

Architectural space of Jan Rybkowski's Warszawska premiera and Aleksander Ford's Młodość Chopina. The film vision of 19th-century cities in the times of socialist realism

ABSTRACT. Kurpiewski Piotr, *Architectural space of Jan Rybkowski's Warszawska premiera and Aleksander Ford's Młodość Chopina. The film vision of 19th-century cities in the times of socialist realism*. "Images" vol. XXII, no. 31. Poznań 2017. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. Pp. 5–12. ISSN 1731-450X. DOI 10.14746/i.2017.31.01.

Two Polish historical films set in 19th-century cities were created. The paper analyzes film images of Warsaw, Paris and Vienna. For the needs of *Warszawska premiera* [Warsaw Première] and especially *Młodość Chopina* [Youth of Chopin] impressive sets of 19th-century cities were built in an atelier in Łódź. The author presents the main architectural principles behind these visions and points to the problems faced by the artists who wanted to create a credible and convincing illusion of the past. The films of socialist realism are today a peculiar souvenir of the Stalinist culture with its brazen propaganda message. It is, however, worth noting that the staging and decorations in the films depicting the past were created with great historical accuracy and some of the solutions applied during the production of *Warsaw Première* and *Youth of Chopin* were a great hint for later films of a similar character.

KEYWORDS: Aleksander Ford, Jan Rybkowski, *Młodość Chopina* [Youth of Chopin], *Warszawska premiera* [Warsaw Première], city vision in film

Polish socrealistic cinema has already become the subject of significant studies which managed to present a general image of the film culture of 1950s Poland (1949–1955).[1] Socialist realism in film was characterized by a high degree of indoctrination, clichéd characters and setting the individual against the community. The main topics presented were: socialist work competition, establishing Soviet-style cooperatives, work on the new socialist construction sites of Poland, the fight against class enemies – kulaks, spies or saboteurs.[2] Even though socrealistic cinema, due to the predominant ideology of the time, did prefer collective main characters, films presenting outstanding individuals were also produced.

[1] P. Zwierzchowski, *Pęknięty monolit. Konteksty polskiego kina socrealistycznego*, Bydgoszcz 2005; idem, *Zapomniani bohaterowie. O bohaterach filmowych polskiego socrealizmu*, Warszawa 2000.

[2] G. Stachówna, *Równanie szeregów. Bohaterowie filmów socrealistycznych 1949–1955*, in: *Człowiek z ekranu. Z antropologii postaci filmowej*, eds. M. Jankun-Dopartowa, M. Przyłipiak, Kraków 1996, pp. 14–17; P. Zwierzchowski, *Zapomniani bohaterowie...*, pp. 13–18.

Opening remarks

Each socrealistic film aimed to prove that socialism (communism) was the best political system possible. Whenever a director decided to create a film about the past, his duty was to prove that in bygone Poland or in Polish lands during the times of the partitions various events foreshadowed the socialism to come.

Warszawska premiera [Warsaw Première], directed by Jan Rybkowski (1950), and *Młodość Chopina* [Youth of Chopin], directed by Aleksander Ford (1951), are biographical and historical films presenting an important event in the lives of two great Polish composers – Stanisław Moniuszko and Frederic Chopin. Zygmunt Machwitz in his article pointed to certain regularities specific for biographical films of the early 1950s. The author indicated that: “[biographical films] engaged themselves in illustrating the presumed theses and creating hagiographic movies. This is a simple consequence of the rules applicable at that time – normative aesthetics and utilitarian historiography”.^[3] The ideological aspect of socrealistic cinema has been the subject of many analyses, hence it is today a closed subject in Polish studies of film history. It is, however, worth paying attention to the spatial and scenographical aspects of films about the past produced in the socialist realism period due to their secondary presence in the available research literature. The main thesis of this paper is therefore that the socialist filmmakers managed to create a redible vision of a 19th-century city and the aforementioned films by Jan Rybkowski and Aleksander Ford can be seen as examples of this.

***Warszawska premiera*
and *Młodość*
Chopina – post-war
cinema creates an
illusion of the past**

The films analysed in this paper are the first post-war attempts to show 19th-century Europe on film, with a special focus on the Polish lands. Both movies can be described as of a highly atelier character, especially *Warszawska premiera*, 90% of which was shot indoors. In *Młodość Chopina*, a “blockbuster” of that time, more open-air scenes of a well-considered idea were shot, although the film in general is dominated by atelier space.

It is worth mentioning that in both films, for the first time since the mid-1930s, the film-makers decided to reconstruct the non-existent world of the 19th century. It should be stated that in comparison with model films of the interwar period^[4] – *Księżna Łowicka* or *Ułan księcia Józefa* – both Jan Rybkowski and Aleksander Ford managed to create a much more convincing vision of the past. In *Młodość Chopina* it is particularly noticeable that Ford was focused on historical credibility, and even more than 65 years after the film was made, the urban spaces serving as the setting for the story of the great Polish composer are still impressive.

[3] Z. Machwitz, *Film biograficzny lat 50-tych*, “Film na Świecie” 1985, no. 320–321, p. 108 [own translation].

[4] In the 1930s few Polish films presented a plot from the 19th century. In *Księżna Łowicka* and *Ułan księcia*

Józefa the historical plot is treated with great freedom and the main focus is on a fictional love story.

Warszawska premiera and *Młodość Chopina* were created in the same political period and their production periods were separated only by 12 months. I believe that for several reasons the analysis should begin with Ford's film. First of all, *Młodość Chopina* takes place approximately 30 years prior to the events presented in *Warszawska premiera*, and for this paper this historical time is more significant than the date of the movie creation. Furthermore, Ford's film is produced on a much greater staging scale and presents a better considered vision of 19th-century urban space.

When Aleksander Ford began his work on *Młodość Chopina* in 1949, he was the most important director in the People's Republic of Poland. Due to this status, he was able to produce his films with access to significant financial resources. A film about the most important Polish composer was one of the biggest production ventures of socialist Poland's cinema, bearing in mind its post-war infancy. At that time at the peak of his powers, Ford focused on the credibility of the Chopin story. Having the possibility to do so, he decided to show three metropolises from the first half of the 19th century on the silver screen – Warsaw, Vienna and Paris.

Impressive sets were built near the Łódź film atelier.[5] Two rows of streets were created from scratch and after a small rearrangement they could "act" as Warsaw, Vienna and Paris. 10 open-air scenes were finally included in the final film, the most valuable of which were included in the second part of *Młodość Chopina* (from approximately the 70th minute). The urban spaces presented in the first half of the film were shot in tight frames, therefore it is difficult to speak of an impressive illusion of a 19th-century city.

Four scenes presenting the former capital of the Congress Poland took place on the streets of Warsaw. Each of them was created from a different visual perspective in order to use the sets in the most efficient way. It should also be pointed out that the following scenes from a Warsaw street were acted according to the emotions conveyed. This manner may influence the visual perception.

The first scene, significant when it comes to the creation of the urban film space, is set in wintertime close to Christmas. Chopin (Czesław Wołłejko) peeks from his window in the evening onto a Warsaw street and a Christmas procession passing by. A short scene of scarcely 10 seconds shows the urban scene of Warsaw in full frame. A still camera located approximately 5 metres above the ground shows a bird's eye view of the pulsating Warsaw.

Warsaw, Vienna and Paris of the 1820s – the urban aspect of *Młodość Chopina*

19th-century Warsaw

[5] J. Giżycki, *Film o młodym Chopinie. Problemy twórcze, realizacja, fakty i dokumenty*, Warszawa 1953, pp. 109–116.

Another open-air piece in *Młodość Chopina* appears shortly after the scene described above. The main character peeks from the window once again, this time observing the march of the Polish army sent off to France to suppress the July revolution. The soldiers march along the paved Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, and the camera shows them in full frame from the perspective of a person standing on the ground. The scene carries a negative message – the army subordinate to the reactionary tsar sets off to fight against the French revolutionaries. [6] In this fragment the camera lens is focused mainly on the soldiers, whereas the tenement house details served only as background. In the two scenes that follow the space of the city by the Vistula River is presented in the fullest manner.

During his departure from the Polish lands, Chopin takes his last look at Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, where he is bade farewell by Konstancja Gładkowska (the composer's teenage love) and a group of friends. This nostalgic scene is an exemplification of 1820s Warsaw. Majestic tenement houses with characteristic façade details, the high density of buildings and narrow streets – all this viewed in an open frame creates a credible vista of a 19th-century city. In the last five seconds of this scene one can even see Sigismund's Column in the background. For the needs of this film a detailed reconstruction of the junction of Kozia and Krakowskie Przedmieście streets was made. When we look at 19th-century pictures and drawings of this part of Warsaw, we are stunned by the precision and accuracy of the buildings that were recreated.[7]

This space appeared for the second time in the vision scene from *Młodość Chopina*, when the main character imagines the fights during the November Uprising. The riots on Krakowskie Przedmieście Street are presented in a dynamic way.[8] Burning tenement houses belching smoke, escaping civilians and Polish soldiers in battle – such an image of the November Uprising created by Ford was virtually the only presentation of the fights of 1830/1831 in Polish post-war cinema. This sequence also makes clear reference to the romantic literary tradition – from a window of one of the tenement houses a piano was thrown out

[6] In the historical films of the socialist realism period each presentation of the revolutionary movements focused on their leftist and internationalistic character, whereas the representatives of the revolutionaries expressed themselves in phrases typical for the communist narration of the mid 20th century.

[7] J. Giżycki, op.cit., pp. 110–112; <<http://dawna-warszawa.blogspot.com/2011/04/ulica-kozia.html>> [accessed on: 26.03.2016]; <<http://www.starawarszawa.pl/>> [accessed on: 26.03.2016].

[8] Presenting the 19th century national uprisings of Poland in films from the People's Republic of Poland was subject to numerous limitations. The official interpretation of the Polish United Workers' Party

concerning the independence uprisings was finally formulated in the beginning of the 1960s. According to this doctrine, the national uprisings were aimed at the tsarist apparatus of power and not at Russians in general. The movie industry of the PRP did not produce any film devoted solely to the Kościuszko Uprising or the November Uprising. Only in the latter half of the 1970s did the industry create films where the January Uprising served as the background, see P. Kurpiewski, *Obraz powstania styczniowego w polskim filmie fabularnym*, in: *Powstanie styczniowe w polskiej myśli humanistycznej. Dziedzictwo w kulturze, języku, literaturze, sztuce i prasie*, ed. L. Mariak, J. Rychter, Gorzów Wielkopolski 2013, pp. 137–154.

towards the pavement. This was meant to be a reference to Cyprian Kamil Norwid's poem *Fortepian Chopina* [Chopin's Piano].[9]

19th-century Warsaw in Ford's film was reconstructed based on an impression, thanks to which it was supposed to present an overall view of the former capital of the Congress Kingdom. Despite being limited to one shooting stage, the urban fulfilled its task. Thanks to the well-considered film edition of *Młodość Chopina* the city was presented in an ascending manner, the from building walls depicted in the background up to a general panoramic view of an elegant part of Warsaw.

The plot of *Młodość Chopina* shifts to the capital of the Austrian Empire for approximately 20 minutes. During this time only one short open-air urban scene of approximately 15 seconds is presented. Furthermore, it is shot in tight frame. After Chopin's performance of the *Etiuda Rewolucyjna* [Revolutionary Étude] the irate crowd leaves the Viennese concert venue in a revolutionary mood. The camera presents three shots of various people and the old tenement houses serves as the background. It is, however, hard to regard this scene as a well-considered spatial idea of the film Vienna: the image of Austria's capitalis rather pretextual and conventional in character.

19th-century Vienna

The following final events of the film move the plot smoothly to Paris. As Tadeusz Lubelski accurately noted, the last scenes of *Młodość Chopina* are far from successful in terms of dramaturgy.[10] It is hard not to get the impression that they were in some measure forcefully included in the film: they are not justified by the plot and relocating the action from Vienna to Paris is virtually unnoticeable.

19th-century Paris

Apart from compositional matters, let us look closely at the events presented in the final scene of Ford's film. The last sequence depicts a demonstration of Parisian workers demanding their rights and singing *La Marseillaise*. Such a plot solution was to some extent demanded by the socrealistic doctrine. Workers fighting for a better tomorrow, revolutionary action and, in the middle of all this, the main character, who has found the right path. Chopin's face is directed towards the future and is clear proof that his path to maturity has reached its end (this was previously stated by the composer himself: "Only our youth has finished") and Frédéric will be able to stand and fight for social justice against reactionary monarchical power. Even though this implies composing revolutionary music, which is what he was destined to do.

[9] The throwing of the piano on which Chopin once played out the window towards the pavement occurred during the January Uprising in 1863. The motif of the shattered piano was also used by Aleksander Ford's apprentice, Andrzej Wajda, in his film *Kanał* [Kanal] (1957), which tells the story of the last of the last days of the Warsaw Uprising. In the fourth

minute of this picture one of the characters stops for a moment by the shattered instrument.

[10] T. Lubelski, *Chopin w trzech biograficznych filmach fabularnych polskich reżyserów*, in: *Chopin w kulturze polskiej*, ed. M. Gołąb, Wrocław 2009, p. 268.

Focusing on the visual point of view, the Parisian final remains the most spectacular sequence from *Młodość Chopina*. The urban space of the French capital of 1831 is presented in a highly convincing way. The dynamic scenes from the streets of Paris have a total duration of nearly 4 minutes and were shot in both tight and wide frames, often using a significant depth of field. The composition bears numerous references to romantic painting, especially by setting in motion the famous *Liberty Leading the People* of Eugène Delacroix.[11]

The previously prepared sets depicting Warsaw were used during the final sequence. The spatial composition was rearranged in order to create the impression of moving into a different city – scaffolding was set on the buildings, a fountain was built in front of the corner house on the junction of Kozia and Krakowskie Przedmieście streets, and the facades of some houses were rearranged. The last sequence was spectacular due to several hundred extras being present. This mass scene presenting the workers' uprising is impressive even today and by bringing Delacroix's painting to life, gave the sequence double artistic value. Having studied the particular shots, one might come to the conclusion that Aleksander Ford made sure viewers remember Paris as the capital of 19th-century revolutions and workers' uprisings.

Concluding discussion on *Młodość Chopina*, it should be stated that the illusion of urban spaces of the 1820s–1830s was also achieved due to rhythmic film editing. The open-air urban scenes appear in a constant projection rhythm, approximately every 15 minutes. Such footage editing created the imagined urban space in the viewers' mind.

Warszawska premiera without the depicted Warsaw from the half of the 19th century

The plot of the second biographical film analyzed in this paper – *Warszawska premiera* – is based on an actual event from 1857/1858 – the first Warsaw performance of Stanisław Moniuszko's opera *Halka*. This atelier film displays very detailed scenographic interiors where the scenes took place. Furthermore, the urban space was treated as an excuse and therefore ultimately the characters of *Warszawska premiera* moved around Warsaw during only six short scenes. This is why it is difficult to consider Rybkowski's film as a credible visualization of a 19th-century city.

From the six open-air scenes of *Warszawska premiera*, four fragments deserve attention from the architectural point of view. In those scenes one can perceive an attempt to construct urban space in film.

In the first scene the depicted Stanisław Moniuszko (played by Jan Koecher) observes Warsaw from his study, listening to street musicians in search of inspiration for his own work. The street is presented in a static shot with a general frame from the bird's eye view (approximately 7 metres above the ground). The poorly dressed musicians

[11] This scene made its mark in the history of Polish cinema as the first (partial) nude. Freedom was

played by Hanna Skarżanka, see R. Marszałek, *Kino rzeczy znalezionych*, Gdańsk 2006, pp. 154–155.

playa dolorous melody while standing on a rugged pavement next to wretched houses. This scene lacks architectural detail as the camera is focused on the group of musicians. The buildings serving as the background for the musicians are presented only in small fragments, therefore it is difficult to talk of there being a well-developed urban space in this film.

The next scene of importance for the topic of this paper takes place in the evening after Moniuszko leaves an inn. The composer goes down a Warsaw street, meeting and chatting with inhabitants of the city on his way. This fragment is shot in narrow frames (mainly American, medium and half-close), which eliminates any architectural details almost entirely from the frame. It is mainly the image of the inhabitants and not the narrowly pictured space that makes for a depiction of the street that is far from representative.

In the two following scenes 19th-century Warsaw is presented in the most credible way. A conversation between Włodzimierz Wolski (played by Jerzy Duszyński) and Paulina Rivoli (played by Barbara Kostrzewska) is presented in three shots on a Warsaw street. Initially, the camera displays the characters' promenading with the antique facades as background in American shot. The next scene features a general frame of a pulsating, bustling street with people walking and carriages driving along it. As the sets are located deep in the frame, it is easy to notice the shapes of historic buildings and a fragment of a characteristic white classicist tenement house. A crowded sandy street with a clearly marked gutter is presented in a very credible way.

The same location, pictured from a different perspective, is also used in the final parts of *Warszawska premiera*. A short scene of a few seconds depicts a carriage ride with Countess Krystyna (played by Danuta Szaflarska), which exposes the dirty street surface. The classicist facade of the tenement house next to which Wolski and Paulina Rivoli took a stroll earlier is also visible.

Only two final scenes from the film recreate the space of Warsaw from the middle of the 19th century. The image of the city was, however, only hinted at: showing only a few mediocre scenes made this vision of the past appear only in the imagination.

Ewa Mazierska's statement almost 20 years ago: "[...] cities from bygone days, just like everything concerning the past in cinema, do not have to be historically accurate"[12] can be just as easily applied to the times of socialist realism. The creation of an evocative view, acceptable to the viewers in those days, was achieved mainly by locating the screen characters in credible-looking scenery. Constrained by the political corset of socialist realism, the filmmakers strove to maintain a modicum of independence by building a visual image of

Summary

[12] E. Mazierska, *Janusowe oblicze filmowego miasta*, "Kwartalnik Filmowy" 1999, no. 28, p. 44.

a world that had ceased to be. This was to a certain extent achieved by Jan Rybkowski and especially by Aleksander Ford. An analysis of both films shows clearly that staging practices performed by Ford, the maker of *Ulica Graniczna* [Border Street], introduced a new quality of creating visions of the past to Polish cinema. The staging propositions applied in *Młodość Chopina* have become standards in presenting urban spaces from the 19th century and could be regarded as a source of inspiration for filmmakers younger than Ford. It was only in the decade that followed that Polish cinema presented films with staging élan, the action of which took place in the cities of the age of steam and electricity. However, in Konrad Nałęcki's *Mansarda* [Mansard] (1963), Andrzej Wajda's *Popioły* [The Ashes] (1965) or Wojciech J. Has' *Lalka* [The Doll] (1968) the filmmakers decided to shoot their works in real outdoor settings, thus creating an image of the past by means of locating the action in preserved urban spaces, resulting in a narrow film frame. Therefore the depiction of urban scenes in *Młodość Chopina* remains an incredibly interesting testimony to the times of socialist realism and, at the same time, testimony to the possibilities of politically restricted Polish cinematography.

Translation: Maciej Zborowski

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