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# Manual Cinema

## A Unique Hybrid of Shadow Theatre and Cinematic Practices

### Abstract

This article explores the phenomenon of “manual cinema”—a notion independently adopted by various artists to describe their original practices that hybridize shadow theatre with both historical and contemporary image-projection technologies. The concept of manual cinema is consistently developed by artists and collectives rooted in the art of puppetry, which constitute the primary analytical focus of this study. Despite the increasing scholarly interest in convergence theatre and various media, this particular artistic practice has remained largely overlooked, and the conceptual framework of manual cinema remains under-theorized. The study examines the original concepts of manual cinema implemented by Polish artists, Tadeusz Wierzbicki and Adam Walny, as well as the collectives Manual Cinema (USA) and Hotel Modern (Netherlands). Following Peter W. Marx’s perspective on media ecology, the article explores the concept of manual cinema as a media machine with its own relationship between the performer, the apparatus, and the spectator. This approach allows for capturing and analyzing the function

of 'perceptual multistability' (as defined by Erika Fischer-Lichte) inherent in the discussed performances.

### Keywords

Adam Walny, Tadeusz Wierzbicki, Manual Cinema, Hotel Modern, cinematic techniques, shadow theatre, puppetry

### Abstrakt

#### Kino manualne: Unikalna hybryda teatru cieni i praktyk filmowych

Artykuł poświęcony jest analizie praktyk artystycznych stanowiących hybrydę różnych tradycji teatru cieni z dawnymi i nowoczesnymi technologiami projekcji obrazu, które ich twórcy, niezależnie od siebie, określają „kinem manualnym”. Zjawisko to jest konsekwentnie rozwijane przez artystów zakorzenionych w sztuce lalkarskiej i właśnie ich konceptualizacje i realizacje kina manualnego stanowią główny obszar analizy w niniejszym studium. W badaniach nad konwergencją teatru i innych mediów niewiele uwagi poświęcono dotąd tego typu praktykom artystycznym, a i samo pojęcie nie było przedmiotem badawczego namysłu. W centrum analizy znajdują się autorskie koncepcje kina manualnego realizowane przez Tadeusza Wierzbickiego, Adama Walnego oraz przez kolektywy Manual Cinema (USA) i Hotel Modern (Holandia). Sformułowana przez Petera W. Marxa koncepcja ekologii mediów służy podjęciu dyskusji nad kinem manualnym jako maszyną medialną, wytwarzającą swoiste relacje między performerem, narzędziami i widzem. Takie ujęcie pozwala uchwycić i poddać analizie funkcję „percepcyjnej wielostabilności” (w ujęciu Eriki Fischer-Lichte), której doświadczają widzowie omawianych przedstawień.

### Słowa kluczowe

Adam Walny, Tadeusz Wierzbicki, Manual Cinema, Hotel Modern, techniki filmowe, teatr cieni, lalkarstwo

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The mutual interplay between theatre and cinematic practices has a long history and manifests in manifold ways. This article emerges from a scholarly inquiry into the phenomenon of “manual cinema”—a term independently adopted by artists originated in the tradition of puppetry. Tadeusz Wierzbicki and Adam Walny—two Polish artists operating independently within the field of puppetry—employ this term to describe their performances that amalgamate the principles of shadow theatre with vintage technologies of image projection. The notion of manual cinema was adopted in the name of the Chicago-based collective Manual Cinema, which investigates the experimental fusion of puppetry, shadow theatre, animated film, and real-time projection. The company defines its works as a transformation of the cinematic experience, imbuing it with “liveness, ingenuity, and theatricality.”<sup>1</sup> The conceptual framework of manual cinema can also be used to analyze performances by the Dutch company Hotel Modern. Their practice focuses on live performance that integrates puppeteering, shadow theatre, and various visual production technologies, including cameras and a montage of real-time projection, film, or digital animation.<sup>2</sup> Analogous practices, often developed by artists rooted in puppetry, are variously described as “handmade theatrical cinema” or “cinematic theatre,”<sup>3</sup> and range from intimate spectacles to large-scale productions.

The term manual cinema is employed by theatre practitioners to denote their original artistic works that hybridize live performance, shadow theatre, and diverse techniques of image production and projection. By employing the notion of manual cinema, artists emphasize three primary aesthetic dimensions of this artistic concept. The first is the dynamic interplay between theatre and cinema, characterized by the tension between the live presence of the body or objects and their screen visualization. The second is the symbiotic coexistence of manual manipulation and apparatus with its technological performance. The third involves the perceptual tension arising from the disparate modes of the

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<sup>1</sup> Drew Dir, “Manual Cinema,” *Theatre Topics* 26, no. 2 (2016): 15, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/tt.2016.0033>.

<sup>2</sup> See more about the interplay between puppetry and cinematic techniques in the following articles: Marzena Wiśniewska, “Multimedia Performances and Intermediality in Contemporary Polish Puppet Theatre”; Kateřina Lešková Dolenská, “A New Dimension of Puppetry” both in Ida Hledikova and Cariad Astles, eds., *Puppetry and Multimedia* (Bratislava: Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> The notion “micro cinema theatre” is discussed according to such works as: *Kiss&Cry/NanoDances* by French Theatre du Rond Point (Michèle Anne De Mey & Jaco Van Dormaela, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2B6dcyrCLk>); *Five Lines* by Spanish theatre group Frau Trap (“Frau Trap,” accessed March 25, 2025, [https://www.frautrapp.com/files/shows/dossier\\_1718534456.vDzWko.pdf](https://www.frautrapp.com/files/shows/dossier_1718534456.vDzWko.pdf)). In turn, the description “a theatrical cinema experience” patronizes the production *The Storyville Mosquito* by Kid Koala from Canada (2019), which is an example of the huge show in Hollywood-style studio with numbers of puppets of all sizes and puppeteers animating whole objects and creating filmed story in the real time, see more: “Kid Kola,” accessed March 25, 2025, <https://kidkoala.com/the-storyville-mosquito/>.

viewing of theatre and cinema. A primary artistic challenge in manual cinema lies in the engineering of specialized apparatus and the configuration of a stage that bridges live theatre with diverse optical solutions originating from both vintage and innovative optical apparatus and projection technologies. Manual cinema constitutes a specific form of live performance situated at the intersection of theatre and cinema. This phenomenon belongs to the ecosystem of media practices that hybridize materiality and manual animation with cinema technique, allowing the audience to witness the physical act of creation as a multimodal experience of moving images. Drawing on Peter W. Marx's concept of media ecology, such a configuration positions manual cinema performance as a "media machine" that generates a multifunctional, "thaumaturgical" stage space,<sup>4</sup> thereby challenging spectator's process of perception.

The article examines the conceptual framework and performative modes of manual cinema as developed by artists rooted in puppetry, and especially in shadow theatre. The study first discusses the work of two independent artists from Poland—Tadeusz Wierzbicki and Adam Walny. Their intimate, solo performances create a compelling intermedia dialogue between shadow theatre and diverse projection techniques, echoing theatrical and cinematographic experiments of the early-twentieth-century avant-garde. This is subsequently contrasted with the activities of two notable collectives: Manual Cinema (USA) and Hotel Modern (Netherlands), whose technologically complex and multi-cast productions redefine the concept of manual cinema on a large scale. Following Peter W. Marx's perspective on media ecology, the article explores the concept of manual cinema as a "media machine" with its own relationship between the performer, the apparatus and the spectator. The study discusses modes of perception that are actualized through the manual cinema practices, particularly focusing on "perceptual multistability" as articulated by Erika Fischer-Lichte. Examining the notion of manual cinema in the context of considered artistic practices, the paper discusses its application in theatre and media studies.

## **Handmade Manual Cinema in Artwork by Tadeusz Wierzbicki and Adam Walny**

Tadeusz Wierzbicki is an independent artist who, in 1991, established his first solo theatrical work under the name *Obnośny Teatr Odbitego Światła* (Itinerant

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<sup>4</sup> Peter W. Marx, *Early Modern Media Ecology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 12–18.

Reflected Light Theatre). He subsequently continued his authorial practice as Teatr Małe ‘i’ (the Little ‘i’ Theatre), which was later replaced by the names Studio Forms of Light and Laboratory of Light Phenomena. The final designations most accurately reflect the nature of the Wierzbicki’s projects.<sup>5</sup> Recognized as a Polish pioneer of light performances utilizing flexible mirrors, Wierzbicki is also the inventor of authorial electrostatic and kinetic shadows, and light masks, as well as systems of screens.

From Wierzbicki’s initial and notable performance entitled *Zajęczi* (Sunbeams) (1993), to its subsequent theatrical variations in works entitled *Litera ‘i’* (The Letter ‘i’), and *Labyrinths of Light* (2016)<sup>6</sup> his main artistic work is based on the reconfiguration of shadow tradition and technique.<sup>7</sup> In the practice of shadow theatre, the light source is between the screen and the performer, behind the puppet. This makes the animator invisible, causing the shadow of the puppet to fall on the screen. In Wierzbicki’s theatre there are two important differences. He does not create puppets; instead, he utilizes abstract objects produced from materials capable of reflecting light (glass, plastic, metal, flexible mirrors). These include dots, dashes, lines, circles, spirals, and loops, as well as letters, numbers, and light masks. The light source is positioned in front of the flexible mirror object, which reflects the white visualization onto the screen. Mirror objects produce light shadows in motion, “moving,” in a process of capturing light on the screen and thus becoming poetic *dramatis personae* of Wierzbicki’s performances. It is important to note that Wierzbicki does not experiment with light-sensitive substances in order to fix the image of real things, as is customary in photography. He creates ephemeral performances that can be termed “drawing by light.” The artist thus emphasizes that his theatre is not the antithesis of a theatre of shadows or “white shadows,” but rather an exemplar of a theatre of light. The images created by these objects are sometimes visualizations of recognizable real objects such as fish or human figures, but mostly they are abstract and expressive images based on kinetic actions of the luminous forms, and accompanying poetic aphorisms and music. Wierzbicki’s artistic projects can be viewed as an investigative pursuit of visual poetry and experimental early films, resonating

<sup>5</sup> On the phenomenon of Tadeusz Wierzbicki theatre see Marzenna Wiśniewska, *Archipelag indywidualności: Solowe teatry performerów współdziałających z materią* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2022), 161–218.

<sup>6</sup> Tadeusz Wierzbicki published film montages of selected theatrical miniatures on his YouTube channel. See for example: Tadeusz Wierzbicki, “Spirala”, YouTube, July 17, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wxp-cxqNngM>.

<sup>7</sup> It is notable that Tadeusz Wierzbicki has performed at three editions of the Internationales Schattentheater Festival in Schwäbisch-Gmünd in Germany. The manifesto of the Polish artist has been published in a book: Tadeusz Wierzbicki, “Theater des Lichts / The Theatre of Light,” in *Schattentheater Band 2: Kunst + Technik* (Shadow Theatre, Volume 2: *Art + Technique*), ed. Rainer Reusch (Schwäbisch Gmünd: Einhorn Verlag, 2001), 141–149.

with the melancholic sensibility found in the manually animated photograms and short films of Franciszka and Stefan Themersons,<sup>8</sup> as well as in the pioneering visual poetry of Viking Eggeling (e.g. *Symphonie diagonale*, 1923), Hans Richter (e.g. *Rhythmus 21*, 1928), and Oskar Fischinger (e.g. *An Optical Poem*, 1938).<sup>9</sup> As Henryk Jurkowski has observed, Wierzbicki “exceeded everything that the shadow theatre had achieved so far, and pointed the way to new types of performing art, although paradoxically his ‘visual’ programs are highly intimate.”<sup>10</sup>

A conceptual framework and performative modes of manual cinema have been developed by Wierzbicki as part of his diverse artistic activities. However, before examining this concept further, two fundamental aspects require attention: the exploration of the screen as a performative shadow space, and reviving the *camera obscura* technique as the basis of his optical inquiry.

In his laboratory of light, Wierzbicki experiments with shapes and materiality of screens. He explores non-standard screens of varying geometries—ranging from flat, rectangular surfaces to cylindrical and spherical forms. His material inquiry extends beyond traditional canvas and tulle to include carbon paper, steel mesh, and transparent foil, as well as natural “found” screens such as stones, walls, snowdrifts, and dunes. By utilizing mobile and hybrid screens, the artist allows environmental factors—such as wind or electrostatic properties—to animate the light shadow play. Wierzbicki’s recent installations, such as the multilayered tulle cylinders seen in *The Wells of Light* (2020), further evolve his screen apparatus. Drawing on the immersive logic of the panorama, these spatial screens invite the viewer to circulate through the installation. In this configuration, illuminated by light masks, the viewer’s eye becomes an autonomous animation tool, fostering a unique, subjective perception.

Wierzbicki has conducted a series of ephemeral experiments with natural light, operating under principles of the *camera obscura* technique. The artist transformed a small chamber within his studio in Majaczewice into a darkened (black-painted) interior with a carbon screen on the wall, where a small window functioned as a lens to admit sunlight. In the summer of 1992, within this “optical darkroom,” he initiated a project entitled the “Theatre of the Rainbow.” It represented one of Wierzbicki’s many investigative performances conducted in private and without an audience. This work exists today solely through artists

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<sup>8</sup> Adriana Prodeus, *Themersonowie: Szkice biograficzne* (Warszawa: Świat Literacki, 2009), 49–87. For more see the exhibition catalogue *Stefan i Franciszka Themerson: Poszukiwania wizualne / Visual Researches*, ed. Urszula Czartoryska (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 1981), <https://zacheta.art.pl/public/upload/mediateka/pdf/64fgcfde72d16.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Oskar Fischinger, “An Optical Poem,” YouTube, July 29, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Xc4g0oFFLk>.

<sup>10</sup> Henryk Jurkowski, “A Poet in the Universe of Light,” *Teatr Lalek* 2/3 (2003): 25.

descriptions and their photographic documentation. Wierzbicki describes the experimental process of the Theatre of the Rainbow as follows:

A beam of light entered the studio, which was painted black, through a narrow opening in the wall. The light was refracted by a substantial prism, which divided it into a spectrum of rainbow hues. The display of light, in the form of small moving shards of broken mirrors, was redirected onto a small screen, creating moving compositions of ever-changing shapes and colors.<sup>11</sup>

The principles of the *camera obscura* facilitated the emergence of another unique domestic performance, which Wierzbicki entitled “Theatre of the Sky.” Within his darkened studio, he constructed a rudimentary periscope incorporating a car mirror, a device that projected vivid natural imagery: “blue sky and clouds illuminated by the setting sun and a swaying green oak branch.”<sup>12</sup>

Such actions, rooted in pre-photographic traditions, restore a sense of “materiality” to light, offering an intimate experience of the interaction between nature, physical matter, and human agency. An extension of these light performances became Wierzbicki’s projects of experimental theatrical architectures, including “Theatre—A Flower Blossoming into a Performance,” “Theatre of the Sun Directly on the Beach,” “Theatre—A Homestead with Many Scenes,” and “Theatre—A Sundial.” These original conceptualizations of theatre buildings featured autonomous performances of light resulting from changing positions of the sun or moon in the sky. They may be discussed as a part of multifaced concept of the “theatre of nature and of art,” stimulating a renewed sensation of light and darkness while offering thaumaturgical action.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the spirit of the Bauhaus experiments with the “light-space modulators” and constructions for “reflexive play of light,” as conducted by László Moholy-Nagy<sup>14</sup> and Oskar Schlemmer,<sup>15</sup> can be observed in Wierzbicki’s experimental theatre architecture, as well as in his artistic achievements.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Tadeusz Wierzbicki, “Teatr camera obscura,” [www.i-art-i.eu](http://www.i-art-i.eu) (page not available), after: Wiśniewska, *Archipelag indywidualności*, 180.

<sup>12</sup> Tadeusz Wierzbicki, “Teatr nieba,” [www.i-art-i.eu/swiatlo-naturalne](http://www.i-art-i.eu/swiatlo-naturalne) (page not available), after: Wiśniewska, *Archipelag indywidualności*, 180.

<sup>13</sup> Marx, *Early Modern Media Ecology*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in motion*, trans. Paul Theobald (Chicago: Paul Theobald & Co, 1947).

<sup>15</sup> Oskar Schlemmer, *Eksperymentalna scena Bauhausu: Wybór pism*, ed. and trans. Małgorzata Leyko (Gdańsk: słowo/ obraz terytoria, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Currently, Tadeusz Wierzbicki showcases his work through filmed études via his dedicated YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@tadeluz>.

The aforementioned experiments define the key aspects of Wierzbicki's artistic philosophy, which shape his projects identified by him as manual cinema. His overarching creative principle is the construction of an artistic space that enables the experience of the materiality and performativity of light—particularly natural light, which is treated as an autonomous “natural performer.” Linked to this is a commitment to analogue solutions and the engineering of original, proprietary apparatuses. Furthermore, the craft-based nature of his artistic process allows for the continuous transformation of the technical aspects and functions of shadow-theatre elements, ultimately leading to a reconfiguration of their performance.

Wierzbicki adopted the term manual cinema to describe a series of performances generated through a proprietary apparatus and magnetic shadow objects. Central to his practice is a hand-cranked, translucent scroll screen—a hybrid construction of fine steel mesh and tracing paper—designed to allow specially prepared magnetic shadows to adhere to its surface. Operating entirely without external power sources or electronic components, the apparatus facilitates the horizontal displacement of a long screen, several dozen centimeters in height. The screen is wound onto a single reel alongside the shadow objects; the performance thus consists of manually rewinding the substrate between two reels. During this action, the audience observes the moving shadow image. The shadows create an abstract interplay of shapes, colors, and dynamic visual effects, characterized by their rhythmic appearance and disappearance within fluid, kinetic collages. This technique invokes the historical concept of “scroll theatre,” drawing significant parallels with Javanese *wayang bèbèr*, East Asian picture scrolls, and the nineteenth-century moving panorama.<sup>17</sup> However, Wierzbicki's manual cinema departs from these traditions by focusing on the spontaneous, abstract dramaturgy and visual micro-performances of magnetic shadows. This approach stimulates the viewer's imagination, effectively transforming the spectator into a performer of his own mental imagery as inspired by the moving pictures. Furthermore, Wierzbicki eschews the concealment of the artistic process (though in this coincidentally in common with much Javanese *wayang* performance); the visibility of his hands becomes an integral component of the moving image. The most compelling presentation of Wierzbicki's manual cinema occurred in coastal environments, where natural wind and daylight functioned as autonomous performers in his performance. Wierzbicki also collaborated with composers such as Jerzy Kornowicz and Piotr Kurek. Despite sharing the

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<sup>17</sup> Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusion in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 32–35.

concept of manual cinema through workshops in Poland and abroad, Wierzbicki's artistic work remained, for various institutional and logistical reasons, an infrequently witnessed phenomenon within the Polish theatrical landscape.

A second distinct iteration of manual cinema within the field of Polish puppetry has been developed by Adam Walny, a solo puppeteer working independently since the mid-1990s as the Walny-Teatr (Walny-Theatre).<sup>18</sup> Walny embodies the archetype of the traditional puppeteer-craftsman: a jester, improviser, and itinerant performer who revitalizes the tradition of wandering theatre within contemporary public spaces. He is the inventor of several innovative puppet forms and animation techniques, including underwater marionettes (e.g. for *Hamlet*, 2010), a keyboard-operated marionette for *Gould: Variations* (2021), and various kinetic sound objects (e.g. *Opus Hamlet* with Lars Kynde, 2011; *Noah*, 2015). His specific conceptualization of manual cinema was solidified during the production of two pivotal performances: *Don Kichot* (Don Quixote)<sup>19</sup> and *Cudowni mężczyźni z korbką* (The Miracle Men with a Crank).<sup>20</sup>

Walny's manual cinema represents a hybrid of shadow theatre, graphic projection, and storytelling, drawing heavily on the heritage of itinerant cinema. His central apparatus is a proprietary projection machine consisting of three integrated, vertically stacked epidiscopes. This assembly is enhanced by a system of scrolling carbon paper and transparent foils, which serve as the substrate for live graphical rendering. The device is operated via a custom control console, emphasizing the manual mode of animation and the materiality of apparatus. In his book *The Art Handbook for the Culture World*, Walny elucidates the mechanism of his manual cinema as follows:

I built a machine which can move pictures with precise changes of the source of light. Using the principles of shadow theatre, I managed to obtain the depth of motion by moving both the picture and the source of light. The story machine and Sancho Panza sit together with spectators. The story is drawn and it is happening on the screen. The beginning is in the dialogue between Sancho and a spectator in the presence of the machine reversing the course of events.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Walny Teatr, Instytut Teatru Przedmiotu, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://itp.org.pl/walny-teatr/>.

<sup>19</sup> Adam Walny, "Don Kichot," YouTube, June 6, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bskwucznwQ>.

<sup>20</sup> Adam Walny, "Cudowni Mężczyźni z korbką," YouTube, July 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIRE-kQanpMs>. The piece was adapted from Andrzej Waligórski's poetry, centered around his well-known protagonist, Zenek Dreptak.

<sup>21</sup> Adam Walny, *The Art Handbook for the Culture World: On Object Theatre* (Kleszczelce: Instytut Teatru Przedmiotu, 2018), 121–122.

The beauty of such “epidiascope theatre” lies in its “authenticity and imperfection: ‘primitivism’ in the best sense of the word,” as Kateřina Lešková Dolenská formulated in her analysis of the aesthetics of Czech puppet performances utilizing overhead projectors.<sup>22</sup>

In both *Don Quixote* and *The Miracle Men with a Crank*, characters and dramatic scenes pre-sketched by Walny on a roll of paper and pieces of foil are projected onto the screen. They may be interpreted as “drawn shadows.” Walny eschews the conventional effect of cinematic animation, in which drawings depicting successive phases of motion create the illusion of a fluid moving image. Instead, the characters in his manual cinema are rendered with simple lines across various frames that capture the viewer’s attention. These depictions focus on the cultural archetypes embedded in their graphic forms, as well as the emotions preserved in their gestures and facial expressions.

The machine, fully exposed to the audience, displays these handmade drawings in rhythmic, frame-by-frame sequences, synchronized with the evocative flickering of the epidiascope’s light. In this setting, Walny’s role as storyteller echoes the optical-mechanical spectacles of nineteenth-century itinerant showmen, who popularized visual-illusion apparatuses and early cinematic shows, very often also becoming inventors in the field of optical experiments. The retro aesthetic of Walny’s manual cinema functions as a “time machine.” This is also reflected in the dramaturgy of the performance *Don Quixote*. In the final sequence we see the knight-errant and his squire, Sancho Panza, positioned upside down—as if the audience were looking from the earth toward the sky, where both characters continue their journey. A form of resurrection occurs within the narrative as the cinema machine, in an accelerated reversal, rewinds the illustrated history before the eyes of the spectators, preparing to recount the archetypal story of Don Quixote once more.

To facilitate his manual cinema, Walny constructed a mobile stage: an elongated silver trailer functioning as a “cinema pavilion on wheels.” This choice is particularly significant given that *The Miracle Men with a Crank* references Jiří Menzl’s film regarding the origins of travelling cinematography. By situating the performance within this mobile unit, Walny induces a nostalgic engagement with the earliest experiments at the intersection of theatre and film. In this framework, despite the technological tools employed, the manual element remains the driving force, prioritizing tactile animation over mechanical automation. Consequently, Walny’s manual cinema functions as a “memory machine,” one that does not

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<sup>22</sup> Dolenská, “A New Dimension of Puppetry,” 54.

merely preserve old-fashioned performative practices, but actively reanimates them. Following Marvin Carlson's concept of theatre as memory machine, Walny's manual cinema pieces, as well as other works of his, function as repositories and mechanisms for the continuous recirculation of cultural memory.<sup>23</sup>

By the reconfiguration of traditional shadow theatre and precinematic visual practices, both artists, Wierzbicki and Walny, create original hybrid apparatuses that, following the approach proposed by Erika Fischer-Lichte in her article "The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics," could be discussed as transcending "the historical referent (without effacing it) and presents itself as a deliberately ambiguous spatiotemporal and parahistorical object(s)."<sup>24</sup> The manual cinema of Wierzbicki and Walny offers the audience a simultaneous coexistence of theatrical and cinematic experience. It highlights a sense of authenticity and craftsmanship, and a dramaturgy open to the improvisation of the human performer, as well as other non-human partners of action, such as natural forces.

## From Shadow Theatre to Hypermedia Cinematic Theatre: Manual Cinema and Hotel Modern

The focal point of the artistic practices of two collectives, Manual Cinema from Chicago and Hotel Modern from the Netherlands, is the challenging of the interaction of shadow theatre and puppetry with cinematic techniques such as real-time projection and live montage. Invoking Philip's terminology, central to their work is the juxtaposition of liveness and mediatization—the tension between physical presence on the stage and its screen representation.<sup>25</sup> The apparatus of representation and technological reproduction constitutes the "very essence"<sup>26</sup> of their performances, inviting a critical discussion in hypermediality<sup>27</sup> as a defining marker of their conceptualization of manual cinema—or "cinematic theatre,"

<sup>23</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003). I expand Adam Walny's work upon this analytical perspective; see Wiśniewska, *Archipelag indywidualności*, 250–252.

<sup>24</sup> Erkki Huhtamo, "Time Traveling in the Gallery: An Archeological Approach in Media Art," in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, ed. Mary Anne Moser with Douglas McLeod (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 234.

<sup>25</sup> Philip Auslander, "Liveness: Performance and the Anxiety of Simulation," in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (London: Routledge, 1996), 196–213.

<sup>26</sup> Auslander, "Liveness," 199.

<sup>27</sup> Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt, "Key Issues in Intermediality in Theatre and Performance," in *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 11–25.

as their work is alternatively named. Furthermore, the tension between live and mediatized forms fundamentally disrupts conventional modes of perception. This, in turn, facilitates an analysis of the emergence of visibility and visibility in performance, leading to an intensification of what Erika Fischer-Lichte terms “perceptual multistability.”<sup>28</sup>

Established in 2010 and led by artistic directors Drew Dir, Sarah Fornace, Ben Kauffman, Julia Miller, and Kyle Vegter, the Manual Cinema company produces works that are a hybrid of shadow theatre, puppetry, actor-led theatre, silent cinema, and live music.<sup>29</sup> They achieve an immersive cinematic-theatrical experience by utilizing a diverse array of matters and technology, such as paper shadow puppets, colored slides, vintage overhead projectors, and live cameras. In their productions, the apparatus—including multiple screens, multifunctional workstations with projection consoles, and stage design, along with all human performers—puppeteers, musicians, camera operators—remains fully visible to the audience. The co-founders of Manual Cinema define their core principle as “making cinema by hand,” providing the audience with a unique experience in which they are “watching an animated film, but all the elements are being performed live.”<sup>30</sup> Given this hybridity, the creators themselves have often grappled with the how to best define their work:

A more relevant challenge for us is whether or not we should even call ourselves “theatre.” We tell live stories, but on a screen, not on a stage; there is no dialogue; our storytelling principles are cinematic, not theatrical; and we have been programmed by film festivals and theatre festivals alike. We call our work “cinematic shadow puppetry” because this is as close as we can get to describing it.<sup>31</sup>

Shadow theatre and the aesthetics of silent cinema play a dominant role in shaping the theatrical-cinematic framework of Manual Cinema’s productions. Julia Miller, one of the company’s artistic directors, pulls back on the hybrid nature of their process:

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<sup>28</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> “Manual Cinema,” accessed September 10, 2023, <https://manualcinema.com/about>.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Jobson, “Chicago’s Manual Cinema,” *Colossal*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2021/09/manual-cinema-candyman/>.

<sup>31</sup> Laura Collins-Hughes, “Manual Cinema Presents Semi-Gothic *Ada/Ava*,” *New York Times*, July 6, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/19/theater/manual-cinema-presents-the-semi-gothic-ada-ava.html>.

We work in a way that combines the classical staging of theatre, but also animation in the way that animators work. We work from an outline of a script, but then we turn that into a storyboard, and the storyboard becomes our visual script, and then we use the storyboard to build all the puppets. We shoot demos of the storyboard, so we film every frame of the storyboard in rehearsal, and then I edit the demos of the story together, so we have a digital version of the show that exists. That is our ideal production. Then we go back to the rehearsal room and try to figure out how to do that in real time and space on the projectors.<sup>32</sup>

The final effect of this process is a hypermedia performance that seamlessly interweaves the visual poetry of shadow theatre with a silent cinema aesthetic. Manual Cinema's productions evoke dream-like worlds, often leaning toward the fantastical and resonating with a Gothic aesthetic. This signature approach is evident in productions such as *Ada/Ava* (2011), *Mementos mori* (2015), *The End of TV* (2017), *Frankenstein*, an adaptation of Mary Shelley's novel viewed through the lens of its cinematic legacies (2018), and *The 4th Witch*, a reinterpretation of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (2025).

Manual Cinema's performances establish a dialogue between legacy media technologies and historical visibility in relation to the contemporary technological and visual revolution. Referring to Nele Wynants' reflections on scientific theatre, Manual Cinema's work can be discussed as having "the potential to entertain and at the same time explore, expose and problematize questions about technology and perception."<sup>33</sup> The potential to problematize questions about technology is explored particularly in *The End of TV*. In this production, the framework of cinematic theatre serves as a repository for images that haunt the memory of an elderly woman reflecting on a bygone era of technological advancement in her city. These memories contrast with the present reality of a young Black woman who has lost her job due to the industrial decline in the same city. Consequently, performance emerges as a "media machine" that critiques the evolution of Technicolor television as both a catalyst and a relic of the American Dream. Here, the television acquires a distinct materiality that disrupts the ephemeral nature of the digital image.

By immersing viewers in a dynamic, spectacular live "montage of attractions," Manual Cinema's productions heighten the sense of perceptual

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<sup>32</sup> "An Interview with Manual Cinema," interview by Anna Chiaretta Lavatelli, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, January 13, 2025, <https://mcchicago.org/publications/blog/2015/01/an-interview-with-manual-cinema>.

<sup>33</sup> Nele Wynants, "Dissecting the Camera: Shifting Positions Between Theatre and Science," *The Theatre Times*, January 29, 2022, <https://thetheatretimes.com/dissecting-the-camera-shifting-positions-between-theatre-and-science/>.

complexity regarding the stage events. The visibility of the apparatus, objects, technique, and performers' labor allows viewers to oscillate their attention between the finished cinematic product on the screen and the live performance occurring below it. Thus, the viewer "witnesses" rather than merely "watches" cinematic theatre, becoming a co-creator of their own visual experience and narrative. Fischer-Lichte describes this phenomenon of perception as "perceptual multistability," defining it as "a state of instability that places the perceiving subject between the two orders, transfers him into a state betwixt and between, into a state of liminality."<sup>34</sup> In her review of the performance for children entitled *Leonardo! A Wonderful Show About a Terrible Monster*, Paulette Richards draws attention to the problematization of media perception by Manual Cinema productions:

Indeed, with so many different things happening onstage all at once, Manual Cinema deliberately makes space for audience members to choose where they want to focus their attention. This approach is the antithesis of our contemporary screen economy that seeks to capture and hold audiences' uncritical attention for as long as possible. Fornace [the artistic director] hopes the company's shows inspire audiences to become makers themselves and to become critical viewers of what they see on screen.<sup>35</sup>

The distinctive features of Hotel Modern's artistic style encompass scale models, puppets, live animation, cameras, and projections, alongside the visual tension generated by the juxtaposition of live and mediatised elements, as well as micro and macro perspectives. Established in 1997 by Herman Helle, Arlène Hoornweg, and Pauline Kalker, the Dutch collective has since become known for creating performances in collaboration with diverse artists from the visual and performing arts.<sup>36</sup>

The productions of Hotel Modern are characterized by a duality of theatrical materiality and the live presence of performers, juxtaposed with cinematic animation and a montage created manually in full view of the audience. This amalgamation positions the collective's work within the conceptual framework

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<sup>34</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Culture and Performance: Theatre History as a Culture History," *Actas/Proceedings. Historia de Teatro e Novas Tecnologias* (2018), [https://ceteatro.pt/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/comunicacao\\_erika-bfg.pdf](https://ceteatro.pt/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/comunicacao_erika-bfg.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> Paulette Richards, "Screen Magic Dispels the Monstrosity of Ignorance," *Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival Archive*, January 26–28, 2024, <https://chicagopuppetfest.org/2024-festival/2024-festival-archive-manual-cinema/>.

<sup>36</sup> "Hotel Modern," accessed January 12, 2025, <https://hotelmodern.nl/en/about/book/>.

of cinematic theatre or manual cinema. While the ensemble does not officially employ these terms, they instead describe their work as “live-animation film.”<sup>37</sup>

In her analysis of Hotel Modern’s creative process, Pauline Kalker emphasizes the dynamic interplay between the scale models and the camera-generated effects as a pivotal element in the performance’s dramaturgy:

We don’t work with a script written beforehand; we usually start by building the basic scale model. When it’s finished we start working with cameras and decide on the scenes that are included in the performance. Then we work out the models, puppets, and props in detail. With the content in our heads, the cameras in our hands and our eyes on the monitor we develop the screenplay. As we perform, the piece starts to breathe.<sup>38</sup>

The stage of Hotel Modern’s performances is a hybrid of a theatre and a film set. This is evidenced by the visible presence of scale models, montage tables, filming equipment, and projection screens. In the collective’s most renowned productions—*The Great War* (2001) and *Kamp* (2005)—this performative machinery is repurposed to profound effect. While *The Great War* portrays the First World War through the recording of soldiers’ letters, *Kamp* offers a harrowing depiction of the reality of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The inherent tension in these productions derives from the relationship between the representation of history through various archival documents and the re-enactment of tragic twentieth-century events using small puppets, miniature objects, and live projection. The reiteration serves to reinforce the cultural memory associated with these atrocities. Commenting on Hotel Modern’s work, Carol Martin highlights a “documentary mode” and the effect of the “citing of the ‘real.’” She argues that this performs a critical function, inquiring “into our mediatised experience, the way we know and write history,” and into “theatrical epistemologies” that locate the work within the discourses of the real world, theatre, technology, and new media.<sup>39</sup>

Reflecting on a presentation of *Kamp* in Poland, Daniel Lis observed:

Combined with the images from the camera, which. . . takes us into every part of the camp, one gets the impression that we are participating not so much in a reporter’s report as in a nightmarish reality show. The surprising

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<sup>37</sup> “Hotel Modern”

<sup>38</sup> “Hotel Modern”

<sup>39</sup> Carol Martin *Theatre of the Real* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 64.

sensuality and the dangerous proximity to the boundaries of intimacy clarify the awkward position in which we are placed as spectators. How should one behave after such a performance? Audience reactions range from stunned silence to timid applause or a standing ovation. Is it appropriate to applaud the actors performing the “theatre of Auschwitz”? Is it appropriate to applaud at all? And yet, is it appropriate not to?<sup>40</sup>

This observation underscores the critical potential of perception in cinematic theatre, particularly when employed in a re-enacting of terrible global events. Maaïke Bleeker explicitly terms Hotel Modern’s theatrical-cinematic approach to documentary puppetry “a critical vision machine.” According to her, this mode places the audience “in the position of having to negotiate its relation to the atrocities represented on stage (as well as on film) and, by extension, its position with respect to the question of what might be at stake in particular ways of representing these atrocities, or claiming them to be unrepresentable.”<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusions

At the heart of manual cinema lies a deliberate challenging of the interactions between shadow theatre and various practices rooted in the legacy of optical experiment and various moving-image practices. A central, unifying element among the artists discussed in the study is their profound relationship with diverse forms of shadow theatre and the reconfiguration of them by the use of experimental screens and overhead projectors, as well as live camera. Tadeusz Wierzbicki, for instance, has established an experimental laboratory rooted in the philosophy of light and the ephemerality of visual objects. Wierzbicki’s work in the framework of manual cinema evokes the avant-garde fascination with light machines and non-camera cinematic experiments. Adam Walny’s manual cinema, haunted by the atmosphere of pre-cinema spectacles, serves as a revival of the phenomenon of the itinerant puppeteer, extending theatrical practice into other media. Manual cinema serves as a media time machine. Both Wierzbicki and Walny foster a close relationship with their audience; by touring outside mainstream venues to reach villages and small towns, they democratize manual cinema, engaging diverse communities that often lie beyond the reach of traditional theatre.

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<sup>40</sup> Daniel Lis, “Auschwitz jako wyobrażenie,” *Znak* 7/8 (2012): 127.

<sup>41</sup> Maaïke Bleeker, “Playing Soldiers at the Edge of Imagination: Hotel Modern and the Representation of the Unrepresentable,” *Arcadia* 45, no. 3 (2011): 277–279.

In contrast, the collective Manual Cinema immerses audiences in large-scale visual narratives that draw upon the aesthetic principles of silent cinema to evoke a sense of awe through the harmony and precision of an interplay between diverse media. They provide ground-breaking spectacles with a variety of illusion effects. Perceptual multistability is deeply experienced by the audience, giving the opportunity to discuss the performative role of each viewer in creating their own performance. However, this immersive experience also highlights that the success of such performances relies heavily on technical flawlessness, as inadequate technique can undermine the cinematic illusion.

Finally, the work of Hotel Modern emphasizes a hybridity of staging as a challenge to the audience to consider the multi-level impact of media on human knowledge, memory, and historical interpretation.

Ultimately, these projects discussed within the framework of manual cinema share a common characteristic: the deliberate use of manual techniques within the cinematic apparatus. They underscore the pivotal role of the performer's hand and the live presence in the age of mediatized representation. Through the lens of Peter W. Marx's media ecology, manual cinema is revealed not merely as nostalgic revival, but as a vital part of a broader "media circuit" where both historical and contemporary artistic practices and technologies coexist. By exposing the materiality of the performance, these artists engage in a form of media-ecological reflection that reconnects the ephemeral cinematic image with its physical, performative roots—with the live.

While this article has focused on creators whose manual cinema emerged from shadow theatre and puppetry, this phenomenon can also be encountered in other areas of the performing arts. *Kineformy* (Cineforms), invented by Andrzej Pawłowski,<sup>42</sup> or the Optical Kinotheatre with non-camera films by Julian Józef Antonisz,<sup>43</sup> also belong to the media ecosystem that could be framed by the term manual cinema. One ongoing artistic project within this domain is that of the independent group kinoManual of Poland (Aga Jarzab and Maciek Bączyk),<sup>44</sup> which name refers to the CineMaNual of Krzysztof Owczarek. kinoManual projects, such as *Pocket cinema*,<sup>45</sup> explore the intersection of experimental hand-drawn animation, the magic lantern, and cut-out techniques, alongside kinetic art

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<sup>42</sup> Kamil Kopania, "Teatr lalek, Bauhaus, Richard Teschner, Kineformy: Kilka uwag na temat wczesnej twórczości Andrzeja Pawłowskiego," *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no. 39/40 (2002): 255–262, <https://doi.org/10.36744/kf.3890>.

<sup>43</sup> Joanna Kordjak-Piotrowska, ed., *Antonisz: Technika jest dla mnie rodzajem sztuki* (Warszawa: Zachęta – Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> "KinoManual," accessed March 12, 2025, <https://kinomanual.pl/>.

<sup>45</sup> KinoManual, "Pocket Cinema," Vimeo, December 6, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/653817140>.

and film,<sup>46</sup> and evoke for contemporary viewers the sensual materiality of early cinematic experience. This, therefore, opens up further fields of analysis within the framework of manual cinema.



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<sup>46</sup> Adriana Prodeus, "Analogowe plemię," *Kino*, no. 5 (2020): 45–46.

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