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## *Chopin on the cinema screen. Aesthetic and cultural determinants*

**ABSTRACT:** As with most film subjects, the way Chopin has been presented in the cinema has been the result of a particular poetic (depending on the genre) and cultural context. The author classifies cinematographic Chopinalia on the basis of the former determinant, although without neglecting entirely, in some sections of the text, to treat film as a text of culture. The clear majority of documentary and educational films about Chopin have been made in Poland (as a form of promotion for the country, which does not boast too many icons of world culture). For both aesthetic and cultural reasons, the boundary between documentary and educational film has become blurred. Historical documentaries have used the same iconographic material, film shots and utterances, and also – for the purposes of musical illustration – the same Chopin works as educational films. Cultural considerations have affected the thematic restrictions in respect to silver screen discourse about Chopin: in both genres, it reflects a rather stereotypical approach to the composer's life story, with no room for the "Chopin mysteries" (e.g. his fascination with Tytus Woyciechowski) that have long been addressed in the literature.

In experimental and animated film, the accent has been shifted – in keeping with the essence of those genres – from Chopin's biography to his music. Nevertheless, here too the pressure of cultural (national) context has determined the choice of film material accompanying particular works. At the same time, experimental films have become anti-war or political films (as in the case of Eugeniusz Cękałski's *Utwory Chopina w kolorze* [Chopin's works in colour], from 1944 or Andrzej Panufnik's *Ballada f moll* [Ballade in F minor], from 1945), whilst the presentation of Chopin's music in animated films has been full of iconographic clichés and pleonasm (a Mazovian landscape with cleft willows, carriages speeding along in the background, dancing ballerinas, falling leaves and so on), creating a schematic visual code that is automatically associated with the compositions of the brilliant Pole. By way of contrast, it is worth emphasising that a few foreign experimental films (Max Ophüls's *La Valse Brillante de Chopin*, Germaine Dulac's *Dysk 927*) have illustrated Chopin's music with images of "universal" objects (piano, gramophone, rain) associated more with music than with feelings, and not with Poland.

The dozen or so feature films about Chopin have mainly belonged to popular cinema. For that reason, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the film-makers have turned to biographical facts which possess a suitable dramatic potential. Feature films about Chopin have treated history as a background – a costume in which to dress a tale about universal cultural myths: the myth of love (the relationship with George Sand, which has dominated Chopin films), the pseudo-Romantic myth of the great artist and the patriot myth (prime examples being Charles Vidor's *A Song to Remem-*

ber and Jerzy Antczak's *Chopin. Pragnienie miłości* [Chopin. Desire for love]). Some films – albeit few in number – have adopted a different strategy. One such picture attempted to exploit Chopin's life story to exemplify Marxist historiosophy and a socialist-realist poetic (Aleksander Ford's *Młodość Chopina* [Chopin's youth]); another – Andrzej Żuławski's *Błękitna nuta* [La note bleue] – is a truly original picture about the composer and, like almost every original film, tells us as much about the director as about Chopin himself.

KEYWORDS: Fryderyk Chopin, cinema, biography, music

The life and works of Fryderyk Chopin command well-deserved respect in cinema.<sup>1</sup> The presence of the Chopin theme on the cinema screen, as in most cinema topics, was a resultant of the poetics (film genre) and the cultural context (when and where a film was made). The narrative of this article is based on the first determinant, although I will not refrain entirely from referring to film as a cultural text in particular parts.

The word “Chopin” (just like “Mozart”, “Modigliani” or “Vermeer”) may indicate the artist himself, his works or, often, both. The aspect of Chopinology taken up in a particular film was highly dependent on its genre, be it a feature, documentary, educational, experimental or animated film.<sup>2</sup> On a basic level it was the specific character of the genre of the film (its production technique, poetics and function, and the status of the presented reality) that determined the development of the Chopin theme. To simplify, it can be said that a feature and a documentary film is, by nature, predestined to present the biography of a composer, whereas an educational film may present both the composer's biography and music (it is quite another matter how often the latter is actually presented). In an animated and experimental film the music is the dominant subject.

## Chopin in Documentary and Educational Cinema

Most of the documentary and educational films about Chopin were made in Poland. This does not need an explanation. Our country cannot boast

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<sup>1</sup> A justification for this claim can be found in the list of films dedicated to Chopin and his music selected by the National Film Library, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and the National Institute of Fryderyk Chopin in Warsaw. The list can be found on: [www.filmowychopin.pl](http://www.filmowychopin.pl)

<sup>2</sup> In the case of the last genre, though it is commonly recognized, not all the theorists would accept its presence on the list above pointing out that – as opposed to the other genres – the criterion for defining an animated film is not the function it performs but the technique used, namely the animation technique. See Alicja Helman, ‘Film’, in *Encyklopedia kultury polskiej XX wieku. Film, kinematografia* [Encyclopedia of twentieth century Polish culture. Film, cinematography ], ed. Edward Zajičková (Warszawa, 1994), 112-113.

an abundance of worldwide cultural icons, hence promoting it through the person of the famous composer seems quite obvious. The presence of the theme in national documentary and educational cinema has already been described (Sylwia Kołos and Piotr Skrzypczak<sup>3</sup>). By a curious paradox, both authors exploring this topic selected almost the same titles for analyses. Is there no difference at all, then, between documentary and educational films? Is it only the institutional status of a film, namely the place of its production (Documentary or Educational Film Production Company), that determines its genre?<sup>4</sup>

In the case of the Chopin theme the distinction between the documentary and educational cinema is a subtle one. To be precise, the most important genological characteristic of the former is the non-fictional status of the presented reality (events, people, places) demonstrated, let us add, by means of photographic reproduction technique (therefore what we see on the screen has an undoubtedly indexed, mimetic character)<sup>5</sup>. Educational cinema is not similarly restricted. To convey popular science or educational content, it may employ a variety of techniques such as animation, feature staging, collage, documental photography, or photography itself. Nevertheless, for both aesthetic and cultural reasons, there is such a strong interdependence between documentary and educational films about Chopin that it is difficult to classify a given film into one of the above categories. (Skrzypczak labels them “educational documentary films”<sup>6</sup>).

Documentary historical films (and biographical films about Chopin fall into this wide group of screen texts) often made use of exactly the same material as the educational films, and for the same purpose. Since the character being portrayed, the great composer, was no longer alive, documentary film makers usually reached for similar iconographic elements (paintings, portraits, graphics, sculptures, scores, etc.), film shots (contemporary pictures of the Mazovian countryside, Warsaw, Paris, Nohant, etc.), the comments of experts, musicians and, as a musical illustration, the same Chopin compositions as the educational film makers.

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<sup>3</sup> Sylwia Kołos, ‘Chopin w polskich filmach dokumentalnych. Między biografistyką a krytyką artystyczną’ [Chopin in Polish documentary films. Between biography writing and artistic critique], in *Chopin w kulturze polskiej* [Chopin in Polish culture], ed. Maciej Gołąb (Wrocław, 2009), 329-337. Piotr Skrzypczak, ‘Setereotyp usprawiedliwiony kulturotwórczo. Biografia i twórczość Fryderyka Chopina w polskich filmach oświatowych’ [Culturally justified stereotype. Biography and works of Fryderyk Chopin in Polish educational films], in *ibid.*, 339-356.

<sup>4</sup> What about films produced by TVP, TV film company Poltel or Miniature Film Studio?

<sup>5</sup> See Mirosław Przyłipak, *Poetyka kina dokumentalnego* [The poetics of documentary cinema] (Gdańsk – Słupsk, 2004), 17-50.

<sup>6</sup> Skrzypczak, ‘Stereotyp usprawiedliwiony kulturotwórczo’, 339-356.

Cultural reasons, in turn, entailed certain thematic restrictions of the knowledge about Chopin presented on screen: both genres in question follow practically the same line in this respect, although they did not, and still do not have to do so. What usually materializes on screen is quite a stereotyped biography of the composer (in fact, considering the documentary/educational films' short footage, it is rarely presented in full). A typical biography of the composer comprises his birth in Żelazowa Wola, the first successes, Szafarnia and the folk art inspirations, then the education received from Wojciech Żywny and Józef Elsner, followed by the first successes in Warsaw, the relationships with Konstancja Gładkowska and Maria Wodzińska, departure for Paris, the torment of the soul missing the rebelling homeland, contacts with the émigré circles, musical triumphs set against deteriorating health, Nohant and the relationship with George Sand, and finally his death, concluded in the famous Cyprian Kamil Norwid's phrase: "By birth a Varsovian, in his heart a Pole, and by his talent a citizen of the world". In the vast majority of the documentary/educational biographies of Chopin, the guiding principle was the myth of the patriotic artist.

Yet, left out of the documental biography of the great composer, as indicated by Kołos, were "Chopin's secrets", which had already been a subject discussed in literature for a long time.

By contrast with the film realizations, it was literature that pushed him slightly off the pedestal; it was books that disclosed information about the homoerotic relationship between Chopin and Tytus Woyciechowski, Chopin's difficult acquaintance with Mickiewicz, his allegedly pornographic correspondence with Delfina Potocka or else the often "unbridled" language of the artist, who could swear like a trooper, especially in Polish.<sup>7</sup>

All the above could, according to Kolos, provide areas of interest for documentary films, which by their nature explore more problematic reality and are free of didactic mission.<sup>8</sup> Employing the schema described above is not so surprising in educational productions<sup>9</sup> (which have a didactic and culture-forming function). Documentary ones, however, could be more finessed in that respect.

The reason for the thematic constraints were, and still are, rather obvious. Chopin is treated with extreme reverence in Polish culture. Especially under Communism (when most of the films about Chopin were produced), challenging the ideal would be a serious misdemeanour. It was, therefore, unthinkable

<sup>7</sup> Kołos, 'Chopin w polskich filmach dokumentalnych', 332-333.

<sup>8</sup> On the clear understanding that one of the documentary models is the so-called persuasive model, also called a rhetorical one, similar to educational cinema, though often used for propaganda reasons – see Przyłipiak, *Poetyka kina dokumentalnego*, 93-109.

<sup>9</sup> Skrzypczak, 'Setereotyp usprawiedliwiony kulturotwórczo', 351.

for the genius patriot to have sexual urges, to talk money or mingle with common people. Why, then, was a more open discussion about Chopin's personality, health or political views possible in literature? The answer lies within the social impact of the cinema which, throughout the Communist period (particularly in the 1950s and 1960s), was the preferred channel of indoctrination (despite television occupying the first place in the audiovisual market in the 1970s).

A perfect example of the aforementioned genre and cultural restrictions is the film *Chopin w kraju* [Chopin in his homeland] (1961) by Jarosław Brzozowski and Wanda Rollny, where the narrator (Jerzy Waldorff's voice) concludes a journey through the places of the artist's youth as follows: "Chopin left Poland for ever – this is what history says – but the truth is that he stayed with us and is still present today. His music fills our concert halls, homes and hearts. It does so because it encompasses the whole country".

Similar spirit can be found in three films by Stanisław Grabowski. They were all made in 1969 by Wytwórnia Filmów Oświatowych (Educational Film Company). The title of the first one, *Chopin w Paryżu* [Chopin in Paris] (1969), is quite ambiguous as he was not only a Pole and a Polish musician there but also a celebrity, a lover and a patient. The film is a somewhat accidental guide to the Parisian locations related to the composer's life. Some of his apartments are presented (but not all of them), as well as a museum bearing his name, Hotel Lambert, St. Roch Church. The list of places itself suggests the character of the presentation, one that is national and patriotic. There is not much commentary in this 10-minute-long film, but what there is (the voices of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz and Krystyna Kobylańska) focuses mainly on the Polish tropes: "Chopin's heart is at home, that which had missed its homeland found peace in it at last"; "From the very start of his stay in Paris Chopin mingled with Polish émigrés. He belonged to the Polish Literary Association and was a friend of the most eminent members of emigration, such as Adam Mickiewicz"; "Right next to the Museum of Adam Mickiewicz, one can find a second place linked to Chopin, namely Hotel Lambert, where the artist was often a guest, playing and improvising"; "Often unwell, Chopin never refused to play for his folk. By my folk I mean Poles – he would say"; and so on and so forth. The film ends with the obligatory phrase by Norwid cited above. Just one sentence sums up the relationship with Aurora Dudevant: "Chopin and George Sand's friendship, although controversial, had a positive influence on the composer's work".

A similar perspective is adopted in the film, nearly half an hour long, *Mnie tu wiatr zapędził* [Brought here by the wind] (about Chopin's fate after leaving Poland, starting in Austria and ending with a visit to Scotland). The selection of passages from the composer's letter written in Vienna, as the news came of the November Uprising, includes, for example: "Malfatti unsuccess-

fully tries to convince me that every artist is a cosmopolitan. Even if he's right, I am still an infant in the realm of art, whereas as a Pole I am in my thirties"<sup>10</sup>.

To compensate for certain thematic limitations of the first movie, in *Goście Doliny Czarnej* [Visitors at Black Valley] (1969) Grabowski focused exclusively on the Sand-Chopin relationship. However, the places, presented as tacit spectators of their affair, were described by the use of excerpts from *Lato w Nohant* [Summer in Nohant] by Iwaszkiewicz. Hence, the relationship between the partners seems fictional, literature-like, and all the dialogues are afflicted by nostalgia. The picture is appropriate and very straitlaced.<sup>11</sup>

It needs to be emphasised that it was not the biographies that prevailed in documentary cinema (altogether, including some foreign ones, such as *Chopin* (1958) by Jean Mitry and Theodore Olembert, there have been no more than twenty productions). The theme was dominated by reportage, produced almost exclusively by the Wytwórnia Filmów Dokumentalnych [Documental Film Production Company] while realizing successive parts of the Polish Newsreel (PKF). Most of the parts related to Chopin typically concerned the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition (about 35 productions, including features within the regular parts of PKF, monothematic PKF parts devoted strictly to the topic, and longer reportage composed of PKF Chopin-related materials). Apart from the above, accounts were given of concerts in Duszniki, Żelazowa Wola or the Łazienki Royal Park in Warsaw. Naturally, productions of this kind are granted lower status than biographies by documentary film makers, as the former are a form of journalism (or artistic critique at best). The poetics of such reportage was recurrent: film shots of preparations, information about the number of participants, the jury verdict, fragments of winners' performances, sometimes a visit to Żelazowa Wola. All garnished with the persistent commentary sharing with the audience the altogether too obvious pride in the scale of the initiative.

What is striking on taking a closer look at the educational cinema is the absence of films about Chopin's music, the lack of attempts to analyze it and make it more accessible. Among films about art (and this is the genre of educational film we are discussing here), biography dominates over musicology. Of course,

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<sup>10</sup> See 'List Chopina do Józefa Elsnera' [Letter to Józef Elsner of 26 January 1831, Vienna], in *Korespondencja Fryderyka Chopina* [The correspondence of Fryderyk Chopin], i, 1816-1831, eds. Zofia Helman, Zbigniew Skowron, Hanna Wróblewska-Straus (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2009), 480.

<sup>11</sup> It needs to be emphasized that culture under Communism in Poland, at least up until the 1980s, was very prudish and a too sensuous description of intimate relations was not very welcome. See Krzysztof Kornacki, 'Naga władza. Polskie kino erotyczne (schyłkowego PRL-u)' [Naked authority. Polish erotic cinema (during the final days of the Polish People's Republic)], *Studia filmoznawcze* [Film Studies] 29 (Wrocław, 2008), 195-224.

Chopin's compositions are a crucial part of all the biographies, but they are so strongly connected to specific periods in the artist's life that the music was in fact used to illustrate them (as in the case of the memorable *Revolutionary Etude* associated with the November Uprising). The music itself, outside its illustrative function, was hardly ever the subject of consideration.

## Spotlight on Chopin's Music

Chopin was the central figure in documentary and educational films, while his music was subjected to historical and biographical contextualization. The artist's compositions served two functions, either as evidence (i.e. mazurkas were proof of his art's folk roots, *Revolutionary Etude* and polonaises were illustrations of his patriotic inclinations) or as background, a kind of sonic wallpaper. Feature cinema, which will be discussed later, was no exception in adopting that approach.

Music is granted more autonomy in those cinema genres which, typically, loosen the mimetic bonds between art and reality, violate or, in the case of those which are more radical, negate the cinematic function of representation. They are more likely to allow a higher degree of musical autonomy, or at least be more appreciative of music in relation to the visual side. This was the case in numerous experimental and animated films, documental impressions and even telediscs dedicated to Chopin.

The rise in the value of Chopin's music started in films which, nowadays, would not even be considered as such. These were recordings of performances of Chopin's music, practically void of any feature or background setting, i.e., specific screen concerts. Although *Chopin's Mazurkas* (1949) by Tadeusz Makarczyński present five compositions played by individual pianists in well composed minimalist scenery by means of intentional camera movements and sequenced editing, what dominates on screen are the performing musicians and their instruments. This was marked by the author, aware of the form, by putting the caption: "screen concert" in the prologue, to set the genre status. The screen concerts which were to follow (i.e. *Słowiki chórem śpiewające* [Nightingales singing in a choir] (1971) by Jan Laskowski and Janusz Cegiello, about the "Poznańskie Słowiki" [Poznań Nightingales] boys' choir or *Impresje Chopinowskie przed VIII Konkuresem* [Chopin impressions prior to the Eighth Competition] (1970) by Ludwik Perski were made with less asceticism, in several, sometimes carefully designed spaces, and with more complex visual materials (often using memorable pictures of landscape, willows, Żelazowa Wola, etc.). From the 1980s onward television has been the best medium for screen concerts.

Experimental cinema is a creative activity whose function is, by definition, a formal experiment. The autotelic aspect of such a transmission (focus on the “play”, with form or viewer’s expectations) is more important than a film’s content, irrespective of the fictional or factual character of the presented world (as in a documentary or feature film) or its didactic character (as in an educational film). The central figure in experimental cinema is the means of expression, such as, for example, editing, but also the music.

One of the main artistic aspirations of the classical experimental cinema of the Great Avant-garde period (the 1920’s and 1930’s) was to liberate cinema from mimetic limitations on the one hand (cinema as such was a photographic art) and the primacy of storytelling and acting (the means that indebted cinema to literature and theatre) on the other. Music was an ideal art for the purpose: abstract, free of world contamination, based on mathematical relations of pace and rhythm. This was what Avant-garde artists aimed at: the so-called abstract, pure or lyrical cinema (with various *Opuses*, *Rhythmuses*, *Diagonal Symphonies*, or *Symphonies of Great Cities* within its frame).<sup>12</sup> The radical experiments in that area took the form of “animated paintings”, playing with lines and picture compositions. In less extreme approaches (as in *Berlin – Symphony of Great City*) the reality was presented by means of rhythmical editing. The mildest option assumed only a shift between the film priorities: it was music not image that shaped the narration. Such an aesthetic programme allowed Chopin’s music to take over his life theme in cinema.

One of the first experiments of this kind was the film *Disc 927* realized by Germaine Dulac in France in 1928. Being a silent movie it is also, as stated at the beginning, an illustration of two *Chopin’s Preludes* (the 5th and 6th). It was therefore equally possible to perform the compositions as accompaniment or to make an attempt to imagine the music. As visual illustration, objects like a piano or gramophone and phenomena like rain were used combined by means of dissolve editing.<sup>13</sup>

*Trzy etudy Chopina* [Chopin’s three etudes] by Eugeniusz Cękałski realized in 1937 (which has unfortunately been lost) was an attempt to transform the music into diverse means of formal expression. According to a contemporary critic

[...] it was an unrealistic, impressionistic attempt to express the tone, dynamics and content of the three compositions by means of rhythm of images, light, shades, surfaces and blocks.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Alicja Helman, ‘Awangarda we francuskim i niemieckim kinie niemym’ [Avant-garde in French and German silent cinema], in *Historia kina, i, Kino nieme* [History of cinema, i, Silent cinema], eds. Tadeusz Lubelski, Iwona Sowińska, Rafał Syski (Kraków, 2009), 745-749, 766-768.

<sup>13</sup> Dissolve editing – a gradual transition from one image to another.

<sup>14</sup> www.filmowychopin – FILM.mht.

Each etude was illustrated in a different way: there was a play of figures and light in *Etude in D flat major*; illusory dance in *Etude in C minor* Op. 25 No. 12 and "symphony" of a tempest (images of lightning, rainstorm, bent trees) in the *Revolutionary Etude*.

As a matter of fact, there are not many experimental films about Chopin. Some of them will be discussed later in another context. The most radical in its formal excess seems to be a film by Józef Robakowski (an artist whose *oeuvre* belongs to cinema just as much as to video art) produced in 2004 (though already planned back in the 1980s). The film *Attention: Ligot* (realized in cooperation with Wiesław Michalak) is a visualization of *Mazurka in F minor* Op. 68 No. 4 by eight hues, which alternately, in accordance with the development of the melodic line, spread on the whole screen surface.

An applied form of art, merging the screen concert phenomenon with the achievements of Avant-garde cinema (respectively simplified), are Chopin telediscs. I mean, of course, those made within Polish cinematography structure or, possibly, Polish Television. Good examples of such telediscs may be the short films presenting music performed by the group Novi Singers, very popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Films such as *Prelude in E minor* (illustrated by a ballet dance) or *Na polskiej ziemi* [On Polish land] (as part of Polish Newsreel PKF 29b/72, showing the group in the manor house in Żelazowa Wola with the obligatory pictures of willows and relics of the composer's past in the background).

On a border line between documental and experimental cinema we find numerous so-called documental impressions. They originate from the distinguished tradition of the Great Avant-garde period (as in the works of Joris Evens) but have lost, with time, their standing and today (in the vast majority of cases) are an example of documental cinch. The specific character of documental impression consists in the exposition of a topic (be it a place, person, object) accompanied by a musical composition, where (although visual narration "orbits" round the topic) the musical component: the pace, key, instrumentarium, determine the sequence of takes, their length and the tone of film shots. A classic example of such a production is Zbigniew Skoczek's impression *Fryderyk Chopin* (1969), presenting, contrary to the title, the manor house in Żelazowa Wola, to the accompaniment of *Mazurka in C sharp minor* Op. 41 No. 1 or a similar picture entitled *Jesień w Żelazowej Woli* [Autumn in Żelazowa Wola] (1974) by Małgorzata Jedynek-Pietkiewicz. Predictably, the visual character was adapted to the lyrical nostalgic tone of compositions, hence the slow pace of dissolved editing used, the pleasant landscapes surrounding the house, gentle light, in other words: a quintessence of poetry and lyricism (to say nothing of the stereotypical manner of such presentation).

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It would be a mistake, however, to think that in experimental or experimenting cinema (which could seem detached from the socio-political aspects of reality) the cultural context had no effect on the development of the subject matter relating to Chopin. It did, and the effect was crucial. Although *Chopin's three etudes* has been lost, the very next film on that subject made by Cękalski survived. Entitled *Utwory Chopina w kolorze* [Chopin's compositions in colour] and made in 1944, the film is regarded by some critics as a remake of the lost film made in 1937. Indeed, it consists of three compositions again (*Revolutionary Etude*, *Nocturne in F sharp major* Op.15 No. 2, and *Mazurka in F minor* Op. 7 No. 3), the weather phenomena reappear (this time it is an undisturbed night sky) as well as a dance motif (though is it not illusory any more). Once more we are exposed to the abstract play of light and artistic forms. But in that last part, illustrating *Revolutionary Etude*, the takes of wincing faces and bomb explosions appear as if concluding the whole work. Undoubtedly, it is a protest song against the war that destroys both the equanimity evoked by the contemplation of nature and the dance presented in the film. The same approach was taken by Andrzej Panufnik a year later in his *Ballade in F minor* where Chopin's music is employed to illustrate the apocalypse of war. Here, for a change, shots of havoc in the aftermath of war in Warsaw were used. As we can see, the war perspective took over the experiments together with the form. Even avant-gardists had to abandon their strongholds and subordinate Chopin's music to the reality of war. This subordination meant that autonomy was once more taken away from music, to make it subject to historical interpretations. Cękalski stepped even further into the ideological approach towards Chopin's music and in his feature documentary *Żelazowa Wola* (1948) showed little Fryderyk's world in contrast to that of the smallholders' children, who, being almost equally talented were given no opportunity of musical self-realization in the serfdom system. It was not until Communism that their descendants got the chance...

As a counterbalance to this appropriation of Chopin's music by the national and historical context, Dulac's film (*Disc 927*) should be recalled. As mentioned before, some "universal" objects (a piano, gramophone, rain), associated with art or melancholy rather than with Poland, were used as an illustration of the music. A similar approach was adopted in 1936 by the renowned film director Max Ophüls who in his *La Valse Brillante de Chopin*

[...] aspired to adjust the rhythm of editing to the sound of the composition and to provide visual equivalents of the musical themes. For this purpose he placed a piano on top of a pyramid-like structure whose steps are claimed by the camera movements one by

one, while the sounds intensify, to reach the performer at last. Brailowski [a pianist – the author’s note] is filmed from all possible sides and angles: from aside, from the back, from the instrument perspective [...] In the finale, camera shows merely the musician’s palms, which seem to move unaided, as if without his participation.<sup>15</sup>

The pressure of the cultural context on those film genres which otherwise could afford more semantic liberty of matching sound and image was also manifested in aforementioned documental impressions and in animated movies produced in Poland. It became commonplace to illustrate Chopin’s music by artistic compositions (in the case of animations) or pictures (in the case of impressions) presenting Polish nature, especially the obligatory Mazovian plain landscape with branchy willows. Chopin’s music, regardless of its potential opulence of imagery, or of how (even only through the titles) suggestive of visual transcription it is (as in case of the nocturnes, mazurkas, waltzes or polonaises), would not have to be subject to the impoverishing formula of illustration (as in the series of animations made by TV Animated Film Studio in Poznań in the mid-1990s) by poetical soft takes of ballet dancers, falling autumn leaves, carriages hurtling through the Mazovian scenery (and taking Chopin to Paris) or murky expressionistic colours of nocturnes. Screen presentation of Chopin’s music in the native productions is full of iconographic clichés and pleonasms, forming a schematic visual code that can be automatically associated with the works of the genius composer. In contrast to this formula, Dulac’s Chopin, in the film mentioned above, is a quintessence of music and/or melancholy instead of being a “Pole”, “Mazovia”, “willow tree” or “folk dance”. But the tendency is still strong in numerous documentary and educational films, which are forced to illustrate the abstract contents of its commentary (about Chopin’s patriotism, folksiness, home-sickness, etc.). Those situations, very often, evoke the Polish landscape almost automatically.

An interesting case of (seeming) liberation from the pressure of Mazovia is the film *Recital Chopinowski w Dusznikach* [The Chopin recital in Duszniki] (1947) described by Iwona Sowińska. The film was an account of the first festival in that Sudeten town, where in the past young Chopin underwent medical treatment. Here, for a change, it was the Sudeten landscape which provided an illustration of the composer’s music. However, as pointed out by Sowińska, this was simply a symbolic way of appropriation of the lands that had just been taken over from Germany (the so called Regained Territories). If “Chopin” equals “Poland” then the music heard over the Sudeten scenery was, in fact, a form of their intense Polonisation. This demonstrates that even an attempt to challenge the cultural stereotype could have been

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<sup>15</sup> [www.filmowychopin.pl](http://www.filmowychopin.pl) (Accessed on seventh September 2010).

motivated by some temporary, political (though, no doubt, sincere) intentions of the author.<sup>16</sup>

## Feature Cinema: The Chopin of American Spectacle

Feature film, in terms of its social function, is an ambiguous genre. Due to its range it seems to be an ideal medium to present the figure of Chopin. This, very often turns out to be true for directors, producers and viewers, and very rarely for chopinologists, which applies to both genre and auteur cinema. In the former, the biography of the composer is subject to the pressure of pop culture spectacle whereas in the latter it is subject to the author's idiosyncrasy (as in *Błękitna nuta* [La note bleue] by Andrzej Żuławski, which will be discussed later). The former, seeking commercial success, implies domination of schemata within its poetics as well as domination of the social stereotypes to which it refers; the latter glorifies the primacy of an individual author and individual form (challenging the prevailing schema). Of course, this dichotomy is deliberately exaggerated here, as it needs to be seen rather as two opposite poles, with numerous different strategies in between, of adopting or escaping the dominant schema.

Irrespective of the genre, be it a biographical film (which is usually more factual when it comes to the artist's biography) or a melodrama, popular among films about Chopin, here we are looking at fiction, which is an essential element of the definition of feature cinema. In view of the above we are, or need to be (having in mind its imaginary status), more understanding towards feature films (even if their plot is based on facts). A fictional story cannot be judged as strictly as a "pure" scientific discourse (of documental cinema or academic textbooks). Therefore, though a "joyful creativity" of filmmakers may often be disturbing we tend to accept it as the artists' special right. We would be less tolerant towards it in a popular science film whose status imposes far-reaching limitations on its producers.

It is significant that in feature cinema the smallest degree of social responsibility for the correspondence between the plot and the facts goes hand in hand with the biggest (running into millions of viewers) reach. Feature cinema is that form of audiovisual broadcast which a person who knows nothing or very little about Chopin uses most often. This poses the question of what is worse from the perspective of social pedagogy: lack of knowledge

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<sup>16</sup> Iwona Sowińska, 'Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin', in *Chopin – filmowe motywy* [Chopin – film motives], catalogue attached to the DVD film packet published by FilMOTEKA Narodowa [National Film Library] (Warszawa, 2010) (no page numbers).

about a character (which in the case of Chopin seems to be quite impossible), or knowledge founded on some potentially fictional biography?

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The specific character of feature cinema cannot be reduced to its aesthetics, to the fictional status of a presented world. It needs to be seen in a broad cultural perspective. It is the social life and its requirements where the simplifications and far-fetched fictionalizations of the composer's screened biographies originate from. Feature cinema is the king of all film genres not due to it being fictional (although people delight in fairy-tales) but because (or also because) it is the most dramatic (emotionally involving) and stereotyped. Experts in pop culture are perfectly aware that the more dramatic the story, the more passionate the involvement of the masses. Hence, feature films about Chopin, in the vast majority of cases, reached for those biographical facts which had the right dramatic potential (departure from Poland related to the November Uprising, and the love life, particularly with Sand in the Storm and Stress period). It is symptomatic, in the light of the above, that no feature film has ever been produced about the English period preceding the death of the composer, which in my opinion is equally, if not even more interesting in terms of psychological complexity.

Experts in pop culture also know that the commercial success of a movie is a result of reinforcing, not challenging, the mental stereotypes. The majority of biographies present the life of a specific character, placed in historical time, only on the surface. Most of them, especially the mass culture, large budget entertainment films, tell universal "fairy-tales about people", stories of *semper et ubique*, existential pop cultural myths, where what is particular (crucial for individual biography) is not as important as what is recurrent and common for many biographies. Human life is boring (according to film screenwriters) except for dramatic episodes and all that concerns people in general. The same rules are applied to Chopin in the majority of feature productions. History is only used there as a background, a costume worn by a story about universal cultural myths: the myth of love (the relationship with George Sand, which absolutely dominates in quantitative terms in studies on the Chopin theme); the pseudo dramatic myth of a great artist, and the patriotic myth. Nearly all the films about Chopin could be placed within the sphere of the pop cultural myths listed above. Two films, however, were realized according to different strategies. One of them was an attempt to make use of Chopin's life as an exemplification of Marxist historiosophy (the film *Młodość Chopina* [Chopin's youth]), the other one (*Błękitna nota* [La note bleue]), is the only truly *auteur* work about the composer. And, as most *auteur* films, says as much about Chopin as about the author himself.

Apart from dramatizing biographies and fitting in universal psychosocial stereotypes, biographical cinema (as a historical genre) shows a tendency to view the past from the perspective of the current social and political situation.<sup>17</sup> Andrzej Wajda used to say that historical films are nonexistent. Obviously, he was not saying that the action of such films was not set in the past (from this perspective his view would be unsupported). What the author of *Katyń* meant was the process of “contemporizing the history”, which is always interpreted from the perspective of present day socio-political reality. In feature cinema this process has the status of an imperative. No film producer, however broad-minded, will light-heartedly invest millions in a project unable to captivate viewers’ interest “here and now”. To captivate viewers’ interest, a film must have specific social capacity, *ergo* fit into their current needs (other arts, the low budget ones, allow the author to write historical novels at will, even if they are to be shelved). Historical cinema looks out for the issues that are likely to excite the public, due to their social dimensions (as in the aforementioned *Katyń*) or current political matters.

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A typical example of dramatizing a biography, invoking both pop cultural myths and current history issues is provided by two titles: *A song to Remember* (1945) by Charles Vidor and *Chopin. Pragnienie miłości* [Chopin. Desire for love] (2002) by Jerzy Antczak. The first one, nominated for an Oscar in 6 categories, is (unfortunately, according to chopinologists) the most famous picture about Chopin in world cinema.

Presented below is Chopin’s life according to the summary of the main points of the plot:

- Chopin lives in Żelazowa Wola, where already as a little boy he is under the tender care of professor Józef Elsner.
- Elsner receives a letter from Pleyel who, having learnt about the young genius, invites him to Paris. Unfortunately, for financial reasons Chopin cannot accept the invitation.
- A few years later, Mikołaj Chopin reproaches Elsner for letting Fryderyk participate in secret conspiratorial meetings.
- Chopin performs during a dinner at Novosilcov’s (as Paganini had done earlier). After Duke Constantine’s arrival Chopin refuses to play, saying: “I will not perform for the Tsar’s butcher”.
- As a result of this manifestation, Chopin has to escape from Poland and he leaves with professor Elsner.

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<sup>17</sup> Rafał Marszałek, *Filmowa pop-historia* [Pop history of film] (Kraków, 1984), 64-128.

- In Paris, at Pleyel's, Elsner shows the letter written 10 years earlier but the music publisher is not interested. Fortunately, by coincidence, Liszt appears at Pleyel's and he plays Chopin's music with the utmost admiration.
- Pleyel organizes a concert for Chopin, which turns out to be a failure; Chopin is unable to perform, having learnt about the outbreak of uprising in Poland (presumably the November Uprising). The reviews are crushing, all except the one by George Sand.
- George Sand and Franz Liszt prepare an intrigue: during a meeting attended by aristocracy, Liszt is to play Chopin's music in complete darkness. Once the lights are on it turns out that Chopin played instead of Liszt. The audience is surprised and fascinated. George Sand triumphs.
- Chopin, against Elsner's advice, departs with Sand for Majorca (Sand has a house there, the children are not going with them). Then they go to No-hant.
- Chopin, under Sand's influence, neglects Elsner. He does not meet him during the teacher's visits.
- Another uprising breaks out in Poland (difficult to identify). Konstancja Gładkowska, Chopin's former friend, comes to France, which rouses Chopin's conscience.
- Against Sand's advice, Chopin plans a concert tour of European capitals, to raise funds for the Polish insurgents.
- The exhausting series of concerts lead to Chopin's health deteriorating.
- Chopin dies. Sand informed about Chopin's serious condition does not stop sitting for her portrait by Eugène Delacroix.

Chopinologists must be shaking their heads reading this summary, I suppose. What nonsense! But it is pictures like these (and not reliable documentary biographies) that shape the general view of the composer's image. Apart from the departure for Paris (excluding the reasons) and the acquaintance with some people, including Sand (but not the anatomy of their relationship) nothing is accordant with the historical facts. And still Vidor's film fits into the social text of biography (widespread image of the composer). As mentioned before, in feature cinema (particularly genre cinema) the "truth" of stereotypes takes over the truth of facts. The film is expected to say what the viewer already knows.

Vidor's work applies, first of all, the standard dramatic schemata (recurrent rules of plot organization used to induce specific emotional response) prevailing mainly in American cinema. They are meant to simplify both the process of creation and the reception of a film. However, from the perspective of historical truth, they simplify presented reality, reducing it to a couple of key principles. One of the most important principles in American cinema is a clearly defined conflict, a point of reference for the main plot organization.

This is exactly what we are exposed to in Vidor's film. Conflict drives the plot: first, it is the clash between Chopin and Grand Duke Constantine, then the conflict between Elsner and Sand. In this part Chopin is, at least up to a point, a passive element of the game, an object rather than a subject of affairs. The next principle brought into play is the personalization of conflict, which results in a specific economy of film characters. In Vidor's film, Chopin's path could not be crossed by too many characters, as this would leave the viewers lost and/or incapable of emotional involvement. Therefore, episodes of Chopin's life provoked by many different people had to be tacked to one (such as Sand), or at most a few, protagonists. Those, in turn, had to represent simple, straightforward values. For that reason Elsner, contrary to the historical truth, is to be the embodiment of freedom ideals from Chopin's birth to death, whereas Sand, accompanying Chopin throughout his stay in Paris, is to emerge as the only author of his success and as the embodiment of human egoism. Yet another of the key principles of film is the Cinderella myth, so characteristic of American cinema dramaturgy, in the form of the Parisian triumph. The bigger the fall, the more spectacular the victory. This same, underestimated Chopin, whose first public performance in Paris was a failure, achieves a great victory owing to Sand's cunning trick! Which of us does not delight in those climactic moments of human victories, this diapason of emotions and enthusiasm, regardless of whether it is Chopin or an American football star who wins. And since we are talking about the main character, the one portrayed in Vidor's film is, in line with the label *made in USA*, extremely active and annoyingly smiling. Let alone the fact that there is no physical resemblance between Chopin and Cornel Wild (playing his part) whatsoever.

The dramaturgic schemata overlap with certain common social ideas related not only to Chopin himself but also to the hierarchy of values preferred in American society, as well as to the status of an artist. Vidor's film reinforces two most important stereotypes of common knowledge about the great composer: that of his active patriotism (finally leading to his death) and the destructive relationship with George Sand. Was he not a patriot? Certainly, in his own way, he was. Was his romance with Sand not "strange" (in terms of a psychological relationship)? Certainly, it was. However, it is just the tip of the iceberg, which for centuries has been described in romances and nowadays in magazines for women. Moreover, for the American screenwriters the imperative of national freedom was indisputable. Therefore, though it was contrary to the facts, they made both Elsner and Chopin depositaries of that freedom. Was it of no interest to Chopin? Definitely, it was, but in a far more complex way than that presented in the picture, void of illogical patriotic manifestations; the authors do not explore the intricate structure of Chopin's views on social issues (he was rather conservative), do not attempt to clarify why, despite his supposed concerns about his homeland, he never tried to return

there. Polish history itself is also left at the authors' discretion (what is the uprising that Chopin raises funds for during his concert tour?) The character of the composer is also shown in a conventional way. A pop cultural, melodramatic protagonist needs to have a destructive passion, preferably leading to death (this same pattern is applied to painters, as in one of the most famous productions about Vincent Van Gogh, the American *Lust for Life*, to mention just one).

A film like *A Song to Remember* introduced an "American Chopin". A character full of passion, bearing no physical resemblance to Chopin, actively fighting for national freedom and dying for it, romantically in love. It was of no importance that the plot was in contradiction to the fundamental biographical facts, and that the character structure was completely at odds with the personality and temperament of the Polish genius. Chopin was not that essential for the movie. He could easily have been replaced by some other musician. He simply realized the standard, commercially effective, universal schema of artist's life "made in USA".

There is one more aspect indicative of how American the Vidor's film is. It goes without saying that the Hollywood cinema, genre cinema (under the guise of entertainment) is the most effective means of imposing a specific ideology upon society.<sup>18</sup> Vidor's film could not have been different in this respect, the plot pivots mainly on the confrontation of duties towards community and self, patriotism and privacy, love of a country and for a woman. The sphere of social values is represented by Elsner (which is a paradox, as he came from Austria), the sphere of individual values is granted to Sand. Vidor realized this film in particular historical circumstances of the end of a war; the war that ruled out any individual happiness before the collective one was established. Chopin was, therefore, an ambassador of the Polish matter, since Poland was one of the allies fighting for freedom. Paradoxically, Chopin made a sacrifice similar to that of the soldiers at Monte Cassino.

The clearly didactic message of the film turned out to be not good enough for Vidor though. Thus, not only the individual happiness came under his attack, but women also fell victim to it. The mid-1940s were the beginning of cinema noir (the so-called black cinema) which resulted in the realization of many types of broadly understood action cinema (criminal, detective, police films). The pessimistic, immoral, productions, full of violence, were also a serious "vote of no confidence" towards women. This could be traced back to the shift of social relations during the Second World War: the families and

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<sup>18</sup> See Tadeusz Lubelski, 'Redaktorzy "Cahiers du Cinema" odczytują kino hollywoodzkie' [Editors of "Cahiers du Cinema" read Hollywood cinema], in *Sztuka filmowej interpretacji. Antologia przekładów* [The Art of film interpretation], ed. Wiesław Godzic (Kraków, 1988), 143-146; Charles Altman, 'Towards the theory of film genre', trans. by Alicja Helman as 'W stronę teorii gatunku filmowego', *Kino* 6 (1987), 18-22.

jobs left by men going to war were taken over by women. What was a necessity at that time, soon afterwards transformed into a fear of emancipating women, seen as gaining masculine traits and becoming aware of their increasing social status and rising power. Screens swarmed with *femme fatale*. Vidor had his share in the creation of this collective portrait by realizing one of the most famous films noir, *Gilda*, with Rita Hayworth, a symbol of sex appeal and men's destruction, in the main role. It is difficult to avoid the impression that Merle Oberon, playing the part of Sand, in a specific *femme fatale* way sets a trap for Fryderyk (which was easy to concoct from Sand's biography). Sand's doings on the screen were additionally reinforced by the conception of her acting (cold, cynical, keeping her distance and spoilt) and make-up. This is how *A Song to Remember* fits in the specific psychosocial context of the Second World War.

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The romance with Sand, as I mentioned before, was the most important motif for film chopinology. It was the starting point of numerous melodramas (as the one discussed above), a somewhat bitter romantic comedy *Improwizacja* [Improvisation] or of the psychological drama films (*Jutrzenka. Zima na Majorce* [Dawn. Winter in Majorca], or especially *La note bleue*). In terms of genre classification, Vidor's production belongs to melodrama rather than "biographical film". Melodrama is the emotional bedrock of cinema, which in an uninterrupted form has survived till today. This can be demonstrated by *Chopin. Desire for love* (2002), by Jerzy Antczak. The genre, has two (among many others) fundamental structural features: firstly, it aims at an ostentation of feelings; secondly, it presents them in the most conventionalized form possible. The protagonists of melodrama are under constant emotional pressure, which means that emerging feelings are, all of them, dramatized and exaggerated (by acting strategies, scenery or frame settings). In fact, melodrama creates a narration of feelings which are the (only) focus of the plot composition. There is no space here for a moment of uninvolved observation, a little action slowdown or even boredom, when presenting the world gets the upper hand of the action. There will be no minimalist acting, lack of movement or lessening of characters' activity either. Nothing is accidental, everything is functional. The flow of feelings forces swift, often simplified, shifts in plot of the "the character suffers", "the character is in love" kind. These were the rules used in Vidor's film. Exactly the same ones will be applied in the film *Chopin. Desire for love*, produced over a half-century later, whose formula refers to the classical American cinema.

It seems as if Antczak and Jadwiga Barańska (the authors of the screenplay) might have had plans for a more ambitious film. A closer look at the

script gives the impression that they tried to combine two opposites: biographical truth with worn out melodramatic schemata. "Everything will be complicated there" the director said before the production started. Everyone knows: intricacy promotes the art. I would say however: everything is inconsistent there. The film breaks into two parts, the first until the meeting with George Sand, the second afterwards. The first part is a national melodrama whose narrator focuses on Chopin's life and his patriotic attitude. The second one is an attempt to create a psychological drama around the conflict of four personalities: Chopin, Sand, her son Maurice and her daughter Solange. Here Chopin appears to be an egoist devoid of empathy; Maurice - jealous of his mother, unfulfilled artist with an inferiority complex; Solange - full of hatred towards her own mother, a competitor for Chopin's love. And amongst them the poor Sand - mother, caretaker, confidante and lover (in this role, convincing, as far as it was possible, Danuta Stenka). The film was an attempt to counterbalance the opinion about Aurora Dudevant, generally unfavourable in Poland, and let "the real Chopin" appear.

In effect, the first part presents an unshakeable, strong individual, the second part, a capricious one. But the description of both, Chopin-patriot and Chopin-the unbearable, keeps irritating with its references to melodramatic (national and emotional) clichés and poor, declarative dialogues. As mentioned before, melodrama, at least the classic one to which the Antczaks refer, employs the most conventionalized form as well as a common plot and iconographic patterns to display feelings. This results in presenting a Chopin full of patriotic affection, who, contrary to the historical facts, rebels against playing for Duke Constantine, openly refuses to do so and, in effect, has to run from Poland; we also have hamletic lines from Piotr Adamczyk (playing Chopin) about the approaching uprising while he escapes like a thief. The most peculiar scene is the one in which Chopin listens to the *Revolutionary Etude* played by Liszt, while imagining a brutal intrusion of the Duke's assassins in his parents' Varsovian apartment, and picturing the keys of his piano being destroyed by the soldiers' butt-ends (*Fortepian Chopina!* [Chopin's piano]). Further on, we have Chopin in torment due to the arrogance and ignorance of the world which does not recognize his talent (the pattern of unrecognized master), and his words: "I did not manage to sell a single work!". Desperate, he is determined to leave for America but a fortuitous invitation from Baroness Rothschild, and Liszt's performance, make him triumph (again, as in Vidor's film, "from zero to hero"). Similarly he suffers from love. The letter with the refusal from Maria Łobodzińska is read by Chopin sitting on a bench in the rain, which results in a serious illness. The first meeting with George Sand is held in the commonplace convention of illumination (their eyes meet for a second in the street). Chopin is lonely and longs for his family; how to illustrate this? Obviously, by his raving about a homely Christmas Eve and a

poignant Christmas carol. A handful of joys are visualized by the recurrent motif of blithe running through sunny meadows and golden fields, while the folk inspired consecutive mazurkas are illustrated by willows, the scenery of the Mazovian plains and storks in a majestic glide over the landscape (making the author of this article weary of any idyllic landscape in the movie).

While it was natural, in a way, for Vidor to miss certain historical facts due to the specific character of American cinema and the time of production, for Jerzy Antczak it was the context of the Polish cinema in the year 2000 which affected the production. He, in turn, tried to incorporate the elements of the *auteur* style of filmmaking (as this was the inspiration of all the directors making their debut under Communism) into a formula of great film spectacle. The idea proved successful in the most famous of his films, *Noce i dnie* [Days and Nights]. However, the latter was based on a novel written by Maria Dąbrowska, whereas *Chopin. Desire for love* is an *auteur* screenplay of Antczak and Barańska, and the difference shows on screen. The authors wanted to do the exactly the same thing again, combining psychological drama with national melodrama. And the result of this was tauntingly referred to by some, Chopin. Desire for qualm.

## Feature Cinema: the Chopin of ideology

The films analysed above were realized within the framework of the commercial cinema. In the system of state control (which Communist Poland was), films were made in a different manner, especially in the most totalitarian period of Stalinism. The biggest production ever realized about Chopin was *Młodość Chopina* [Chopin's youth] (1951) by Aleksander Ford (released in 1952). The film is much more in line with historical facts. But, at the same time, it is a form of Marxist historiography discourse. Nearly all the character's activities (Chopin is played by Czesław Wołłejko) are presented with regard to their socio-political rank. Apart from the Gładkowska thread, the film is devoid of what might be called individual, private sphere. Or else, the sphere of the artist's personal life is entirely subject to the national liberation and class struggle issues.

The realization of the film resembled a campaign lasting a number of years, which at that time, could only be undertaken by the unquestionable tsar of Polish cinematography, Aleksander Ford. Huge funds were invested, from the very start of the conceptual stage, throughout the production (meticulous scenery and costume reconstruction) till the promotion, which was completed by the publication of a book *Film o młodym Chopinie* [Film about young Chopin] (1953) written by Jerzy Giżycki, which was quite exceptional

not only at that time but in the whole of Polish film historiography.<sup>19</sup> Taking up the Chopin theme, irrespective of the director's individual aspirations, was of great importance for the newly formed Communist state. Chopin was the only (beside Kopernik) Pole of epoch-making significance for world culture (a year earlier saw the release of *Warszawska premiera* [The Warsaw première], a film about Stanisław Moniuszko, but obviously its reach was limited to the national cinema) and, at the same time, he was a patriot (the theme had the national placet, so treasured by the contemporary authorities). Furthermore, most importantly, Chopin's works could be derived from folk music, emphasizing the healthy, plebeian core of his art. There was just one condition – the plot had to be limited to Chopin's Polish youth and devoid of the later stages of his life, their refinement and romance. From the perspective of Marxist historiography it was too bourgeois (literally, as the July Monarchy was a period of the increase of the status of that class).

In 1948 an international competition for the best screenplay for the movie was opened, presenting the participants with exorbitant requirements. The future film was supposed to combine the qualities of drama with biographical and historical information, give prominence to the music, be relevant and, in addition, carry the proper ideological message. Since none of the competitors satisfied the requirements, the screenplay was written by the director himself on the basis of selected competition texts, including one created by Jerzy Broszkiewicz.

The period of 1825-1831 was chosen as the time frame. Was it important in Chopin's life? Undoubtedly, it was. The most important perhaps? This depends on the perspective from which we look at it. From the perspective of art, regardless of the value of the teenager's compositions, it is not. Psychologically, the relationship with George Sand would be much more representative of Chopin's complex personality. For the description of cultural and universal regularities of the epoch, his stay in Paris at the time of the July Monarchy would be more interesting. Obviously, in 1950 the Communist perspective was obligatory, therefore selecting the five year period (which, in fact, was limited to Chopin's last year in Poland, as the 16-year-old Frycek [Fryderyk] appears only in the prologue) seems to be justified. Not only for the historical reasons, but also in view of the requirements of social realism dramaturgy, to which the poetics of Ford's production belongs.

Adopting the years 1830-1831 as the dominant time of the action enabled an epic presentation of the main socio-political ideas of the epoch: the confrontation of the Romantics with the Classicists, and social reform supporters

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<sup>19</sup> Jerzy Giżycki, *Film o młodym Chopinie. Problemy twórcze, realizacja, fakty i dokumenty* [Film about young Chopin. Creative problems, realization, fact and documents] (Warszawa, 1953).

(Polish Jacobins) with aristocracy. All of the above was expressed in the scenes of the preparations for the national independence struggle (the November Uprising) and the first protests of the rising working-class movement (the Viennese and Parisian sequences). The blueprint for the construction of Chopin's character was imposed by specific Marxist anthropology. Human personality is utterly determined by the social conditions affecting it (Friedrich Engel's famous: "Social being determines consciousness"). To adapt this onto the screen, the protagonist has, first of all, to be deprived of any exceptional and unique features (which results in a multiplicity of subsidiary plots, and secondary and tertiary characters whose appearance can only be justified by their social function and fame, such as Joachim Lelewel, Maurycy Mochnacki or Duke Adam Czartoryski, all of them being just personifications of certain political ideas). In these circumstances Chopin became (merely) a Cicerone in the museum of nineteenth-century ideas, brought into play to represent historical materialism and dialectical struggle between the reactionary and radical movements. Secondly, the oscillation between the private and the collective has to be properly reflected on the screen, hence so many scenes where Chopin and historical characters are shown together. It may be achieved by parallel editing, while maintaining the synchronicity of action, or by a stronger subjection of poetics to the dialectics, which is travelling, where in one long take the camera shows Chopin and then some historical characters of his time. Specific means of expression (travelling as the technical basis of the editing in the camera) is chosen knowingly and for a reason: the private (Chopin) cannot exist without the public (preparations for the uprising, manifestations, etc.).

Choosing the 1825-1831 period resulted also from the rules of soc-realist cinema, whose favourite protagonist was a young one. In the contemporary productions his rank was close to that of a master: a party activist or an officer of the Security Forces. The latter were exemplary of the balance of the rudimentary Communist character traits: doctrinal zeal combined with strong will and, at the same time, an awareness (knowledge) of the dangers involved in the struggle with the opponents. A master was, therefore, a perfect embodiment of emotional, volitional and rational traits. A young disciple, though full of faith and will, lacked the knowledge of the rules in force, which in this case meant: ideology. One could ask: how did this relate to Chopin? In accordance with the Marxist doctrine, the principles of historical materialism were projected onto the past, in the search for the fundamental conflict between reactionary and radical powers. In historical cinema this was expressed through strict Manichaeism (supported by the acting strategies and appropriate make-up, so that the difference between the good and evil characters was clear from the very start). Undeniably, Chopin in his heart was drawn to insurgents, romantics and radicals and hostile towards (ugly in their appear-

ance) collaborators, classicists and aristocracy. He is, therefore, full of faith which, coupled with the emotions, is expressed in his music. What he lacks is the knowledge, which is why he is so often shown listening to the activists. The most important of them, the master, is Lelewel. Chopin, as presented in Ford's film, is a disciple. Such was his contemporary status, but it was also the most characteristic function of the soc-realist cinema. Didacticism was of the utmost importance.

## Feature Cinema: the Chopin of the Artists

As has already been said repeatedly, the Chopin – Sand relationship dominates quantitatively in the pre-war productions about the composer. In 1989 *Improvisation* by James Lapin was made in the formula of intelligent entertainment cinema. A very particular moment of the Chopin – Sand relationship was chosen there, the moment when they met. Aurora Dudevant, sincerely in love and clearly endowed with the director's liking, courts Chopin, played by Hugh Grant. The actor's child-man *emploi* in British cinema was bestowed on Chopin in *Improvisation*. The film combines the lightness of a love schema (devoid of melodramatic pathos, slightly ironic as in romantic comedy, to which genre the film actually belongs) with the *auteur* zest, unveiled in the film's ending, when Chopin and Sand go to Majorca to celebrate their love. And it is well-known how this will end.

*La note bleue* by Żuławski does not provide the viewer with such genre facilitation. After all, anyone even vaguely familiar with the works of the director of *The Devil*, must be aware of the fact that they are never easy to absorb, due to the very eloquent (and unusual in the zero style cinema) and often hermetic means of expression. Piotr Kletowski wrote: "Żuławski's discourse embraces pictures full of quivering, violation, a death dance. The lives of his film characters are defined by convulsive struggle, excess, violence, cruelty, crying, ugliness where beauty appears only for a split second"<sup>20</sup>. His film about Chopin is made accordingly. Żuławski's style of filmmaking is, therefore, profoundly *auteur*, if this can be measured by style recognisability. Furthermore, if an artist makes a film about another artist, they actually do it to make a film about themselves. Therefore, it is their own conditions, tensions and artistic conceptions that they present in the other artist's biography. This is what Żuławski does and any potential doubt as to this motivation is dis-

<sup>20</sup> Piotr Kletowski, 'Najważniejsze to kochać. O filmowej twórczości Andrzeja Żuławskiego' [Love is the most important thing. About the film works of Andrzej Żuławski] in *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 46 (2004), 94.

pelled in the last in-depth interview with the director.<sup>21</sup> Presenting Chopin's conformist social life and his aristocratic entertainment (of which he often complained in his letters) he refers to his own experience:

If you want to be Romek [Roman] Polański, firstly you need to force your way through, deceive everyone, lie like hell in all those salons, pretend to be one of them, find some delight in it, to then make films completely different from what is expected of you. And to watch them being rejected. This is Delacroix and Chopin's way. You need to render them your due. We do not live on nothing. If you make a film you need millions of dollars. Who is to give them and due to what miracle? You need to pretend to be one of them. As Chopin pretended to be one of those refined ones. And you also need to be interested in it rather than against it, otherwise nothing will happen. Every experience is worth your interest. My participation in elite life, the fact of moving amongst the richest, at some point of my life, is interesting. Those who were not given the chance are simply poorer in their experience. Moreover, I think Delacroix and Chopin, being perfectly aware of their actions, constantly rendering their dues, floating these murky waters were, at the same time, exceptional risk-takers. Because their art was risky. It was new then, crossing the border of acceptability, often misunderstood and not always well received.<sup>22</sup>

It is worth adding that in another part of the interview Żuławski openly despised the "salon revolution" represented by George Sand (likening it to the "caviar revolution" of the communizing French intellectuals).

As shown above, not only did Żuławski draw an analogy with the experience of emigration in his presentation of Chopin's life, but he also emphasized the courage of Avant-garde art. Reading this, it is difficult to avoid the impression that Żuławski, whose style of filmmaking never was the easiest one, refers to his own French experience.

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This reconnaissance into the realm of Chopin films indicates that there are well trodden paths there, as well as those which have been hardly used. Although the over-representation of certain stereotyped images of the composer (the artist – patriot), occurrences and situations (the relationship with Sand), musical and visual codes (the Mazovian landscape) can be fully understood in the light of a director's biographical context, romantic tradition or the composer's status in Polish culture, I still await a filmmaker who will explore the last, English, period of Chopin's life, which both psychologically, and in terms

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<sup>21</sup> Żuławski: *przewodnik "Krytyki Politycznej"* [Żuławski: "Politics Critique" Guide], in-depth interview conducted by Piotr Kletowski and Piotr Marecki (Warszawa, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

of the status of a dying artist, is (in my view) the most interesting. Or at least equally intriguing as the other periods in the life of a character so full of contradictions. While it is true that a documentary about this episode has already been made, I await a feature film, the king of the film genres.<sup>23</sup>

*Translated by Krzysztof Kornacki*

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<sup>23</sup> Mariusz Malinowski, *Ostatnia podróż* [The last journey] (1999).

