films, interpreted in reference to the deep symbolic structures and stylistic traditions of the Baroque; such "journeys" also provide evidence of an awareness of the absence of the continuum in the contemporary world. Reflections on the symbol and the film (Dariusz Czaja) precede a whole series of analyses tracing the presence of profound symbolic contents in film. The series contains translations (Don Frederickson; T. Jefferson Kline – an excellent example of a psychoanalytical-mythographic analysis perceiving *The Last Tango in Paris* as a contemporary version of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice) accompanied by texts by Polish authors presented at a "Seminar of the anthropology of film" established and conducted by Professor Aleksander Jackiewicz and today contin-

ued by anthropologists of culture at the Department of Cultural Anthropology, Film and Audiovisual Arts – in the Institute of Art at the Polish Academy (i.a. an essay by Wojciech Michera tracking the presence and significance of the alchemical symbolic in works by Herzog; essays on the Don Quixote motif in literature and film, and the cultural-literary-film myth of Venice).

Dzieło a "granica sensu" (The Work and the "Boundary of Meaning") by Wiesław Juszczak, author of a translation into the Polish of stories by Karen Blixen, initiates analyses of *Babette's Feast*. In an essay about the author of *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* Janusz Gazda portrayed works and movies by Sergei Parajanov an artist salvaging the memory of the rich cultural tradition from which the film director drew his creative force. Ryszard Ciarka considered the essence of film quests and experiences in reference to the Renaissance aesthetics of *res simulacra*, choosing as the object of his analysis *Innocent Magicians* by Andrzej Wajda and *The Last Day of Summer* by Tadeusz Konwicki. Małgorzata Baranowska discussed the phenomenon of the postcard, and Anna Sobolewska interpreted, *via* the categories of the sacrament, the experience of time and space in *Orchestra*, a video by Zbigniew Rybczyński. A register of culture in contemporary film shaped within the climate of the postmodern game played with cultural texts is another theme.

A separate current consists of fragments of autobiographies, recollections, and excerpts of diaries. We include fragments of an autobiography by Aleksander Jackiewicz, recording his first experiences with the cinema and a further path towards literature, and the anthropology of film. Other texts are parts of *Fotodziennik* (Photo-Journal) kept for years by Anna Bodziewicz and the autobiography of Józef Szymańczyk, a small-town photographer. A separate pull-out contains a drawing from a sketchbook-diary kept for years by Andrzej Wajda. This time, the author of the memorable film version of *Wesele* (The Wedding), congenial in relation to Wyspiański's play but also a highly auteur work, offered a drawing-note made during a staging of a German-language theatrical version featured at the Salzburg festival. (Only a few of our younger readers are aware that this is not the first time that Andrzej Wajda has appeared in our periodical – he is the author of a documentation of the vanishing world of street photographers. Cf. article *Screens and Backgrounds of Street Photographers* in: "Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa" no. 1/1956). The presented issue includes texts on the ethnographic film, focusing on the participation of the creative, subjective element in the production of the ethnographic film and photographic documentation (cf., e.g. a conversation held with Jacek Olędzki, author of numerous ethnographic studies carried out in Poland, Asia and Africa). All

texts collected in this film-photography issue, dealing more closely either with literature, film or anthropology, come together within the range of joint problems and intentions that could be encompassed by Conrad's formula: *To do justice to the visible world.**

* This is a preface to a special issue of „Konteksty” (no. 3-4/1992) about the anthropology of film. Naturally, not all mentioned texts were included into the anthology. We maintain the preface in order to acquaint the reader with the profile of the gathered essays and material. (Cf. *Contents and Summaries*, „Konteksty” no. 3-4/1992).

