

TADEUSZ LUBELSKI

Institute of Audiovisual Arts
Jagiellonian University, Cracow

Images

vol. XXIV/no. 33

Poznań 2018

ISSN 1731-450X

Krzysztof Kieślowski's "Camera Buff": a revised version of "First Love"

ABSTRACT. Tadeusz Lubelski, *Krzysztof Kieślowski's "Camera Buff": a revised version of "First Love"*. "Images" vol. XXIV, no. 33, Poznań 2018. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. Pp. 129–136. ISSN 1731–450X. DOI 10.14746/i.2018.33.11.

The article develops its title thesis, which proposes interpreting Kieślowski's *Camera Buff* (*Amator*, 1979), his second full-length feature film, as a revised version of his documentary *First Love*, made five years earlier. Both films have similar starting points – the story of a couple expecting the birth of their first child. But the conclusion in each case also has something in common and results in the abandoning of a film project. The latter similarity meant that Kieślowski changed the character of the main protagonist in his full-length movie. It is no longer a documentary hero but the film auteur himself. This was probably the essence of the director's artistic discovery made while shooting *Camera Buff*. It meant the abandonment of the documentary character when the prolonged relationship with him (and her) proved to be ethically dubious and his (and her) development predictable. At the same time, Kieślowski expressed his own creative experience as the film's author creating a fictitious character in *Camera Buff*, inspired by various figures of real 'prototypes'.

KEYWORDS: *First Love*, *Camera Buff*, documentary film, fiction film, ethics of film director

The wording of the title should not be, of course, taken literally. For Kieślowski the film *First Love* (*Pierwsza miłość*), created in 1973–1974, was an important artistic experience in documentary cinema. He made it in the Warsaw Documentary Film Studio (WFD) as a film for television, but intended it mainly for festivals. *Camera Buff* (*Amator*), completed five years later in 1979, was the director's second full-length feature film intended for a normal cinema repertoire. Each of the two films played a distinct role in Kieślowski's creative development. Yet there are several reasons for my using the phrase "revised version" in the title above. The first reason is the films' similar thematic starting point: a story about a married couple who have just had their first child. The second reason is that in the five-year gap between the making of the two films, the director left documentary work to make feature films.

As a matter of fact, after *Camera Buff* Kieślowski made three documentary films, one of which, *Talking Heads* (*Gadające głowy*, 1980), according to a recently conducted professional plebiscite was deemed to be among the ten most eminent documentaries in the history of Polish cinema (incidentally, Kieślowski is the only author with two films on this list; the other work is *Seven Women of Different Ages* [*Siedem kobiet w różnym wieku*, 1978])[1], yet they were made because of previous com-

[1] The full list was published for the first time in the issue no 3 (55) of the SFP "Magazyn Filmowy" monthly in 2016, p. 19.

missions, as if driven by momentum. A justification for this decision can be found in the text of *Camera Buff* itself. Hence the initial hypothesis: an analytical look at the feature *Camera Buff* as a revised version of the documentary *First Love* provides an opportunity to answer one of two central questions included in the formula *du documentaire à la fiction*. The question can be formulated as follows: what were the reasons for which the filmmaker who started his artistic work as a declared documentarian (in the second chapter of his autobiography, entitled “A special role of the documentary”, in the passage on the beginnings of the 1970s, he confessed: “At that time I was interested in anything that can be described by means of a documentary camera. There was a necessity, a need, a very exciting one for us anyway, to describe the world” [2]) eventually gained worldwide fame as the author of creative features focused on discovering the mystery hidden in the human soul?

It is worth recalling two answers to this question which the director once gave himself, and, as a matter of fact, did so with regard to the two films under discussion. However, to fully understand Kieślowski’s response, one needs to go back to the very beginning of Kieślowski’s artistic path. In his recently published article on Kieślowski’s unrealised films, the director’s biographer, Stanisław Zawiśliński, included a reproduction of a typewritten page submitted in the WFD on January 14, 1971 as a set of six documentary topics scheduled by the director for the year 1971. Out of the six films he managed to make one, listed as the fourth, still under the working title: “*Child* – a film about a girl giving birth to an unwanted child, about maternal feelings and about public acceptance of this situation. Entry and topic approved by the Editors. 16 mm film, 2 acts”. [3] Thus, Kieślowski submitted the topic early, almost at the beginning of his work in the WFD and many months before his own daughter was born (Marta Kieślowska was born in 1972). Apparently, watching the process of waiting for the child seemed to be a reasonable fulfilment of the documentary working method Kieślowski posited in his MA thesis written in 1970. The method consisted in imitating the dramaturgy of reality – as it is. “With its lack of points, with its order and mess at the same time – this is the most modern and the most genuine of the structures. Apart from a documentary film, there is no method to register this structure”. [4] The film *First Love*, which was eventually Kieślowski’s only realisation of this concept, seemed to him a visible confirmation of the correctness of the postulate included in his MA thesis.

Jacek Petrycki recalled this moment after many years in the following way:

I think that the year 1974, when Krzysztof was really satisfied with *First Love*, was a kind of peak of his artistic mood. He was happy not only because of

[2] K. Kieślowski, *O sobie*, ed. D. Stok, Kraków 1997, p. 48.

[3] See: S. Zawiśliński, “Czego Kieślowski nie sfilmował?”, “Magazyn Filmowy” 2016, no. 3, p. 62.

[4] K. Kieślowski, “Dramaturgia rzeczywistości”, “Film na Świecie” 1992, no. 3–4 (388/389), p. 7.

the prizes in Cracow, and he was awarded two prizes: Grand Prix of the National Festival and Special Prize of the International Festival. And not only even because of the fact that people really liked it: the critics who wrote about the expanded boundaries of the documentary and the colleagues who congratulated him [...]. He was happy because he felt himself that the film was good. He had known what he wanted to make, and he made what he wanted.[5]

In the surge of this enthusiasm, still in the same year, Kieślowski began to realise a twenty-year project to record subsequent developmental phases of the girl whose birth was presented in *First Love*. The director announced this one hour film under the working title *Twenty Years of Ewa Moskal* (or another, *Ewa Ewunia*) in the following words: "This infant will transform into a child, then into a teenager, finally into an adult woman... A seemingly obvious case – but to see this development on the screen within an hour...!".[6] However, the project was eventually suspended after more or less a year.

At this point it is time to return to the previously announced director's double explanation for abandoning the project. It comes from his article published in 1976, "Do I have the right to risk?" ("Czy mam prawo ryzykować?"). The conclusions he drew from his artistic experiences of the past decade were fundamentally different from those he had included in his MA thesis ten years earlier. This time Kieślowski wrote:

Now more than ever I wonder how permeable reality is for me as a documentarian. I think that only a small degree of its complexity is portrayed on the screen. And even if it is, if I touch important things, and If I do it aptly – after all, the events, problems, views belong to real people with a face and a name. Maybe I could harm them, destroy their life? [...] Accompanying the young protagonists of *First Love* we were only one step ahead of the situation when the film, our presence, would begin to shape their life in an unnatural way, and it doesn't matter whether it would be a good or a bad way. Will we manage to stop next time? Do I have the right to take the risk? I don't think so".[7]

To get acquainted with how Kieślowski eliminated the two recognised disadvantages of documentary cinema, it is worth looking at *Camera Buff* from this perspective. Already at the beginning of the film we come across a real piece of "the revised version of *First Love*". The director repeatedly described the situation which enabled shooting of the childbirth in this film. According to Kieślowski's words, his assistant, Krzysztof Wierzbicki, was waiting for a phone call from Romek, the documentary's protagonist, to inform him that it was time for childbirth so he was taking his wife to hospital. Yet after two weeks of waiting in vain, Wierzbicki got drunk and ended up on a night bus where he

[5] J. Petrycki, "Kiedy jeszcze lubiliśmy rejestrować świat", [in:] *Kino Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego*, ed. T. Lubelski, Kraków 1997, p. 181.

[6] "Film o całym życiu" (the director K. Kieślowski interviewed by A. Kłodyński), "Studio" 1974, no. 8, [in:] *Kino Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego*, op. cit., p. 270.

[7] K. Kieślowski, "Czy mam prawo ryzykować?", "Polska" 1976, no. 5 (261), p. 69.

met Romek and Jadźka who – not being able to take a taxi – by sheer luck caught the same bus to go to the hospital. Wierzbicki immediately sobered up and managed to arrange shooting of the childbirth, “which, by the way, – as the director commented – lasted eight hours, so there was no need for haste”.[8] In *First Love* there was a long, seven-minute sequence assembled from fragments of this shooting and combined with the image of Romek waiting in the hallway in the company of excited Wierzbicki.

However, the recording of the journey to hospital was missing. This scene was therefore shot only after a few months when Ewunia was a little older.

It was just about a signal, something like a caption: *Jadzia goes to hospital*. – Jacek Petrycki recalled after a long time. – So we took a long lens, we set up the camera in the distance and we asked them to reconstruct their journey, the way they walked and tried to catch a taxi.[9]

It looks rather wan in the film and the viewer barely pays attention to this scene. Finally, Jadzia and Romek get on the tram, they are scarcely visible to hide the fact that she is no longer pregnant. Apparently, however, Kiesłowski was bothered by failing to have recorded this scene and he shot it after five years – in accordance with its actual course, from a short distance, with the participation of actors who were then available. It is the second scene of *Camera Buff*, placed immediately after the image of Irenka’s dream, and it thus opens the film’s actual action. It was shot strictly according to the screenplay (written by Kiesłowski himself[10]), however on the basis of Jadźka and Romek’s story. It is grey dawn. Filip Mosh, played by Jerzy Stuhr, concerned about the condition of Irenka (Małgorzata Ząbkowska), carries her in his arms, at the same time trying to stop one of the passing cars. A “Warszawa” sedan stops, decorated with colourful balloons and probably on the way from a party. The driver puts the car into reverse in an uncertain way, so Stuhr says warningly: “He’s drunk” and hides with Irenka in an archway. There he stands her up on her legs; it turns out that she is able to walk on her own. Provincial Wielice is not Warsaw from *First Love*, so the hospital is in the vicinity. In the next scene we can see Filip at the hospital counter being informed by a nurse that: “She will not give birth until the afternoon”. After this the viewer’s attention is, according to a shift in emphasis to the male protagonist’s side, focused on Filip, who organises a home party to celebrate the birth of his daughter. This time we do not watch the childbirth; drunk Filip learns the news from the nurse in front of the hospital actually in the afternoon.

In order to demonstrate the sender-receiver profit and loss account of telling this story twice – by means of documentary cinema

[8] K. Kiesłowski, *O sobie*, op. cit., p. 58.

[9] “Ciąg dalszy pokażemy już bez niego...” (J. Petrycki interviewed by T. Lubelski), [in:] *Chełmska 21. 50 lat Wytwórni Filmów Dokumentalnych i Fabularnych*

w Warszawie, eds. B. Janicka, A. Kołodyński, Warszawa 1999, p. 164.

[10] See: K. Kiesłowski, *Przypadek i inne teksty*, ed. H. Krall, Kraków 1998, pp. 90–91.

and as a feature film, I propose an analysis of two fragments of both films, presenting a similar situation: the couple's conversation over the baby's crib. The first fragment comes from the final sequence of the documentary *First Love*: Ewunia is already a few months old, the editing etude of the couple's activities concerning the child makes the viewer realise that their life begins to stabilise. For the first time in the film we see them expressing their parental expectations together and in a calm way.

Although the fragment of *Camera Buff* presents an analogous situation, the difference between the two situations results, to a large extent, from the shift of narrative accents I have already mentioned. The viewer's attention is consequently attracted to the activities of the titular protagonist. We watch his success at the amateur film festival, and – after his return – his meeting with the manager to present him the award certificate. The presented scene directly follows Filip's return from this meeting.

In this confrontation there is one profit for the viewer of the documentary, and it is an obvious one. It consists in the profit resulting from the "documentary pact" (to employ a term coined by Philippe Lejeune) between the viewer and the director: the viewers' pleasure stems from the fact that they are watching real people in authentic life situations. If they asked the director for the characters' addresses, they could go to them and confirm that the characters looked and behaved just like on the screen. However, the feature scene brings numerous gains – and especially, the two advantages which were highlighted by Kieślowski himself in the cited article. First, the viewers know that they are watching actors in fictitious situations and in real life, so the poop diaper which lands on Jerzy Stuhr's face does not have the unpleasant smell it would have had in a similar situation captured in a documentary. But owing to the fact that the actors lent their faces and bodies to the film, in the fictitious *Camera Buff* we are watching a situation which seems more real. In addition, it is so embarrassing that real protagonists would probably not let the film crew record it. (Although – here I am opening a parenthesis – as the standards of shame, as is widely known, have shifted in recent years, today it would also be possible to record such a scene in a documentary. The director of an excellent British documentary from 2015, *A Syrian Love Story*, Sean Mc Allister, became so familiar with his documentary protagonists that he recorded them having a much more drastic argument, and what is more, an argument in the presence of the child. I cannot imagine such a scene in Kieślowski's film, however.) The first advantage is related to the other advantage mentioned by the director: feature films have access to a higher degree of complexity of reality. The conversation of the protagonists of the documentary is, to be honest, limited to banalities. The conversation created by the feature filmmakers and played by the actors refers to deeper spheres of life, most of all, because the deeper spheres of life are touched upon by the main character who takes up

new experiences which the documentary protagonist would not like to or could not open up to.

Mikołaj Jazdon in his monograph on Krzysztof Kieślowski's documentary work, in the last chapter entitled "Między dokumentem i fabułą" ("Between a documentary and a feature film") and devoted to a subject related to that of my presentation, claims that

the director begins to make feature films to tell the stories he wanted to include [...] in documentaries. He fulfils the task to describe reality in the feature film. He is able to do it through reconstruction of authentic events and imitation of the dramaturgy of reality in his own artistic film compositions.[11]

At first, he proves his thesis using film-history arguments: in the early period of Kieślowski's work, most of his documentaries were drastically censored; particularly dramatic was the case of reediting the film *Workers 1971: Nothing About Us Without Us* (*Robotnicy 1971: Nic o nas bez nas*, 1972) without the authors' consent and then a limited distribution of the film.[12] At the same time, his early feature films, at least up to *The Scar* (*Blizna*, 1976) inclusive, were treated more gently by censors, although they also addressed burning issues. Intratextual proofs are provided by *Camera Buff* according to the director's own words in his autobiography: "A few unrealised documentaries were later included in *Camera Buff*. The protagonist makes them his own. For example, the documentary about the pavement or a dwarf".[13] At the end I will elaborate on this self-reflexive trace suggested by Jazdon.

There is an obvious analogy between Filip Mosz's idea to buy a camera to capture the life of his newborn daughter month after month and the previously mentioned Kieślowski project to record the development of his protagonists' daughter for twenty years. Kieślowski resigned from his idea, but actually Filip Mosz also practically abandoned his project or, at least, weakened its priority when being occupied with other, more compelling subjects. Thus, not only are the starting points of both films similar, but their finishing points are also alike. But this similarity assumes transformation of the documentary protagonist into the author of the feature film. This was probably the essence of the artistic discovery the director experienced while making *Camera Buff*: abandoning the documentary protagonist because the prolonged relationship with him turned out to be ethically questionable and the direction of his development too predictable, but also creating a fictional character who - by embodying various incarnations of real prototypes - would be the expression of the film author's own artistic experience.

To give an account of his experience at that time, a character embodying the features of Romek Moskal was useless for Kieślowski. He needed a newly minted father who would want to film his little

[11] M. Jazdon, *Dokumenty Kieślowskiego*, Poznań 2002, pp. 181–182.

[12] See: J. Petrycki, "Kiedy jeszcze lubiliśmy...", op. cit., pp. 178–179.

[13] K. Kieślowski, *O sobie*, op. cit., p. 165.

daughter, "a piece each month, until she grows up", and for whom this project would soon become insufficient. But since the director was preparing a feature film and not a documentary, he did not need one particular character to be rendered on a 1:1 scale. Accustomed to the documentarian's working methods, Kieślowski was looking for various prototypes in order to combine them in one character, burden the character with his own problems, and finally find an actor who would be able to express such a synthesis. And all of these happened in the case of *Camera Buff*. A whole range of simple people with cameras were met by Kieślowski owing to the amateur film club movement to which he was introduced by his friends, Krzysztof Zanussi and Andrzej Jurga, who were fascinated by the movement and who appear in the film in this role. The character of Filip Mosh was the effect of careful documentation resulting from meeting many amateurs, in particular – from the autobiographical account written by Franciszek Dzida from Chybie near Bielsko to the order of Kieślowski.[14] However, the feature film prepared for Filip combined the amateurs' biographies with problems which the film author struggled with himself as he had just experienced having his film *The Calm* (*Spokój*, 1976, released in 1980) stopped by censorship, the film he considered the most significant in his achievements to date.[15] The ideal performer for this character was Jerzy Stuhr, for whom Kieślowski wrote *The Calm*.

It brought a desirable effect, which is confirmed by a situation described by Miron Czernienko who witnessed the director's success at the Festival in Moscow in 1979, where *Camera Buff* was awarded Golden Prize – the main Jury prize and, simultaneously, the FIPRESCI Prize: "Let me put it bluntly – the Russian critic recalled – never, neither earlier nor later, could we observe such a young, happy and joyful Kieślowski as at that time when he was passing, together with the Polish delegation, the old circus on the Tsvetnoy Bulvar".[16] The director was so happy with the award for the second – and probably the last – time, after the success of *First love* in Kraków. It was of particular importance to Kieślowski that *Camera Buff* won the Festival in Moscow where 8½ (*Otto e mezzo*, 1963) by Fellini had won sixteen years earlier. Andrzej Titkow, who shared a room with Kieślowski for some time

[14] This account entitled *Kolejna próba ukierunkowania. Z notatnika wiejskiego działacza kultury. Czerwiec 1969-lipiec 1976*, was discussed by Edyta Zachurzok in her MA thesis *Filmowiec-amator w krainie PRL-u na przykładzie AKF-u "Klasy" z Chybia* (Kraków 2005, in the collection of the Institute of Audiovisual Arts, Jagiellonian University). See also: M. Jazdon, *Dokumenty Kieślowskiego*, op. cit., pp. 193–194.

[15] The director himself admitted that the factory manager who requested Filip to remove some parts of the film was seen by Kieślowski as "a censor from Warsaw who cut different fragments from my films.

I wanted to see him and learn about him and what stands behind him by means of the film *Camera Buff* (K. Kieślowski, *O sobie*, op. cit., p. 112). I wrote more extensively about the self-reflexive aspect of *Camera Buff* in the article "Być artystą. Zobowiązania wobec sztuki w filmach Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego", [in:] *Kino Kieślowskiego, kino po Kieślowskim*, ed. A. Gwóźdź, Warszawa 2006, pp. 43–47.

[16] M. Czernienko, "Krzysztof Kieślowski. Słowa pożegnania", trans. Joanna Wojnicka, [in:] idem, *Bliska zagranica. Szkice filmowe o Polakach i dla Polaków*, ed. T. Lubelski, Warszawa 2007, p. 219.

during their studies in Łódź, recalled that his roommate – fascinated by Fellini’s film when it was released in Poland in 1965 – hung the film poster on the wall and for no apparent reason uttered the following statement which was unlike him: “I will also make such a film once”. It became true in a sense. Just like *8½*, *Camera Buff* is a self-reflexive film whose plot is limited to presenting the preparatory phase of a film. Only the final scene shows the beginning of its making. However, in Kieślowski’s film, unlike in Fellini’s, only the viewer knows that it will be a feature film. The director remains convinced that he himself is an amateur-documentarian.

BIBLIOGRAFIA

- “Film o całym życiu” (the director K. Kieślowski interviewed by A. Kołodyński), “Studio” 1974, no. 8
- Gwóźdź A. (ed.), *Kino Kieślowskiego, kino po Kieślowskim*, Warszawa 2006
- Janicka B. and Kołodyński A. (eds.), *Chełmska 21. 50 lat Wytwórni Filmów Dokumentalnych i Fabularnych w Warszawie*, Warszawa 1999
- Jazdon M., *Dokumenty Kieślowskiego*, Poznań 2002
- Kieślowski K., “Dramaturgia rzeczywistości”, “Film na Świecie” 1992, no. 3–4 (388/389)
- Kieślowski K., “Głęboko zamiast szeroko”, “Dialog” 1981, no. 1
- Kieślowski K., *O sobie*, ed. D. Stok, Kraków 1997
- Kieślowski K., *Przypadek i inne teksty*, ed. H. Krall, Kraków 1998
- Lubelski T. (ed.), *Bliska zagranica. Szkice filmowe o Polakach i dla Polaków*, Warszawa 2007
- Petrycki J., “Kiedy jeszcze lubiliśmy rejestrować świat”, [in:] *Kino Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego*, ed. T. Lubelski, Kraków 1997
- Zachurzok E., *Filmowiec-amator w krainie PRL-u na przykładzie AKF-u “Kłaps” z Chybia* (Kraków 2005, MA thesis, in the collection of the Institute of Audio-visual Arts, Jagiellonian University, unpublished).
- Zawiśliński S., “Czego Kieślowski nie sfilmował?”, “Magazyn Filmowy” 2016, no. 3