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Film Image and Its “Painterly Quality”: Comparative Film Studies by Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz

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Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz;
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film image;
painterly image;
painterly quality

Abstract

The subject of this analysis is Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz’s article “Obraz malarski a obraz filmowy” [“Painterly Image and Film Image”], published in *Kwartalnik Filmowy* in 1953. This is a profoundly mature and fully scholarly work by a very young author. This commentary places the article within the context of the development of post-war Polish film studies, highlighting its significance as a statement showing the author’s acute awareness of the challenges and objectives facing this emerging academic discipline. The main part of the commentary focuses on reconstructing the key aspects of Toeplitz’s comparison between the painterly and film images, with particular emphasis on the problems related to the transposition of the former into the latter (the concept of “painterly quality” proving central in this regard). The subsequent sections address the status of Toeplitz’s proposal within the tradition of comparative film studies, considering both the later works of filmmakers inspired by the visual arts and the contemporary possibilities for publishing research within the framework of comparative film studies. **(Non-reviewed material).**

Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz's output (including strictly in film studies) is enormous, and it is difficult to refer to it even briefly here. Nonetheless, a comprehensive study has been relatively recently prepared – edited by Barbara Giza and Piotr Zwierzchowski¹ – and includes both in-depth analyses of selected issues, and an annotated bibliography of all the works of the book's main character (over one hundred pages of a densely written list).² He became the erudite author of *Kwartalnik Filmowy* as a very young man (a student of art history), to which the researchers reconstructing this fascinating biography point with a special mention³ (whereas Tadeusz Konwicki wrote that the twenty-years-old Toeplitz was *loaded with film*⁴). Independently of his critical and journalistic activity, already intensive at that time, he published three articles in the journal,⁵ and occasionally took part in discussions (including a polemic with his uncle, professor Jerzy Toeplitz),⁶ most recently in 1956. Interestingly enough, it was in this way that his enthusiasm for writing elaborate academic texts stopped although some of his later publications, written in a slightly different, more essayistic style, can be considered thoroughly scholarly and to this day, many of them still function as significant reference points, for example in reflection on mass culture, television, or comics. Toeplitz also wrote a doctoral dissertation, which he eventually did not defend,⁷ but which he published as a monograph *Sztuka komiksu. Próba definicji nowego gatunku artystycznego* [*The art of comics. An attempt to define the new artistic genre*] (1985), which was later recognised as pioneering in Poland.

The text "Painterly Image and Film Image" thus constitutes a unique trace of the lesser-known face of the "early" Toeplitz, who over the next few decades of the 20th century managed to earn the name of one of the most interesting, prolific and versatile publicists, commentators on social and cultural life, and film critics. Above all, however, the article deserves to be recollected due to the topic it discusses which, although not new, is presented for the first time in such a significant way in the Polish post-war context. By institutionalising and submitting to academic rigor, the developing film studies of the time put a lot of effort into defining its own status, and therefore also its subject of research. The foundation of Toeplitz's essay is determined by the question of what film image actually is and what kind of relationship it has with painterly image. Nevertheless, the author goes much further in his theoretical considerations.

In the historical context of the development of film studies, and thus justifying the choice of Toeplitz's text from the archives of *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, the author's high methodological self-awareness is worth emphasising. At the beginning, he judges the existing film theory as focused on the screenplay and the literary foundations of film, to eventually postulate strengthening of other comparative research, i.e., on film and painterly image. At the same time, he is aware of the complexity regarding this task: (...) *film criticism has not developed a suitable scientific framework to analyse and record these practical experiences, so that they become not only the accomplishments of one master of cinema or another but a lasting achievement of film studies.*⁸

In the process of comparing the static, unchanging, materially tangible painterly image, and the film image, changing over time and drawn on the screen with light, "film presentation," understood as a static fragment of a film, becomes a specific *tertium comparationis*. It becomes possible to combine technical and aes-

thetic issues (both cases are about reflecting three-dimensional reality, as well as a kind of choice in the ways of its presentation – compositional and colour-based) and issues of reception (similarity of viewing circumstances).

Apart from fundamental characteristics distinguishing painterly image from film image (in short: montage, space, and depth), Toeplitz points to seven “common places” of painting and film or – in order to precisely convey his goal – answers the question of *how fundamental categories of the painterly image manifest themselves in the new quality that the film image constitutes*.⁹ These are: 1) concept as a perceived “effect” of an episode or scene; 2) a deepened (by sound and motion) illusion of three-dimensionality of film image; 3) static composition of painterly image *versus* kinetic composition of film image; 4) colour composition (local and/or the tone of the whole); 5) value; 6) texture; 7) reception (the similarity is considerable, assuming the aforementioned static film presentation).

Perhaps the most frequently discussed subject in later comparative analyses (to this day) is the direction of inspiration: from painting to film. Toeplitz did not emphasise this topic, but ultimately, he also asked: *how does a painterly image turn into a film image?*¹⁰ Naturally, he based one of his answers on specific – yet generalised in a theoretical way – cases of film references to paintings or painterly traditions, while underlining the condition for successful transposition: the director is obliged to learn his model’s *principal ideological and artistic sense*¹¹ in advance. Visual fidelity, although sometimes striking, especially in the case of what is known as living pictures (*tableaux vivants*), was not a sufficient condition for the “painterly quality”: *It is possible to be faithful in transposing a painterly image into a film image without staging this image in the film frame at all. Instead, the task consists in conveying essential features of the painterly work using entirely new, different in terms of genre, means of filmic expression. (...) any artistic feature of a painting can be translated onto the screen; copying it on the screen is a mistake, it means breaking the formal canons of a new art – the art of film.*¹²

As a consequence, according to Toeplitz, the “painterly quality” of film presentations can be understood in two ways: as the ability of a film to transpose, translate, “imitate” a specific painting but also as the ability to create images considered “painterly”, associated with such (for instance, by noticeable composition, choice of colours, and, above all, a kind of pause in time, stillness, static scenes and shots that attract attention and require the viewer’s concentration). In both cases, artistic motivation and justification¹³ is accentuated and regarded as necessary in the work of a director.

The status of the text in question can also be looked at from a historical perspective. The 1920s and 1930s saw an explosion of theoretical (aesthetical, philosophical, etc.) reflection on film, an attempt to capture the phenomenon of film as a new art form, also, apart from the purely technical aspect, by situating it in relation to the already sanctioned classical disciplines. One of the themes within these early deliberations was treating the phenomenon of moving images as “similar” to and deriving from painterly images (independently or parallelly to literary and theatrical inspirations) or, on the contrary, as ultimately breaking with this non-obvious inspiration. Similarities and differences between the film image and the painterly image were already acknowledged from various perspectives

by Vachel Lindsay, Kazimierz Malewicz, Erwin Panofsky, and Walter Benjamin, among others. The early post-war French film studies also began to explore the topic of the relationship between film and painting (Pierre Francastel, Étienne Souriau, Jean Tribut). In fact, these works were actually contemporary to Toeplitz. It is difficult to say whether he was familiar with them (among the few inspirations, Soviet ones predominate: Sergei Eisenstein, Anatoli Golovnya, Abram Room, but also Mieczysław Porebski and Georges Sadoul); in any case in the post-war Polish context, the text discussed here appears as pioneering and especially significant, if only as an arbitrary caesura.

In the history of the concept of “*obraz*” [image] (i.e., film image), Alicja Helman situated it in the initial phase, and moreover, as she wrote, it already represented the *comparative orientation*¹⁴ characteristic of Polish post-war film theory. Its intensive development was indeed noticeable from the mid 1950s to 1980s, and a few important texts were published in *Kwartalnik Filmowy*.¹⁵ As time passed, structuralism, semiotics, and linguistics were entering this comparative discourse more and more intensively – both as methodological inspirations and as platforms for scholarly, academic enhancement of film studies discourse (Jadwiga Bocheńska, Alicja Helman, Tadeusz Miczka, Erazm Kuźma, Piotr Lis).

Afterwards, the interests of researchers did not so much weaken, as comparative studies still had many issues to discuss, but their focus shifted: subsequent theoretical concepts were initiated to a lesser extent, and instead greater emphasis was put on the analysis of the growing number of examples of artistic use of painting in filmmaking. Tadeusz Miczka’s book on Andrzej Wajda’s artistic inspirations is of particular importance here¹⁶ as well as, from more recent Polish works, Filip Lipiński’s book on the impact of Edward Hopper’s paintings on contemporary audiovisual culture.¹⁷ A separate mention should be made of research devoted to directors or their particular works in which painterly inspirations are clear, significant, or crucial, for instance Andrzej Wajda¹⁸ and Lech Majewski.¹⁹

At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, Helman stated that *the origin of film studies is of a comparative (...) provenance*. In the context of the relation in question, she added: *Visual arts, with which film seems to be entwined most organically, due to its visuality, iconicity, accentuated by everyone, were the relatively weakest source of inspiration for theoretical analysis, which may sound paradoxical. The abundance of material is ostensible, and the multifaceted considerations may deceivingly attest to their purported usefulness, whereas in fact visual arts are devoid of concepts which are satisfactory for a modern researcher.*²⁰ Present-day research on the history of film theory does not generally confirm the view of *the weakest source*; however, a lot has changed in regards to *the abundance of material*, as well as in terms of its availability and possibility to use it in the presentation of research results. First of all, the old comparative studies, interested in the “painterly” work of film directors could not foresee that the subject of its analysis would include such works as Lech Majewski’s *The Mill and the Cross* (*Młyn i krzyż*, 2011), Gustav Deutsch’s *Shirley: Visions of Reality* (2013), or *Loving Vincent* (2017) and *The Peasants* (*Chłopi*, 2023) by DK Welchman and Hugh Welchman. Secondly, online communities nowadays often juxtapose film frames with paintings referenced by the filmmakers, or which only after the recipient’s act of juxtaposition demonstrated some kind of similarity. This gives



The Mill and the Cross, dir. Lech Majewski (2011)



Loving Vincent, dir. DK Welchman, Hugh Welchman (2017)



The Peasants, dir. DK Welchman, Hugh Welchman (2023)

rise to impressive, quality, sometimes wordless, imaginative interpretations of the specific relations between film and painting which, thanks to the multiplication of examples and manners of presentation, in a completely new way attest to the phenomenon of artistic marriages and the potential of comparative research.

In the following decades of his film-related contemplations, Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz did not come back to the topic discussed here in a systematic manner; somewhat incidentally, only exceptionally captivating and successful cases provoked him to make a few remarks.²¹ The discussed text thus constitutes an interesting episode on the writer and publicist's creative path (in terms of film studies and criticism), but even more, it is a sign of times: of the awareness of the shaping and development of an academic discipline in a given ideological context. Toeplitz's later, mature journalism developed in the context of Polish People's Republic's compromises and privileges; however, as it turns out, even the very beginning of his writing activity was particularly marked in that respect. Expressions and postulates in the spirit of social realism, and even a quote from Lenin appear in the text, yet what seems most remarkable about them in hindsight is their utter redundancy. The search for "visual expression" in Pushkin, "cinematic use of colour" in Gogol admittedly constitutes an argument in favour of the development of film social realism; nevertheless, the dominant purely theoretical discourse does not actually need this support. Analogical endeavours provoke the question of the wider context of publishing in Poland at the beginning of the 1950s.

The article by Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz remains a significant introduction to comparative studies in terms of comparing the painterly and film image, but at the same time a very distant one due to the development of the art of filmmaking and its "painterly" techniques, access to films, works of art themselves or their reproductions, and the methods and techniques of publishing research results (from print to the Internet), and finally due to the fundamental change in the dominant of the theory of interpretation. It is certainly no longer verified by the discovery of the director's intentions and its *artistic motivation and justification*, but rather by the invention of the viewer, who is proficient in modern visual culture and points out the obvious and less direct relations between images.

Transl. Karol Krzaczyński

¹ See: Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz, eds. B. Giza, P. Zwierzchowski, *Polscy krytycy filmowi* publishing series, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2024 (especially: J. Grzechowiak, "Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz – rys biograficzny", pp. 12-23); see also: K. Batora, "Toeplitz Krzysztof Teodor", in: *Współcześni polscy pisarze i badacze literatury. Słownik bibliograficzny*, vol. 8, eds. J. Czachowska, A. Szałagan, Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, Warszawa 1994, pp. 328-331; "Toeplitz Krzysztof Teodor", in: *Literatura polska XX wieku. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2000, p. 229.

² A. Kowalski, "Podmiotowa i przedmiotowa bibliografia dotycząca Krzysztofa Teodora Toeplitza [KIT] (wybór)", in: *Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz*, op. cit., pp. 258-370.

³ See: B. Giza, "Międzysocjologia, antropologia a psychologia społeczna. Krzysztofa Teodora Toeplitza koncepcja krytyki filmowej", in: *Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz*, op. cit., p. 120. He made his press debut even earlier – in 1947.

⁴ J. Grzechowiak, op. cit., p. 12.

⁵ In addition to the article discussed here: K. T. Toeplitz, "Komentarz do filmu 'Rzym, godzina 11'", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1954, no. 2, pp. 22-43; idem, "Dziecko i fetysz, czyli

- humanizm utopijny (wielki cykl Vittorio de Siki, 1946-1952)", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1956, no. 4, pp. 3-39.
- ⁶ See: "Radziecka dyskusja o dramaturgii", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1952, no. 7, pp. 62-70; "Pierwsza Ogólnopolska Narada Krytyki Filmowej (dokumentacja)", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1955, no. 2-3, pp. 93-116; "W obronie polskiej sztuki filmowej", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1956, no. 4, pp. 64-66.
- ⁷ See: J. Grzechowiak, op. cit., p. 17.
- ⁸ K. T. Toepfritz, "Obraz malarski a obraz filmowy", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1953, no. 10, p. 68.
- ⁹ Ibidem, p. 78.
- ¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 82.
- ¹¹ Ibidem, p. 83.
- ¹² Ibidem, p. 86.
- ¹³ Ibidem, p. 87.
- ¹⁴ A. Helman, "Obraz", in: *Słownik pojęć filmowych*, vol. 6, ed. A. Helman, Wydawnictwo "Wiedza o kulturze", Wrocław 1994, p. 67.
- ¹⁵ See: J. Mierzejewski, "Kompozycja obrazu filmowego", in: *Zagadnienia estetyki filmowej*, ed. R. Dreyer, Filmowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1955, pp. 239-267; S. Morawski, "Zdjęcia, czyli o plastyce filmowej", in: idem, *Jak patrzeć na film*, Filmowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1955, pp. 80-84; A. Jackiewicz, "Malarstwo filmowe", in: idem, *Latarnia czarnoksiężska*, Filmowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1956, pp. 107-110; A. Kumor, "Obraz malarski i obraz filmowy. Ze studiów nad estetyką obrazu filmowego", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1959, no. 3, pp. 50-77; A. Ledóchowski, "Płótno obrazu – płótno ekranu. Z zagadnień związków między filmem a plastyką w 20-leciu powojennym", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1964, no. 1-2, pp. 36-48; B. W. Lewicki, "U podstaw porównawczych badań nad sztuką. Filmoznawcza propozycja badawcza", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1965, no. 1, pp. 3-7; "Związki plastyki z językiem filmu. Rozmowa z Andrzejem Wajdą", *Projekt 1969*, issues 5-6, pp. 97-99; J. Bocheńska, "Film a inne sztuki", in: idem, *Polska myśl filmowa do roku 1939*, *Studia z teorii filmu i telewizji* publishing series, vol. 2, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1974, pp. 128-147; M. Hopfinger, *Adaptacje filmowe utworów literackich. Problemy teorii i interpretacji*, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1974; Z. Czesot-Gawrak, "Film w świetle estetyki porównawczej", in: idem, *Współczesna francuska teoria filmu*, *Studia z teorii filmu i telewizji* publishing series, vol. 12, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1982, pp. 136-148; A. Helman, "Komparatystyka i integracja w filmoznawstwie współczesnym", in: *Z badań porównawczych nad filmem*, eds. A. Helman, A. Gwóźdź, PWN – Uniwersytet Śląski, Warszawa – Kraków 1980, pp. 9-23; T. Miczka, "O niektórych problemach metodologicznych estetyki komparatystycznej filmu", in: *Z badań porównawczych...* op. cit., pp. 27-39; D. Palczewska, "Film wobec innych sztuk w polskiej myśli filmowej", in: *Z badań porównawczych...* op. cit., pp. 181-196; A. Gwóźdź, "Polski film fabularny w relacjach z innymi sztukami", in: *Film polski wobec innych sztuk*, eds. A. Helman, A. Madej, Uniwersytet Śląski, Katowice 1979, pp. 187-216; E. Kuźma, "Granice porównywalności poezji z malarstwem i filmem", in: *Pogranicza i korespondencje sztuk*, eds. T. Cieślakowska, J. Sławiński, Wrocław 1980, pp. 257-269; P. Lis, "Brzezina Andrzeja Wajdy. Przekład intersemiotyczny i autonomia dzieła filmowego", *Studia Filmoznawcze* 1981, vol. II (*Film. Sztuka i ideologia*), pp. 127-144; A. Boczkowska, "Filmowa i telewizyjna interpretacja dzieła plastyki", in: *Film i telewizja*, eds. D. Palczewska, A. Kumor, *Studia z teorii filmu i telewizji* publishing series, vol. 11, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1982, pp. 10-38.
- ¹⁶ T. Miczka, *Inspiracje plastyczne w twórczości filmowej i telewizyjnej Andrzeja Wajdy*, Uniwersytet Śląski, Katowice 1987.
- ¹⁷ F. Lipiński, *Hopper wirtualny. Obrazy w pamiętającym spojrzeniu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2013 (especially the chapter "Zbliżenie – film", pp. 351-428).
- ¹⁸ In addition to the aforementioned book by T. Miczka, see: A. Dudzik, "Literackie i malarskie tworzywo symboliki w Brzezynie Andrzeja Wajdy", in: *Kino wobec sztuk. Związki, inspiracje, przenikania*, eds. D. Skotarczak, J. Nowakowski, Wyższa Szkoła Nauk Humanistycznych i Dziennikarstwa, Poznań 2007, pp. 59-68; F. Lipiński, "Wieczna miłość: Kobieta w słońcu i Tatarak Andrzeja Wajdy", in: idem, *Hopper wirtualny...* op. cit., pp. 404-414.
- ¹⁹ J. Nowakowski, "Intermedialna synteza sztuk. Od rajy jako tematu do metafory intermedialnej syntezy sztuk", in: idem, *W stronę rajy. O literackiej i filmowej twórczości Lecha Majewskiego*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2012, pp. 199-237; M. Lebecka, "Ogród rozkoszy ziemskich, czyli cyfrowa alchemia", in: idem, *Lech Majewski*, Biblioteka "Więzi", Warszawa 2010, pp. 124-145; M. Jakubowska, "Narracja transmedialna – obrazy malarskie a twórczość filmowa Lecha Majewskiego

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²⁰ A. Helman, *Komparatystyka i integracja...* op. cit., pp. 9, 10.

²¹ See: notes on references to Matejko's paintings in *Knights of the Teutonic Order* (K. T. Toeplitz, "Krzyżacy 1960", *Dialog* 1960, no. 12, p. 126) or Jacek Malczewski's paintings in *The Birch Wood* (K. T. Toeplitz, "Brzezina klasyczna", in: idem, *Próba sensu, czyli notatnik leniwego kinomana*, WAI F, Warszawa 1974, p. 284 /first edition: *Miesięcznik Literacki* 1971, no. 2, pp. 82-84/), as well as somewhat more general observations of a comparative nature (film – theatre – painting) in Wajda's theatrical work: K. T. Toeplitz, "Wzajemność", in: idem, *Próba sensu...* op. cit., pp. 291-296 (first edition: *Miesięcznik Literacki* 1972, no. 2, pp. 73-75).

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Słowa kluczowe:

Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz;
historia teorii filmu;
komparatystyka;
obraz filmowy;
obraz malarski;
malarskość

Abstrakt

Rafał Koschany

Obraz filmowy i jego „malarskość”. Filmoznawstwo komparatystyczne Krzysztofa Teodora Toeplitza

Przedmiotem omówienia jest artykuł Krzysztofa Teodora Toeplitza *Obraz malarski a obraz filmowy*, opublikowany w „Kwartalniku Filmowym” w roku 1953. To bardzo dojrzała, w pełni naukowa wypowiedź niezwykle młodego autora. W niniejszym komentarzu artykuł ten został umieszczony w kontekście rozwoju polskiego powojennego filmoznawstwa, jako ważna wypowiedź świadoma trudności i celów, przed którymi stoi nowa dyscyplina akademicka. Zasadnicza część omówienia jest skupiona na rekonstrukcji najważniejszych wątków porównania obrazu malarskiego i filmowego, a przede wszystkim problemów związanych z transpozycją jednego w drugi (kluczowym pojęciem okazuje się tu „malarskość”). W kolejnych partiach omówienia została poruszona kwestia statusu propozycji Toeplitza w tradycji komparatystyki filmowej, także w odniesieniu do, z jednej strony, późniejszej twórczości reżyserów zainspirowanych sztukami plastycznymi oraz, z drugiej strony, współczesnych możliwości publikowania wyników badań mieszczących się w komparatystycznym nurcie filmoznawstwa. **(Materiał nierecenzowany).**