

# Stefania Zahorska's Camera Lens

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In 1934, when Stefania Zahorska published her text “What the novel owes film”, film – including the first experiments – had been around for less than 40 years. It took seven years for films to start using (or rather experimenting with) sound, with more or less success. There already existed some great silent cinema masterpieces (*Intolerance*, 1916; *The Last Laugh*, 1924; *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925; *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, 1928), including films by Charlie Chaplin, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, Siergiej Eisenstein. Sound cinema had also already achieved some successes, including the films of Fritz Lang, René Clair, and Josef von Sternberg – the list could be even longer. Nonetheless, film is mostly seen as a form of (more or less sophisticated) entertainment, which in the eyes of its opponents would never deserve to be considered “proper art”, like music, theater, or literature. On the other hand, there are also those who call film “the tenth muse”<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, well-established forms of art with centuries-long

<sup>1</sup> Karol Irzykowski, *Dziesiąta muza: zagadnienia estetyczne kina* [The tenth muse: cinema's aesthetic issues] (Kraków: Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1924).

traditions are of interest to film. Literature provided film with its “first injection of content and sense”, as Zahorska writes. Since the very beginning, the cinematographer also employed theatrical plays, transferring them to the film tape. The same practice was continued by the silent film, unsure of its own identity, registering in great detail shows imported straight from Broadway.

Filmmakers all around the world draw abundantly from literature, especially novels. Sometimes it is the source of creative solutions, like in the case of the 1916 *Intolerance*, whose creator D.W. Griffith repeatedly stressed that the film's narration was inspired by the structure of Charles Dickens's novels. However, for film, novels are typically a source of attractive anecdotes, dramatic structure, a means of “elevating” film by basing the plot on a well-known author or literary prototype, or a way of gaining popularity by referring to commonly known and (depending on the cultural knowledge) appreciated literary characters. Thus, characters from Zola, Dumas, Mickiewicz, Żeromski, or Sienkiewicz can appear onscreen along with those with origins in cheap, sensational literary works, like *Fantomas*, *Juvex*, *Arsen Lupin* and *Zigomar*.

Aversion to such a marriage between film and literature came not only from film's skeptics. After the Great War, avant-garde groups looking for a new, original language for film, deemed literature a threat and a burden to film. Yet, onscreen avant-garde is no mass production, and such productions shamelessly continued to employ literature, presenting it as – to quote Zahorska again – “twisted as if in a fun-house mirror, thick like a drunkard's face; delicate and sophisticated thoughts turned into cords, into straw wisps”.

Thus, it should not be surprising that there was a common belief that film and the cinema prey on literature, making it incredibly shallow, reducing it to sensational and romance motifs. This was caused not only by the wish to attract the biggest possible audiences, but also by still very imperfect means of narration, a lack of skill in transferring deeper motifs to the screen, bad acting (inaccurately dubbed “theatrical” – nobody taught actors how to act on screen), or, more broadly speaking, imperfect film technique. Generally, almost any onscreen literary adaptation was met with severe criticism.

But suddenly a new, academically accomplished player appeared, an associate professor at the Free Polish University and film critic at “*Wiadomości Literackie*”, who stated that although many of those accusations were accurate, the novel was beginning to owe something to film, as well. This was a daring idea in 1934 in Poland. So, who was the author of “What the novel owes film”?

Stefania Zahorska was born on 25 April 1889 in Kraków<sup>2</sup>, as Ernestyna Stefania Lesser, the youngest of four sisters in a middle-class family of assimilated Jews. She studied in Kraków and Berlin, and had passed her high school exams (in Hungarian!) while living with her older

<sup>2</sup> In the light of controversies surrounding the date of Zahorska's birth it should be mentioned that the correct date was identified by Anna Pilch, on the basis of documentary evidence: Anna Pilch, *Symbolika form i kolorów: o krytyce artystycznej Stefanii Zahorskiej* [Symbolism of forms and colors: on Stefania Zahorska's artistic criticism] (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2004).

sister in Budapest. Later, in the 1930s, she would become a sworn translator from Hungarian. She had unusually broad interests. She studied medicine and chemistry, and in 1919 graduated from Jagiellonian University with a degree in art history. She received top grades for her thesis on the early Renaissance in Poland (published in 1921), in which she made a highly interesting claim that the Italian Renaissance came to Poland via Hungary<sup>3</sup>. This was a classic example of Zahorska's original way of thinking, which would become the main feature distinguishing her reflections on culture.

She began writing articles in 1919 for magazines, mostly devoted to art history; however, in the same year she also wrote a text which showed her interest in Freud, to whom she would refer many times in later years<sup>4</sup>. Most of her papers written in 1919–1929 are on the visual arts. Among other things, she wrote two popular monographs on Jan Matejko and Eugeniusz Żak, published as a part of a series of artistic monographs by Gebethner and Wolff<sup>5</sup>. In 1921 she moved to Warsaw, where she got a job as an assistant professor of history of art at the Polish Free University. She was an art history lecturer in Warsaw, as well as in the university's Łódź division.

The scope of her interests, like the scope of her other activities, was indeed impressive, and included the visual arts, psychology, sociology, philosophy, history, literature, and the theory of art, as well as teaching and education, which she treated very seriously. She gave free Sunday lectures on Wyspiański, Matejko, Cézanne, Stanisław Witkiewicz in Collegium Publicum, as well as numerous guest lectures. She was also a lecturer at I Miejska Szkoła Rękodzielnicza [an urban handicrafts school] – a job she truly enjoyed – where she taught future milliners, tailors, lacemakers, and corsetieres how to look at a piece of art, and how to perceive color, space, and functionality. This was genuinely noble work at the grass roots level. According to surviving evidence, she was a phenomenal teacher, and kept in touch with some of her students even after the war. Her many essays, reviews, and articles show her passion for teaching, for example, her use of such language as “let us go back to...”, “as we remember”. It can also be seen in the academic form “to recapitulate”. And perhaps “What the novel owes film” was originally in fact a lecture...?

She started to write about film in the mid-1920s, and she remained faithful to it until the outbreak of World War II, as well as after she emigrated from Poland – although she wrote on film far less often then. She always perceived it as an autonomous art form; she was open to experiments and original ways of using “moving pictures”, but she also saw it as a significant ingredient of Polish popular culture, one which had a great impact on contemporary people.

<sup>3</sup> Stefania Zahorska, *O pierwszych śladach odrodzenia w Polsce* [On the first traces of rebirth in Poland], vol. 2 (Kraków: Prace Komisji Historii Sztuki PAU, 1921).

<sup>4</sup> Stefania Zahorska, “Twórczość i świadomość” [Creativity and awareness], *Wianki*, No 3 (1919): 13–14.

<sup>5</sup> Stefania Zahorska and Jan Matejko, *Jan Matejko* (Warszawa: Gebethner & Wolff, 1925); Stefania Zahorska, *Eugeniusz Żak* (Warszawa: Gebethner & Wolff, 1927).

A text she wrote in August of 1927, and published in September in “Wiadomości Literackie”, which was a broader reflection on the contemporary German film culture, should be considered her “film writing debut”<sup>6</sup>. Although it was her first text on film, it is clear that she must have been interested in the topic for a long time. In the text, she reveals most of her future (academic) interests, hopes, prejudices, and even idiosyncrasies. The latter was connected to the conviction that the randomness of the people connected with the “film business”, who sought only quick profits, “the curse of trade calculation” killed film and any courage to experiment.

Zahorska’s interests, and probably also her ambitions, went well beyond essay writing, publicism, or criticism. In September 1927 she presented an essay during the Second Polish Philosophical Congress entitled “Formal issues in film”<sup>7</sup> on the aesthetics panel, alongside Władysław Tatarkiewicz, Stanisław Ossowski, Edward Stamm, and Jan M. Szuman. This is one of the most important academic texts on film published in Poland in the interwar period, and was later developed into a full-fledged subject of academic research. With some caution, one could claim that Zahorska (like Karol Irzykowski) was a precursor in terms of reflection on film in terms of semiotic categories. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that she was the first to introduce film to the academic environment. Interestingly, Zahorska – a well-educated art historian – decided to introduce film to the academic humanities via philosophy rather than art-related disciplines. Perhaps she decided that looking at film from the perspective of art history would limit it, close it within the interpretative field of a moving picture, whereas she saw this phenomenon as deserving of more attention.

In 1928 she tried to release her own social, literary, and artistic weekly, “Wiek XX” [20<sup>th</sup> century], publishing authors such as Tadeusz Peiper, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, and Władysław Strzemiński, as well as Ilja Erenburg’s articles about artistic life in the USSR. Zahorska wrote extensively about the visual arts, including exhibitions, artistic schools, and film. In “Wiek XX” she published one of her most important critical texts on silent film, “Film in mothballs”, which was her deepest, most inquisitive analysis of the weaknesses of Polish cinema<sup>8</sup>.

Zahorska wrote extensively and quickly. She published her texts in a variety of magazines – both those aimed at intellectuals and at readers of Sunday cultural inserts. She was very good at adjusting her writing to her readership. In the early 1930s she became a film critic for “Wiadomości Literackie”, where up until the outbreak of World War II she published over 500 film reviews. As a film critic, she could be ruthless, and even cruel in the face of incompetence, “profiteering”, and patriotic kitsch, and her reviews were not forgotten, even many

<sup>6</sup> Stefania Zahorska, “Z ruchu filmowego w Niemczech” [On the German film movement], *Wiadomości Literackie* 195, No 39 (1927); The text has also been published by Anna Nasiłowska in Stefania Zahorska, *Wybór pism: Reportaże, publicystyka, eseje* [A selection of texts: reportages, publicism, essays] (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Stefania Zahorska, “Zagadnienia formalne filmu” [Film’s formal issues], *Przegląd Filozoficzny XXXI*, No 1–2 (1928): 192–99; For an extended discussion of that text see Pilch, *Symbolika form i kolorów* [Symbolism of forms and colors], especially p. 128–137.

<sup>8</sup> Stefania Zahorska, “Film w naftalinie” [Film in mothballs], *Wiek XX*, No. 3 (1928): 4.

years later. She was open to many possibilities, and accepted the appearance of sound film with curiosity.

She was distinguished in popularizing masterpieces of Soviet cinema, which was poorly known in interwar Poland (or rather almost completely unknown). In the latter half of 1934 she went to the USSR, where she participated in Eisenstein's, Pudowkin's, and Kuleszow's seminars at the GIK (Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography) and learned about the most important artistic disputes among the Soviet cinema's elites. She loved the local atmosphere of "everyone's equal work", the enthusiasm, and work "without bluff, a specific film applesauce". One of the effects of that trip was a series of excellent reportages published in "Wiadomości Literackie"<sup>9</sup>, not only about the Russian film milieu, but also about everyday life there. Zahorska did not hide anything nor cover anything up (to the extent of what she actually saw). It turned out that she also had a great talent for this genre, as evidenced by both the-above mentioned texts, as well as those from Germany.

Let us pause in 1934. Between her stay in Germany and the trip to Russia she wrote "What the novel owes film". In other words, a film enthusiast, fascinated with Eisenstein, Pudowkin, Wiertow, and Ruttmann pointed the sensitive camera lens towards literature. It was a completely original idea considering that in some groups the opinion that film was secondary to literature was prevalent for the next several decades. As an open-minded person, Zahorska focused on how film could potentially benefit literature, rather than on the cliché statement that "film preys on literature" (of which she was perfectly aware)<sup>10</sup>.

Several Polish novels were at the center of her interest: *Żółty krzyż* [Yellow cross] by Andrzej Strug, *Czarne skrzydła* [Black wings] by Juliusz Kaden Bandrowski, *The Street of Crocodiles* by Bruno Schultz, *Zazdrość i medycyna* [Jealousy and medicine] (a novel) and "Skandal w Wesołych Bagniskach" [Scandal in Wesołe Bagniska] (a short story) by Michał Choromański. Using such examples, she demonstrated how film inspirations influenced a given work of literature, a transformation of the fleeting, intangible, abstract into visible, sensual pictures. How a film picture transformed literary spacetime.

When she wrote about the novel's varied, multi-layer character, the simultaneity of phenomena, the intertwining of different layers of reality, combining unrelated phenomena, which Zahorska treats as evidence of film's "infecting" the novel, she also reveals her greatest passion in terms of film – editing. Montage, which is key to film as a form of art, and which is the basis of the deepest, the most potent metaphors in late silent cinema. Using the example of *The Street of Crocodiles*, Zahorska argues that there is no doubt that film played a role in the shaping of contemporary literary metaphor, which became more sensual, dynamic, plastic, and concrete; it became a moving metaphor.

<sup>9</sup> See Stefania Zahorska, *Wybór pism: Reportaże, publicystyka, eseje* (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2010).

<sup>10</sup>For an extended discussion see Małgorzata Hendrykowska, "O szczególnych powinowactwach literatury i kina w refleksji Stefanii Zahorskiej" [On the special relationships between literature and the cinema], *Przestrzenie Teorii*, No 32 (2019): 167–79; and Anna Pilch, *Symbolika form i kolorów*, 39–40.

Are we convinced by all of Zahorska's ideas and examples? Doubtlessly one could argue with some of them. So what makes this relatively short 1934 text so significant? Zahorska successfully convinces the reader that the relations between film and literature can be described outside of the traditional domain of pure adaptation, in terms of metapoetics, lexical aesthetics, and the moving picture. She points out how one can go beyond the discourse on the similarities between an onscreen adaptation and its prototype, and that the relation between the two is not unidirectional: from literature to film. In Poland, hers was an important and precursory voice in terms of perceiving deeper relations between literature and film.

Zahorska focused on contemporary literature. Just a few years later two other, previously unknown texts would be published, written in 1908 and 1911, in which the "cinematicity" of literature was clear. The first one was a one-act play by Karol Irzykowski, *Sprzedane samobójstwo* [Sold suicide] (1908)<sup>11</sup>, in which inspiration by film is demonstrated in the topic, and *Widziadła* [Phantasms] by Bolesław Prus (1911)<sup>12</sup>, a novella which is also a ready-made screenplay, a testament of "film-like thinking". More such examples can be found in works by Reymont, Żeromski, Belmont, etc; however, none has described the phenomenon quite like Zahorska. In her opinion, film significantly impacted the novel, which found a place for itself within it and internalized film's means of expression, sensualism, temporal ellipticity, spatial construction, simultaneous narration, dynamics, and the specificity of description resulting from the unmatched possibilities of the camera lens. "Modern literature looks at the world through a magnifying glass, from close-up; it has become analytical and sensual", as Zahorska observes. Even if those tendencies appeared by themselves and were not transplanted from film, "film's role in maintaining them and shaping the imagination of young authors and readers is doubtless. Infection with a concrete, sensual way of looking at the world stems from the screen, attunes and sets people's imagination, directly or indirectly shaping the written picture".

In her considerations regarding film inspirations which were important for literature, Stefania Zahorska is neither a nouveau-riche nor dogmatic person. She is not trying to convince us that the dynamics and sensualism of film dominated literature. Although she does not specifically write about this, I believe she is completely aware of it. In 1934 the cinema was commonplace. Everyone went to the cinema. Thus, at that time, there was a certain collective imagination about the world, characterized by a dynamic, "trembling" and "jerky" sensualism, by variety and multidimensionality, which affected the construction of the novel, drama, film, photographic press coverage, and the poetics of the poster. Writers, in spite of their individual differences, remained in the same circuit, cultural rhythm, moving in the same iconic space, in the same orbit, in a world that consisted only of props and scenes. Was it even possible to be deaf to the world of the moving pictures?

<sup>11</sup>Karol Irzykowski, "Człowiek przed soczewką, czyli sprzedane samobójstwo. Dramat w 1 akcie" [A man in front of a lens – a sold suicide], *Pion*, No 24–25 (1938).

<sup>12</sup>Zygmunt Szwejkowski, "Nowela Prusa 'Widziadła'" [Prus's novella 'Phantasms'], *Pion*, No 15 (1936).

This was Stefania Zahorska's situation in 1934. She was 45. There were still many important things ahead of her: hundreds of excellent film reviews, articles on history of art and contemporary art, essays on literature and reviews, her own plays, novels, and short stories, written in Poland and in exile. In 1939 she first fled to Paris, and then to London, she worked in exile, uncompromising in her fight against evil. Her life ended in a rather sudden and unexpected death; forgotten, in a foreign land.

She was characterized by an unusual, deep and profound intelligence. To my mind, she was the most acute, inquisitive, and incisive film critic of the interwar period. She was a sophisticated woman in the best meaning of the word, brave and independent, open, fluent in several languages, travelling, known for her elegance and manner, who was friends with the intellectual elites (and not just Polish).

Stefania Zahorska died in London on 5 April 1961, at the age of 72. In Poland, her death went unnoticed. Her versatile works were only appreciated again at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>13</sup>.

## What the novel owes film<sup>14</sup>

### Stefania Zahorska

Film came to viewers' eyes in all its primitive wildness. It ran onscreen accompanied by gunshots, broken plates, demolished backstages, speckled with flour and cream thrown in the face; it introduced such deep issues as chases on pillows and struggles with one's own shoes or nose as its innate themes and problems.

<sup>13</sup>Danuta Karcz was the first to write about Zahorska's film criticism: "Stefanii Zahorskiej walka o treść" [Stefania Zahorska's fight for content]. "Kwartalnik Filmowy" 1962 No 1-2, p. 47-92. Maja Elżbieta Cybulska published some important archival materials in her London book "Potwierdzone istnienie. Archiwum Stefanii Zahorskiej" [Confirmed existence. Stefania Zahorska's archive]. London 1988. More works appeared later: Stefania Zahorska, *Szkice o literaturze i sztuce* [Sketches on literature and art], edited by Paweł Kądziała, Warszawa 1995, Stefania Zahorska, "Przychodź do mnie". Listy do Leonii Jabłonkówny [Come to me. Letters to Leonia Jabłonkówna]. Edited and introduction by Maja Elżbieta Cybulska. London 1998; Anna Pilch, *Symbolika form i kolorów. O krytyce artystycznej Stefanii Zahorskiej* [Symbolism of forms and colors. On Stefania Zahorska's artistic criticism]. Kraków 2004. Stefania Zahorska, *Wybór pism. Reportaże, publicystyka, eseje* [Stefania Zahorska, A selection of texts. Reportages, publicism, essays] selection, introduction, and edition by Anna Nasiłowska, Warszawa 2010. Anna Nasiłowska, *Interdyscyplinarny umysł Stefanii Zahorskiej* [Stefania Zahorska's interdisciplinary mind], "Kwartalnik Historii Nauki i Techniki" 2012, No 3-4. More recently scholars have been focusing also on the literary output of Zahorska. See for example Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, *Po tamtej stronie tekstów. Literatura polska a nowoczesna kultura obecności* [On the other side of texts. Polish literature and the modern culture of presence]. Poznań 2013, especially the chapter: "Ruch powstający w innym" [Movement originating in the other]. *Modernizowanie psychoanalizy w emigracyjnych powieściach Stefanii Zahorskiej* [Modernized psychoanalyses in Stefania Zahorska's exile novels]. Jakub Osiński, *Biedni emigranci patrzą na getto. O Smoczaj 13 Stefanii Zahorskiej* [Poor emigrant are looking at the ghetto. On Smoczaj 13 and Stefania Zahorska]. "Teksty Drugie" 2018 No 3, p. 399-417.

<sup>14</sup>The text was originally printed in "Kurier Literacko-Naukowy" 1934 No 29 (it was a weekly extra to the popular Cracow "Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny"). The text was also published in Anna Nasiłowska (W.) *Stefania Zahorska, Wybór pism. Reportaże, publicystyka, eseje. Wybór, wstęp i opracowanie Anna Nasiłowska*. Warszawa 2010, p.285-290.

When audiences were no longer impressed merely with the movement of onscreen pictures, with the very fact that they can see a dog wagging its tail – it turned out that the cultural level of film needed to be substantially raised to make it digestible. And who was supposed to do this, to undertake this hard educational effort? Literature, of course. It entered film's life twice: the first time, at the very beginning, giving it the first injection of content and sense, when the silent film was adapting great historical novels, such as *Quo vadis*<sup>15</sup> and *The Last Days of Pompeii*<sup>16</sup>, when similarly to late-19th-century naturalistic novels, film stories about fallen girls were made, or when a more concise and logical structure of film police dramas were taken from detective romances.

And then, for the second time, almost yesterday, literature entered film's life: this happened when film started to talk, or rather mumble, when it turned out that it had nothing to say by itself, and thus needed to borrow language and words. Who from? Literature, of course. First from the theater, then from the novel. From masterpieces of world literature, from *The Song of the Nibelungs*<sup>17</sup> to the latest romances. When it comes to Polish literature, very few managed to escape the naïve and wild greed of film – not even Mickiewicz, Sienkiewicz, or Żeromski<sup>18</sup>, or many others. Literature paid a high price for these borrowings and transformations. Its face appeared on the screen twisted as if in a fun-house mirror, thick like a drunkard's face; its thoughts, delicate and sophisticated, turned into cords, into straw wisps. Indeed, literature has paid and is still paying a high price for its educational work on film.

However, we all know this. There is no need to talk about this anymore. Well-educated gentlemen have already beefed on film, its thoughtlessness, its preying on literature. Who knows, they may have hurt film, they may have overlooked some of its valuable properties. Those, which – regardless of the incredible stupidity of screenplays and staging – nonetheless introduce a distinct tone in the perception of the world, a new and peculiar attitude to reality – so new that they are inaccessible to other forms of art. Yes indeed: there are also such fields, in which the uncouth savage, film, is leading. In which it is able to fascinate even literature, though it is far smarter than film. In which film's suggestion effuses almost hypnotizingly and so strongly that it eats into every page of a book. Yes, doubtlessly film does influence literature, and not just the theater – even novel. This stupid, savage, barbaric, uncouth film.

<sup>15</sup>In the times of the silent cinema Sienkiewicz's *Quo vadis* was adapted several times, for example in a short film produced by Pathé, directed by Lucien Nonguet (1901) and in a film entitled *In the times of the first Christians (Au temps des premiers Chrétiens)* directed by André Calmette (1909). In the case of those earliest films we are talking about references to the literary prototype rather than adaptations. The feature-length Italian *Quo vadis?* directed by Enrico Guazzoni and released by Cines (1913) and the German-Italian *Quo vadis?* directed by George Jacoby and Gabriell D'Annunzio, with Emil Jannings as Neron (1924).

<sup>16</sup>An Italian silent film produced by "Ambrosio Film", directed by Arturo Ambrosio and Luigi Maggi (1908)

<sup>17</sup>*The Song of the Nibelungs*, directed by Fritz Lang. Screenplay by Thea von Harbou based on the Old Germanic 8th century poem *Nibelungenlied*. Camera Carl Hoffmann. Starring Margatethe Schön, Paul Richter, Theodor Loos i in. Prod. UFA, Niemcy (1924).

<sup>18</sup>Zahorska refers here to the numerous adaptations of, among others, Sienkiewicz: *Bartek Zwycięzca* [Bartek the winner] (1923), *Janko Muzykant* (1930), Żeromski: *Dzieje grzechu* [The story of sin] (1911), (1933), *Uroda życia* [Beauty of life] (1921), *Rok 1863* [The year 1863] based on *Wierna rzeka* [Constant river] (1922), *Przedwiośnie* [Early spring] (1928) and Mickiewicz: *Czaty* [In wait] (1920), *Pan Tadeusz* [Mr Tadeusz] (1928).



However, a funny *qui pro quo* takes places here, as if a complete mix up of paternity, an unclear marital status or descent. For in discussing film's influence on literature one should focus especially on the approach to time; the question of the simultaneity of several plot-lines; the problem of the condensing long phenomena into a short period of time; the issue of a screen's breathlessness, in which pieces of car wheels, of horse legs, flashes of light in car windows and ruffled strings of horse hair replace the demonstrated gallop of horses and a car being driven. Or let us take the opposite phenomenon – slow motion, in which every movement is broken down to slow, individual pieces, and tells us what impetus and running consist of, what an object's movement consists of, what the object itself consists of. And yet those concepts, remarkably characteristic of film and organically connected with technology, first came to life in poets, the so-called imaginists and futurists, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – and they were dedicated to literature. Film accidentally became their heir and executor – the fantastic ideas of futurist writers were unexpectedly realized in film. Is it not funny when a legitimate son turns out to be the spitting image of some other woman?

Time, so expandable and prone to cuts in film, has been treated as a conventional value, a scheme in literature. The author obviously did not tell their protagonists' life story hour by hour, taking some shortcuts and leaps, marked with "many years had passed". Events that happened simultaneously were presented chronologically, one after another, like in the theater. For example, a young girl is dancing at a ball, and after the second act we can see her fiancé, who is dying. We do not immediately grasp that this is happening simultaneously, that he dies precisely when she is having fun. The same scene looks different in the cinema: simultaneity is almost directly served to the viewer. We can see the smiling mouth and fading eyes almost next to each other. Two strings of phenomena, sometimes an even higher number of plotlines are happening in front of our eyes, on the same piece of film tape. A dancing girl, a dying fiancé, an indifferent street, a restless mother.

This multi-track and multi-layer character of phenomena, this mutual intertwining of various surfaces of a film's reality has doubtlessly inspired literature. Today's novel technique frequently employs the technique of combining seemingly completely unrelated phenomena. A writer leaps from one event to another, seeking only the unity of time. A famous French novelist, Jules Romains, begins his multi-volume novel on October 6<sup>th</sup>, early in the morning<sup>19</sup>. He is looking, as if through a camera lens, inside Parisian apartments, he goes from one house to another, projecting on pages (as if on a screen) a variety of events taking place in different parts of the city at the same time. The American Dos Passos<sup>20</sup> employs a similar technique in his novels, and it is also becoming increasingly more common in Polish literature. In the prewar novels by Andrzej Strug, especially in his last trilogy, *Żółty krzyż*<sup>21</sup>, different layers of reality are intertwined, dream and reality, the truth of life,

<sup>19</sup>A 27-volume roman-fleuve by Jules Romain (1885-1972) *Men of Good Will* (1932-1947). Polish edition of volumes.1-4 (1933-1939).

<sup>20</sup>Dos Passos (1896-1970) American novelist and journalist; author of 42 novels, including the U.S.A. trilogy *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), *The Big Money* (1936).

<sup>21</sup>Andrzej Strug, *Żółty krzyż* (Warszawa: Gebethner i Wolff, 1933).

the impression of a fantasy. In the novel *Zazdrość i medycyna*<sup>22</sup> or the short story *Skandal w Wesołych Bagniskach*<sup>23</sup>, both by the young Choromański, who has been honored by the Polish Academy of literature, one can sense a greedy wish to express this worrying simultaneity of phenomena – the author frequently returns to the initial moment, similarly to what happens in the cinema.

In a slowed picture, which the writer shows to the reader, each quality of the described pictures are exaggerated, becoming individual, isolated, sensual, tangible. You can almost see every pore of the skin, almost touch each roughness of the surface, smell and taste each object. In the past, it was enough to describe a beautiful protagonist by simply stating that “her skin was like velvet”. Today the young Ważyk describes a young lady’s beauty routine as follows: “She revealed an inhumanely transformed face, shining with oil like a buttered bun”. Kaden Bandrowski writes in his *Czarne skrzydła*: “He saw a large piece of skin on a woman’s back spread on a blue sofa. Red, shiny hands were weltering in it, kneading it like dough”<sup>24</sup>.

In the past, a writer would describe a neglected garden as, say, “full of lush vegetation” – and that would be it. Today general characteristics – as a notion – is changing into a defined description, unique, full of inimitable details, so clear as if it was a film. The young Bruno Schulz describes a part of a garden: “There those goggly burdoch goggled like jades sitting, taking up space, half-eaten by their own mad skirts”. Or: “The air (...) cut with lightning of shiny horseflies, furious sun, it was cracking like invisible rattles (...)”<sup>25</sup>.

Modern literature looks at the world through a magnifying glass, from close-up, it has become analytical and sensual. Perhaps these tendencies have appeared in it by themselves, and were not transplanted from film. Nonetheless, film’s role in maintaining them and shaping the imagination of young authors and readers is doubtless. Infection with the concrete, sensual way of looking at the world stems from the screen, attunes and sets people’s imagination, directly or indirectly shapes the written picture.

Let us look at how literary metaphors have changed. In the past, people wrote about “sheets white as snow” or that “he buried himself in the sheets like in hay”. How static, motionless and general those thin metaphors seem compared the one in Schultz: “... he was falling into whitish clouds, strands and piles of cool feathers (...) and the sheets around him were growing, swelling, and souring – they were growing over him with masses of heavy, white dough”.

This type of metaphor is not only extravagant sensualism, but also an example of dynamics, of a metaphor on the move. One picture turns into another, flows in front of the viewer-reader’s eyes, changes with words like pictures in the cinema.

<sup>22</sup>Michał Choromański, *Zazdrość i medycyna* (Warszawa: Gebethner i Wolff, 1933).

<sup>23</sup>Michał Choromański, “Skandal w Wesołych Bagniskach” – novel printed in instalments in “Gazeta Polska” (1934).

<sup>24</sup>Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski, *Czarne skrzydła* (Katowice, 1928).

<sup>25</sup>Quotes from *The Street of Crocodiles*, Tow. Rój. Warszawa 1933 (1934), passages from a short story *Sierpień* [August].

There is one more type of novel that has been heavily affected by film: a novel whose action is made mostly of the accretion of facts, in which events are running through the pages as quickly as the tricks of a runaway villain in a film police drama. In such a novel the author approaches their protagonists as if from the outside, showing them in motion, at work, characterizing them through actions and situations. For example, this is how the young Gojawiczyńska's *Ziemia Elżbiety* [Elizabeth's land]<sup>26</sup> is written. But this kind of film's influence on literature requires a more personal and extensive discussion. Let us recapitulate. Let us state that we did not organize a race nor a comparison of achievements. Why would we? It would mean a great unpleasantness for the young urchin – film. Let us agree now and without paltering that it is no match for its grand and serious mentor – literature. However, let us allow it to get its own back in at least one small category. Let us admit that film shapes the sense of concreteness, that it transforms intangible, abstract terms and notions into visible pictures, plastic, tangible shapes. It makes sensualism permeate imagination.

Let us also admit that film has made our world more dynamic, that it has moved it from its foundations. It also deals with time masterfully and ruthlessly, by arbitrarily cutting, lengthening, and repositioning phenomena. Here film is a reformer. And here even the dignified written word gives in to it.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>26</sup>See Pola Gojawiczyńska, *Ziemia Elżbiety* [Elizabeth's land] (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Wydawnicze "Rój", 1934).

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# KEYWORDS

*film criticism*

**Stefania Zahorska**

FILM

sensualism

novel

*film inspirations in novels*

## ABSTRACT:

The vast and varied literary output of Stefania Zahorska (1889-1961) including, among others, articles on art history and theory, philosophy, psychology, history of culture, out of which reflections on film theory and criticism have the most prominent position. Zahorska was the most distinguished film critic of the Polish interwar period, due not only to her talent for writing and criticism, but also her erudition, education, and most importantly, independent judgment. While in the 1930s film was commonly seen as a parasite preying on literature, Zahorska in her essay “What literature owes film”, published in 1934 in *Kurier Literacko-Naukowy*, states that the novel was also slowly getting something from film. She focused on the contemporary Polish novel and the potential benefits which literature could gain from film. She convincingly demonstrated how film inspirations influenced literary concreteness, how – under film’s influence – the spatiotemporal model changed in literature. By analyzing novels “infected” with film, she pointed to its role in shaping contemporary literary metaphors. Her originality of thought stemmed from her breaking from popular discourse regarding the similarities between an adaptation and its source, and her indicating that the relation between film and literature is not simply unidirectional: from literature to film. It can be described beyond the traditional domain of adaptation, in terms of metapoetics and the aesthetics of word and moving pictures. In Poland hers was an important, pioneering voice in terms of how the relations between film and literature were seen.

## film editing

*spacetime*

## metapoetics

## simultaneous narration

*time and space ellipticity*

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