



Symbolic “Iconic Sites” vs. “Quotidian Worlds”—Industrial Landscapes in 1960s Polish Cinema

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Abstract:

This paper examines industrial landscapes in Polish Cinema in the 60s. Upper Silesian scenery is considered not as a mere background but an essential element that constructs the cinematographic narration. Historic, economic, and socio-cultural context is brought up to draw attention to the propagandizing role of cinema in the 60s. The category of “iconic sites” proposed by Tim Edensor is introduced to analyze cinematographic depictions of Upper Silesia. Movies show the processes of industrialization framed by the strict artistic rules proposed by the Polish People Republic’s officials. The analyzed examples show the adoption of a distanced outsider’s perspective that is based on geographical and cultural orientation points. The propaganda images seen as “iconic sites” are confronted with another interpretative category proposed by Edensor, “quotidian worlds,” constituted by products of grassroots practices, focused on capturing the space of everyday experiences (surroundings) from the perspective of a citizen.

Keywords:

industrial landscape, Upper Silesia, Polish cinema, iconic sites, quotidian worlds

Industrial landscape is a specific type of cultural landscape—processed as a result of conscious human activity, strongly marked by its interference. Geographers as characteristic features of this type of landscape classify occurrences of “densely built-up areas with its typical industrial architecture: presence of high chimneys and/or hoisting towers and mine shafts, large-scale production halls, cooling systems, blast furnaces and coking plant facilities, slagheaps” (Chmielewski, Myga-Piątek, and Solon 2015, 398). This type of material topography implies ambivalent attitudes towards landscapes, which are perceived as full of contradictions, on the one hand progressive, modern, arousing admiration, and on the other hand

deformed, devastated, human and inhuman at the same time. It constitutes the quintessence of modern human dreams of ruling the world, remaining at the same time a symbol of dehumanization, a collapse of faith in civilization's development and loss of confidence in the ability to conduct a rational co-existence of nature and culture on Earth. Polysemy, indicating a multiplicity of meanings and different directions of interpretation, makes the industrial landscape an attractive object of exploration via art. The popularity of this motive results from the observation mentioned above, especially in visual and audio-visual arts from the 19th and 20th centuries (lithography, painting, photography, films).

In Poland—just like in most countries of the so-called Eastern Bloc and somewhat differently than was the case in Western European countries, which were characterized by different dynamics of industrial activity (Kaliński 1995, 161)—industrialization reached its peak in the years following World War II. The country, which in the pre-war period based its economy on agriculture, began working through an intensive transformation, changing into an industrial country. The aspirations of communist authorities are reflected in the rhetoric used in the subsequent socialistic plans of economic development. This narration was summed up by Wojciech Musiał, who wrote that the Six-Year Plan was the first one entirely implemented in Poland within the frame of centrally planned economy. The economic and social restructuring specified in the Six-Year Plan were dictated by a general doctrine, where both components were inseparably linked together—social revolution became a part of industrialization. As Musiał puts it, in different words, a state industry became a base of systemic changes (Musiał 2013, 196). The greatest intensity of industrialization, connected with the location of resource deposits, occurred in Upper Silesia. In a relatively short time, this region became a true “Eldorado” attracting a large group of workers from the whole country searching for jobs in the emerging new foundries, mines, and factories. As a result of the intensified migration, as well as industrial development and intensive urbanization, Upper Silesia had undergone thorough changes of material (landscape transformations due to development of new industrial and housing facilities) and socio-cultural nature (confrontation of languages, behavior patterns, culture). Thus, it became an exemplary model of a place developed in pursuit of “a better future” according to the spirit of socialist ideology.

The subjects of interest in this article are Polish films from the 60s with Upper Silesia in the background. The visualization of the industrial landscape, however, is not limited to the scenery for the narrative; rather, it is an essential element that significantly influences the character of these works. Tadeusz Lubelski, who wrote about Polish cinema from the 60s and its socio-cultural contexts, referred to the ambiguity of this period. On the one hand, the Gomułka era is characterized by dogmatism, “a strong-arm government,” ubiquitous “ugliness, mistrust and constant surveillance” (Lubelski 2009, 235). On the other hand, it is an era of relative peace

(stagnation described as “our little stability”). Accordingly, film makers, facing the need to produce works that would fit into the current doctrine, could at the same time benefit from moderate freedom—“the margin of freedom” (Lubelski, 2009, 236)—which was brought about in artistic life after October 1956. In the cinematography of the 60s, I try to detect the works which deliberately, although in many different ways, use the forms characteristic of industrial landscapes.

‘Iconic Sites’

Relations between geography and socio-cultural space are of paramount importance in forming a collective identity. Landscapes always constitute a reflection of social, economic, and cultural identities, being at the same time an expression of the ideological priorities of the privileged layers of society. While analyzing the industrial landscapes of Great Britain, Paul Belford stated that they evoke “an important part of the iconography of new English identity” (2009, 30), “an identity focused on industrial production and global exportation” (2009, 21). According to the researcher, the industrial landscape, developing in England approximately since the 16th century, was deliberately engaged in the creation of a new society—a community oriented toward industrial activities. The gradual departure from the old world and the creation of a new one in the spirit of modernization had its spatial dimension and entailed the need to create modern places. Belford mentioned the English industrial magnates (such as Brookes of Coalbrookdale) interested in developing new industrial “ideal places” (Belford 2009, 30), being a visible sign of incoming capitalist relations of production. In the industrial landscape of the Polish People’s Republic in the 60s—similarly—the realization of a new vision can be seen; however, in this case it is related to the introduction of a communist regime into Polish reality. More precisely, it was aiming at implementing the idea of merging the social and national doctrine. On the one hand, it meant strengthening the mono-ethnic structures of the country and confirming the borders established shortly after the war. To serve that goal, the visual emphasis was put on the cultural and historical elements in space. They were maintaining the mythical continuity of, for example, pro-Polish attitudes of pre-war Silesian workers or the immemorial Polish identity of so-called “Regained Lands.” On the other hand, efforts were made to promote the vision of society embodied by the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the industrial landscape was simply ideal for achieving this aim through its implications concerning employment relationship, oppression of the workers, and the class conflict.

According to Tim Edensor, a unique national topography/geography each time strengthens lively presence in the landscape of the “iconic sites” (Edensor 2002, 45), understood as “sacred centres,” “points of physical and ideological orientation” around which “circuits of memory” are often organized (Edensor 2002, 45). These

places operate with symbols, constituted by “highly selective, synecdochal features which are held to embody specific kinds of characteristics” (Edensor 2002, 45). They are like monuments referring to the (glorious) past, and “they also frequently celebrate the modernity of the nation, are symbols of its progress” (Edensor 2002, 45). Their production, supervised by the country, normally demonstrates the adoption of a distanced outsider’s perspective akin to “being in relation with the landscape” (Frydryczak 2013, 51)—that is, searching for geographical and cultural (view) points of orientation according to the ideological key. As such, it is a synthesis of ideas and universal values—national elements of the official culture. In this case, the role of the landscape is particularly privileged; it is perceived as a reservoir of iconic signs, which can be easily transformed into clear national symbols.

The industrial landscape immortalized in cinematography provided Polish audiences with numerous “iconic sites.” They were fulfilling the requirements defined by the resolutions of the Secretariat of the Central Committee concerning cinematography. The Central Committee proclaimed that cinema should reflect the subject matter of contemporary life characterized by truth and realism: subject matter featuring factual social, interpersonal, moral, and political conflicts the solutions to which favor socialism (Uchwała Sekretariatu KC 1994, 31). Moreover, it was perfectly suited to the demands of the cultural policy stipulated by the Second General Assembly of the governing Polish United Workers’ Party in 1954. The following goals for art (film art included) were listed: art should perform a canvassing function and develop socialist awareness. Mariola Jankun-Dopartowa commented that optimism and communicativeness were set as the main features of a valuable artwork; moreover, art was supposed to be realistic in form and to have socialist meaning (Jankun-Dopartowa 2007, 111). The industrial landscape on the silver-screen was perfectly tailored to fulfill these functions. One of the most significant “iconic sites” in Polish cinematography was an industrial plant defined as an environment filled with the idea of progress. The most significant example from this period is *Gorąca Linia* (*Hotline*) directed by Wanda Jakubowska in 1965—the film, due to its theme and the perspective used to carry the narration, can be identified as neo-productive. Its theme is, generally speaking, a construction site featuring conditions found in new socialist mines. Engineer Karol Przybora arrives with a particular task in the industrial district. He is supposed to build a thriving plant in six years (which was in accordance with the concept of economic planning in the Polish People’s Republic at the time). Thanks to his engagement, accountability, and especially his impeccable ideological image, he manages to do the task. What is more, he also succeeds thanks to being more than an office bound director; he succeeds by being a real activist and companion at work. The engineer does not hesitate to go down with miners in dangerous areas of the mine underground and monitor the progress of construction works. This practice leads him to discover a critical oversight that threatens both the local community and the stability of the

whole social policy. The film shows mining in the region as a dangerous activity that relies on pre-existing (German) infrastructure characterized by outdated capitalist technologies and irrational management rules. An additional danger threatening the endeavor came in the form of hostile class elements embedded in the community, which stubbornly sought to undercut the socialist regime. Supporters of the old political set-up and representatives of private initiatives belonged to this group of official enemies. The new plant enthusiastically built by Przybora was supposed to, contrary to former capitalist relations, gather a community saturated with a spirit of cooperation and “healthy” competition. To emphasize this in the visual plan of the film, a rule was applied according to which modernity was ennobled. Everything that is old, German, capitalist is depicted as backward and defective, whereas those coming into being—such as newly built production facilities and infrastructure—are presented as bright, clean, and automated. Another issue associated with industrial plants is migration. In the movie entitled *Obok prawdy* (*Beside the Truth*) directed by Janusz Weychert in 1964, the landscape of a mine is focused in on the figures of workers, who arrive from different parts of Poland (especially from the countryside) to Silesia—the region of new economic opportunities. Migrants were brought in by attractive earnings and opportunity for social mobility (mining and metallurgy was considered lucrative and future-oriented), but also a thirst for adventure and change of lifestyle. What is important here is that in feature films depicting the mine as an “iconic site” (unlike in documentaries such as *Rok Franka W.* (*The Year of Frank W.*), directed by Kazimierz Karabasz in 1967) they do not go into details in terms of the fate of newcomers, their emotions, motivations, or the complicated assimilation processes they face in their new environment. Instead, spectacular events with protagonists taking part are accentuated, as a result these movies emphasize significant social issues. This can be observed in the film *Obok prawdy* mentioned above, in which the camera is focused on the issue of an accident in the mine that happens because of a thoughtless, underqualified young worker and archaic technology. The message of the film is that only improving the people’s education and morality along with the process of equipment modernization can guarantee the success of Polish socialist industry. The factory and its surroundings in the film constitute “iconic sites” because they also have conflict-generating potential and convey an assumption that is essential to communist doctrine—namely, that an indispensable factor of social development is the class struggle. The depicted conflict concerned the situation at the time. The system, in which members of the socialist community must be alert and on time, undermines the bad intentions of concealed enemies of the people (for example, as in the film *Gorąca linia*). Equally often, however, the conflict is formulated in historic terms (from the inter-war period) as a struggle of the Silesian (Polish) working class with western (especially German) capitalists—the owners of the local foundries and mines. That final issue enables us to

harmoniously integrate the social and national narratives and to show the meaning of the class struggle as well as the battle for Silesia to be Polish. In this respect, the films entitled *Czarne skrzydła* (*Black Wings*) directed by Ewa and Czesław Petelscy in 1962 or *Rodzina Milcarków* (*The Milcarek Family*) directed by Józef Wyszomirski in 1962 are representative. The mining slagheaps and housing estates contrasting with the palaces of the former capitalist owners constitute an area of impoverished existence for Poles, who, in conditions of class humiliation, were taking up the heroic battle for national liberation. In this context, good Silesians (workers and citizens) are recognized as those who always actively support a Polish identity, and bad ones are identified as all those who were in favor of German nationality. This simplified version of Polish-German conflict became a dramaturgic axis even for the widely recognized film directed by Kazimierz Kutz entitled *Sól ziemi czarnej* (*The Salt of Black Earth*) (1969), said to be the most outstanding example of Silesian cinema.

‘Quotidian worlds’

“Iconic sites” are distinguished by their ideological aspect, which makes them of symbolic and permanent value, significant but idealized reference-points for identity. The everyday experience of people beyond these sites is somewhat different. On the basis of this distinction we can come to the conclusion that “iconic sites” and “quotidian worlds” are unambiguously antinomial terms. The thesis presented by Edensor, however, is based on a different conviction. According to the researcher, within familiar, homely spaces dominated by habitual practice, we create more than merely familiar and local bonds. These places can be foundational for national identity, however, on the basis of other non-hierarchical rules (Edensor 2002, 50). Living space—according to Gaston Bachelard—is mostly associated with home and neighborhood areas, as “home is most affectively charged through the way it is sensually apprehended, producing a kinaesthetic experience of place which is embedded in memory” (Bachelard 1994, 3-4). Individual, affective spaces belong to different geographical scales, however, if treated jointly, they can take part in the creation of national identity. This identity must be understood as a process, like a trend of continuous restoration and reproduction, having numerous dimensions and being marked by a density of links. Its essence lays in intertextuality and production of meanings. For in this entire “imagined, internally complex national geography” (Edensor 2002, 66), as defined by Edensor, different localities and private spaces are working together. Both of them overlap each other.

However, “quotidian worlds,” just as “iconic sites” are endowed with a kind of potential for consolidating that which is national, determine definitely separate perspective of inspection of reality. It can be defined as grassroots involvement in a familiar space, participation or “being in a landscape” (Frydryczak 2013, 9).

A different understanding of space presented by film-makers corresponds to that. First of all, instead of a view that is impersonal and abstracted from the context, there is a specific “neighbourhood” (Frydryczak 2013, 192) displayed on the screen—an anthropological place, a space for living, experiencing, and preserving cultural practices endowed with a specific local color. The industrial landscape becomes a display of local knowledge, which throws doubts on the possibility of ideologically controlling the space and can be easily distinguished in a *longue durée* perspective. Suitable for that framework of perception that undertakes the attempt of expressing individuals, local point of view, in a sense, independent of doctrinal orders, becomes possible in Polish cinema in situation of moderate (in comparison to period of socialist realism) creative freedom, which has brought about after 1956. The growing tendency of documenting everyday life, using in film practices an objective grassroots approach, enabling to observe life, is visible to a lesser degree in feature films and more so in documentaries, and also in the field of amateur cinema that was developing in Silesia thanks to numerous amateur film clubs arising next to the mines and factories.

One of a few feature films, a work that breaks down the schematic vision of the mine—the space of crystalizing class and mining awareness—collective body engaged in implementing the exploitation plant is the picture directed by Paweł Komorowski entitled *Pięciu* (*Five*) from 1964. However, the background of the narrative constituted here—like in *Obok prawdy*—by a catastrophe in a mine, has quite a different distribution of feature elements. The film-makers are not interested in the accident itself and the issues related to responsibility and bureaucracy, but the catastrophe grasped in the context of its existential dimension, understood as a liminal point of mining experience. The scene where people are waiting for rescue becomes an impulse for initiating the processes of anamnesis, in which the audience is confronted with the protagonists’ experiences of breakthrough significance (in terms of life experience), that embodies the whole complexity of the condition of the Silesian borderland. Thanks to that, a broad cross-section of Upper Silesians’ fates in the 20th century emerges before the eyes of the audience (Lewandowski 2012, 40). Among them there are images from the Second World War, which deviate significantly from well-known visions showed in other Polish war films from this period. They reveal the Silesian “otherness” of fates, including such experiences as a substitution of German uniforms with Polish ones by the Silesians at Monte Cassino or the fratricidal struggle of autochthons, fighting in two opposing armies (Polish and German). The attempt to deepen the problematic themes of the war and to show its drama from the perspective of the borderland demonstrates the director’s thorough knowledge about the local history and culture.

An impression of “being in the landscape” in the film *Pięciu* is strengthened by fact that the protagonists speak in a dialect and the whole presented world is

marked by local Silesian color. The work experience that is essential for locality is not only a superficial activity, but constitutes a non-transferable link for native tradition and ethos. A similar attitude towards work can be found in the amateur productions of Leon Wojtala,¹ especially in such films as *Gorzki chleb* (*Bitter Bread*) (1960) or *Dni bez słońca* (*Days without Sun*) (1969). The “QuotidianWorld” of industry captured by the last director is not depicted as a space infused by a socialist apotheosis of work but the everyday struggle of local people, who, regardless of political and systemic conditions, must work (often work in excess), struggling with the archaic systems of production and a lack of oversight concerning occupational health and safety rules. The subsequent films directed by Wojtala—for example, the one produced most likely in the early 70s entitled *Ginący świat* (*Dying World*)—are more pessimistic with a suggestive vision of the destruction of the local world as a result of the influence of ecological disaster caused by industrialization and the excessive exploitation of natural resources.

The aforementioned works indicate that a necessary condition for a film to capture “quotidian worlds” is to adopt a perspective “from the inside,” which was successfully done by film-makers from the region and/or bound up with it mentally. In this context it is also worth mentioning two other films from the 60s: footage directed by Janusz Kidawa, *Haldy* (*Slagheaps*) (1962) and a short film produced as a school etude by Antoni Halor named *Pożegnanie kolejki* (*Farewell to the Narrow-gauge Railway*) (1968). One vision of world emerges from both pictures, formed by way of the coexistence of nature and industry. What can be striking in Halor’s film is the natural landscape of fields and meadows adorned with red poppies that smoothly change into a prairie landscape thanks to the slagheaps, which resemble the sun-burned rocks of the Grand Canyon. All these associations are complemented by an old steam engine blasting into infinite space. It is only the hoisting shafts visible on the horizon, captured from time to time, that remind one that it is not the scenery of the West, but a natural Upper Silesian area. In Kidawa’s film, the industrial landscape is definitely more prominent. Here, it sublimates due to its romantic images. The radiance of the afternoon sun makes the captured objects tender, as a result of that the titular slagheaps do not seem to be tarry and black but brown-orange, and the whole landscape acquires features of exotic beauty. Generally, the landscape depicted in the above-mentioned works shows that the environments of industry and humanity are not mutually exclusive, and the crucial element of identity is the approval of centuries-old industrial tradition. The sense of identity is strengthened by the nature’s capacity for self-renewal. On the slagheaps and in the fallows sprout up clean, white flowers—a sign of natural phenomena unique to the region and a symbol of transformative phenomena on

¹ This author was a member of the legendary “Śląsk” (Silesia) amateur film club in Katowice, later in ZZK “Maczki” Klub, and at the end, from the 70s, a member of Mikołowski “iks.”

a larger scale, related to the long-term process of nature and human beings adapting to industrial conditions.

The feature that the discussed movies share is the emotional relationship of the film-makers to the depicted place, which, according to Heidegger, is the place of “being.” The industrial landscape that fills the frames, on the one hand, is treated as domesticated and authentic space, and on the other hand, awakening feelings of concern and fear. This is particularly visible in Kidawa’s film, in which the place is presented as full of ambivalences: domesticated and worrying, friendly and at the same time overwhelmed by the element against which a human must measure their strength in everyday experience. Fascination with coal slopes, both aesthetic and anthropological (“mountains” piled up by human hands), is accompanied by horror and fear that the slagheaps are on fire, that it will grow, and possibly soon bury the housing estate. These kinds of extremes express the human mentality in the periods of increased industrialization. Halor’s *Pożegnanie kolejki* unexpectedly offers a sense of nostalgia mostly associated with a completely different epoch—the post-industrial. The last journey of a narrow-gauge railway captured by the director, the so-called “bańgowska railway” that was transporting the workers of KWK Siemianowice, is an expression of fascination with the local industrial tradition; at the same time, it constitutes a document of those times, which, in the face of anticipated changes, is perceived as lost.

The other film directed by Halor, which at the turn of the 60s and 70s depicted the large-scale industrial environment from an original perspective, was footage produced with the cooperation of Józef Gębski, entitled *Czarne zielone* (*Black Green*) (1971). The film breaks down the propagandized vision of Polish mining via humorous scenes, where the recruitment and training of the candidates for miners is conducted in an atmosphere of intellectual, mental, and cultural clash. Footage captured underground shows work in a mine in a realistic way and makes the audience focus on the lack of human knowledge and practice with respect to the archaic mystery of the underground. That mode of presentation of the industrial theme was not appreciated by the authorities, and the film was soon withdrawn from screens, unlike in the case of *Rok Franka W.* which was devoted to similar themes. This excellent documentary, disclosing details about the vocational program organized in Silesia by the *Ochotnicze Hufce Pracy* (Voluntary Labour Corps), constituted a crucial film in the history of Polish documentaries due to the fact that it depicted the activities, intellect, and sensitivity of one protagonist (and not those of a whole community, as had been the case so far) that were not staged. However, from the perspective of the considerations central to this paper, this film proves that producing a “QuotidianWorld” through cinema is not the exclusive domain of directors from Silesia. It is a matter of film-makers taking on a specific perspective in viewing the landscape and the place—grassroots and individual. The industrial environment in the film produced by Karabasz is perceived

as everyday life for a young worker, a newcomer from a small grassroots place, immersed in a metropolitan reality that is both exciting and movingly unfamiliar; it outlines the complex problems connected with acclimatization.

Conclusions

To sum up, the titular “iconic sites” and “quotidian worlds” embodied on the screen result from a specific point of view assumed by film-makers (distanced or engaged). The crucial characteristic of the creation process of “iconic sites” is the ideological audit, which always means reductionism; the landscape becomes a synecdoche, the exposure of the nationality pattern treated as monolith, without a local context. An “iconic site” remains a symbol of a creative act, a hierarchical creation of new identity, being a fulfillment of a specific postulated vision (Edensor 2002, 64-68). In films about Silesia, it is the vision of industrial space—synonymous with a “new” place, the calling card of a country building socialism—that results in the tendency to make history monumental and to selectively code historical phenomena (overestimating the scale of the battle for national liberation), omitting attributes of regional distinctiveness (language, cultural behavior patterns), geographical simplifications (lack of distinction between Silesia and a coalfield). This is very much unlike the case of “quotidian worlds,” which reveal local knowledge, focus attention on historical, geographical, and cultural specificities of the region, and the consequences of its variable nationalities, being within the limits of the formula of documenting the observed pre-existing reality (and not of its creating). The fact that “iconic sites” and “Quotidian world” do not have to be contradictory to each other is demonstrated in the works of Kutz, especially *Sól ziemi czarnej* from 1969 and *Perła w koronie* (*Pearl in the Crown*) from 1971. Apart from these works, it is difficult to find other examples of these two perspectives coexisting in film. More frequently, they constitute antitheses due to creating pictures of a place interpreted as an ideological short cut, monolith (“iconic site”), or filmed with the suggestion of more complicated, multidimensional tensions full of identity (“QuotidianWorld”).

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