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“The Amateurs” On (theatre of) persons with intellectual disabilities in a feature film

In the paper I want to show and discuss some aspects of a feature film “The Amateurs” and attempt to find out what questions the presented movie can provoke, what experiences it tells about, and whether it can provide a stimulus for social change and emancipation of people with intellectual disabilities. The movie is based on the artistic work of Polish theatre company BRO Biuro Rzeczy Osobistych Personal Affairs Bureau, whose activity has been running for twenty five years. In order to see and reflect on some aspects of the movie I employed secondary data analyses / a content analysis of found data / secondary data / sources: some excerpts from movie critics' reviews and an interviews with the director of “The Amateurs”. Theoretical approach in attempting an analysis of the movie is inspired by *sensuous theory* of film by Vivian Sobchack. The meeting between the viewer's and actors with disabilities in the film in an embodied cinematic experience understood as a dialogic encounter. “The Amateurs” not only enable to show /see/ an important and often missing social issues, but also reveals a change in the meanings ascribed to persons with intellectual disabilities as actors and (co)creators of (film) art and culture.

Key words: actor with intellectual disabilities, film art, meanings shift, social change, participation in culture

„Armatorzy”

Artykuł przedstawia i omawia niektóre aspekty filmu fabularnego „Amatorzy”. Fabuła filmu nawiązuje do pracy artystycznej polskiego zespołu teatralnego Biuro Rzeczy Osobistych BRO, którego działalność trwa od dwudziestu pięciu lat. Film „Amatorzy” to obraz, w którym występują aktorzy z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną, prowokując tym samym liczne wątki i pytania nie tylko o miejsce osób z tym rodzajem niepełnosprawności w sztuce (filmowej), ale składania także do namysłu nad rolą tego filmu jako bodźca (do) zmiany społecznej i emancypacji osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną. Namysł nad filmem „Amatorzy” oraz odniesienie się do wybranych wątków obrazu, został dokonany na podstawie analizy danych wtórnych / analizy treści danych zastanych, którymi są wybrane fragmenty recenzji krytyków filmowych oraz wywiad z reżyserką „Amatorów”. Inspiracja teoretyczna w próbie analizy filmu została zaczerpnięta ze zmysłowej teorii filmu Vivian Sobchack. Spotkanie widza i aktorów z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną występujących w filmie to ucieleśnione doświadczenie kinowe rozumiane jako dialogiczne spotkanie.

„Amatorzy” nie tylko pozwalają pokazać /zobaczyć/ ważne i najczęściej pomijane kwestie społeczne, ale także mogą prowokować do zmiany znaczeń przypisywanych osobom z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną jako aktorom oraz (współ)twórcom sztuki (filmowej) i kultury.

Słowa kluczowe: aktor z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną, sztuka filmowa, zmiana znaczeń, zmiana społeczna, uczestnictwo w kulturze

Outline of the context for consideration

The article was initiated by the artistic work of Polish theatre company BRO Biuro Rzeczy Osobistych Personal Affairs Bureau, whose activity has been running for twenty five years, evolving from art therapy projects, to become recognized theatre company. Its activities are connected with Polish Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities under the direction of Zbigniew Biegajło – pedagog, therapist, director. The company has realized a few important social – artistic projects and has taken part not only in various disability arts festivals, but also arts festivals of alternative or off theatres and it finds itself in a very special place now. The company has managed to change the perception of the art of people with disabilities and has come close to achieving the goal they set before them – turning professional. Not only would this be the crowning of their achievements, but also the final step of their departure from the therapeutic context determined by the medical model of disability.¹ Eventually, spectacular progressing of BRO, its perpetual development mode, performance skills, as well as subsequent performances/plays created over the years, (including one made together with professional actors entitled “My business”), became the basis for award – winning feature film “The Amateurs”, which becomes the main axis of this paper.

„The Amateurs” – the (award-winning) feature film²

In the production³ we can see authentic members of the Personal Affairs Bureau BRO. What sets the film apart from others, is that persons with intellectual disabili-

¹ The social theatre Biuro Rzeczy Osobistych/ Personal Affairs Bureau BRO was presented in one of my papers, focusing on the analysis of the play performed by BRO – “My business”, which was devoted to the issues of relations between men and women with Down Syndrome (DS) and the thread of (not) becoming parents, with particular emphasis on tensions and conflicts that pregnancy of a woman with DS arises, the moral dilemmas it causes, and eventually the decisions made that thwart the experience of parenthood. Krzemińska D., “My business” – experimental performance about love, being a couple and pregnancy of people with Down Syndrome. *The artistic work of theatre company of adults with intellectual disabilities as the right to (co-creating) culture – a sketch*, Niepełnosprawność. Dyskursy Pedagogiki Specjalnej, nr 32/2018 (Disability. Discourses of Special Education, No. 32/2018).

² <https://www.charlie.pl/index.php?i=film&id=1621514068> (access: 19.11.2023).

³ <https://mubi.com/en/pl/films/amateurs-2020> (access: 26.11.2023).

ties played the main roles, which means that the characters were not played by professional actors. The cast of the film is dominated by authentic actors of the Personal Affairs Bureau, who perform on equal terms with professional actors. The story itself is fictional, but „The Amateurs” has a lot of the paradocumentary.

A movie plot

It is a comedy-drama in which the main plot focusses on an exceptional acting ensemble, that faces a great opportunity to play on a real stage and start preparing to put on a Shakespeare production. “The story begins when Krzysiek’s theater – the Personal Affairs Bureau BRO the members of which are actors with intellectual disabilities) wins the festival and the award sponsored by a professional theatre. They are given a chance to stage a show. Great joy, great opportunities, great expectations. Krzysiek and the actors are currently working on a new play, *Zorba the Greek*. It would be wonderful to perform it on a real stage. It turns out that the theatre director attaches certain conditions to his offer of collaboration. The director has received a grant as part of the programme that promotes Shakespeare and activates people with disabilities. If they want to perform in a professional theatre, they have to follow the rules. Krzysiek has doubts... Yet, he decides to face the challenge. They begin rehearsals with the participation of professional actors and Wiktoria, a celebrity and a famous star. Krzysiek’s actors are instantly impressed by Wiktoria’s charm. During one of the rehearsals, the theatre director decides the main role can’t be played by Mary, Krzysiek’s sister. The director is ruthless: there won’t be any premiere with toothless, lisping Mary. The protagonist should be played by a younger, prettier actress with better diction. Wiktoria! Krzysiek agrees to replace the cast. Time pressure, fascination with Wiktoria... The premiere must take place, but will it make Krzysiek proud?⁴ “The disabilities and difficulties experienced by the characters effectively interfere with figuring out the Old English phrase. But do they interfere with the journey to the heart of the dramatic matter?”⁵

The movie written and directed by Iwona Siekierzyńska was premiered during The Main Competition of the Gdynia Film Festival 2020, the Polish cinema premiere was in 2021. It has received 13 awards and 5 nominations⁶. Siekierzyńska underlined that one the most important and prestigious award was the Hollywood Eagle Award for best feature film at the Polish Film Festival in Los Angeles in 2021: “the award marked the 13th accolade for her movie, which “de-

⁴ <https://ikh.com.pl/movies/426-2/> (access: 19.11.2023).

⁵ <https://www.filmweb.pl/reviews/recenzja-filmu-Amatorzy-23544> (access: 26.11.2023); <https://www.charlie.pl/index.php?i=film&id=1621514068> (access: 19.11.2023).

⁶ <https://filmweb.pl/film/Amatorzy-2020-854633/awards> (access: 26.11.2021).

picts people with intellectual disabilities and the main roles are played by actors with such disabilities"⁷. The director of "Amateurs" also added, that "(...) a member of the cast, Marzena Gajewska, who plays Mary, the sister of the main character, Krzysiek, received the Best Actress award at the 24th Shanghai Film Festival in 2022. The jury of the main competition appreciated her for the role of Mary. She was (...) named best female lead at the Shanghai Film Festival. "For an actress with intellectual disabilities, with Down syndrome, to be named best actress is revolutionary" – Siekierzyńska emphasized"⁸.

Methodological thread and theoretical (approach) inspiration

In the paper I want to show and discuss some chosen aspects of a feature film "The Amateurs" and attempt to find out what questions the presented movie can provoke, what experiences it tells about, and whether it can provide a stimulus for social change and emancipation of people with intellectual disabilities, especially as (co) creators of culture. In order to see and reflect on some aspects of the movie I employed secondary data analyses / a content analysis of found data / secondary data / sources as a type of research activity, which in the light of the methodological rules, is a method that allows for a kind of identification and processing of selected sources in order to collect/obtain information of interest to the researcher and to obtain useful data, directly related to a particular subject area (Angrosino 2000; Babbie 2003; Charmaz 2009; Rubacha 2008). For the purpose of this article some **excerpts from movie critics' reviews have been selected**, as well as **an interview with the director of "The Amateurs"**.

Theoretical approach in attempting an analysis of "The Amateurs" **is inspired** by *sensuous theory* of film by Vivian Sobchack who introduces and defines her seminal term "the film's body" (Sobchack 1992). "Film is also, by its nature, a form of communication with the world and others. Sobchack describes it as a body, because - like our consciousness - it contains what it "sees", uses the existential structures of being-in-the-world, and above all, the expression resulting from the fact of being seen. The contact of two bodies, the viewer and the film, makes the cinematic experience result from a meeting, it is dialogical (...)" – explains Marta Stańczyk (2015)⁹. **I find some of the threads of Sobchack's *sensuous theory* an**

⁷ <https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7791/Artykul/2834847,movie-about-disabled-actors-wins-polish-film-festival-in-la> (access: 19.11.2023).

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ M. Stańczyk (2015), *Zmysłowa teoria kina*, Vivian Sobchack I sensuous theory, EKRANY, 3–4: 25–26; http://ekrany.org.pl/historia_kina/zmyslowa-teoria-kina-vivian-sobchack-i-sensuous-theory/ (access: 19.11.2023).

interesting inspiration for considerations related to a movie “The Amateurs”, hence it requires a brief introduction to the key themes of the concept.

In preface to her book “The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience” Sobchack describes: “(...) I want to mistrust what has become the certain ground, the premises, of contemporary film theory and to interrogate certain widely held assumptions about the nature of film and the intelligibility and significance of spectatorship and the film experience. To do so, however, I must interrogate vision—vision as it is embodied, vision as it is performed, vision as it signifies, vision as it radically entails a world of subjects and objects to make sense of them and of itself as it is lived. More formally, the task of “The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience” is to describe and account for the origin and locus of cinematic signification and significance in the experience of vision as an embodied and meaningful existential activity” (Sobchack 1992, p. xiii–xx)¹⁰.

Stańczyk, making a comprehensive analysis of the *sensuous theory* practiced by Vivian Sobchack, points out (...) “that in the cinema room we are present primarily with our bodies, so the viewer's somatic experience is relegated to the margins of reflection on the film. And although evocative descriptions of mood and plot appear in reviews, and some genres find terms in the vernacular related to the physicality of reception (such as “thriller” or “tear squeezer”), it is only the recently developed sensuous theory that describes the viewer's intimate, bodily relationship with the image and multisensory perception” (Stańczyk 2015)¹¹. Vivian Sobchack, the author of *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, a patron of *sensuous theory*, so to speak, is a forerunner of the elaborate concept according to which: “images are not only movable, but also move. Cinema (...) ‘touches us’/ moves us in a way that is close to the immediacy (...)” (Stańczyk 2015)¹². Sobchack treats “the film experience as a communication system based on bodily perception. In the cinema we find ourselves (...) in a situation in which we perceive expression, i.e., the film, which in turn uses the expression of perception, i.e., the mechanisms we use every day to perceive reality, our ways of being-in-the-world: looking, listening, movement, sense of space, and so on” (Stańczyk 2015)¹³. Film “is also by its nature a form of communication with the world and others. Sobchack describes it as a body, in that, like our consciousness, it contains what it “sees”, uses existential structures of being-in-the-world, and, above all, expression, resulting from the fact of being

¹⁰ V. Sobchack (1992), *Preface* [in:] *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (pp. xiii–xx). Princeton: Princeton University Press; <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691213279-002>; <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9780691213279-002/html>.

¹¹ M. Stańczyk (2015), *Zmysłowa teoria kina*, *Vivian Sobchack I sensuous theory*, *EKRANY*, 3–4: 25–26; http://ekrany.org.pl/historia_kina/zmyslowa-teoria-kina-vivian-sobchack-i-sensuous-theory/ (access: 19.11.2023)..

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

watched/ seen. The contact between two bodies, the viewer and the film, makes the cinematic experience result from an encounter, exchange, it is dialogic (...)" (Stańczyk 2015)¹⁴. The body – not just touch - can provide a basis for redefining the system of representation and meaning making, and supports the encounter/meeting with the other as a certain unknown. It thus rejects the tendency, typical of Western oculo-centrism, to annex foreign cultures, and does not fit into dominant discourses, emphasizing the incompatibility of certain experiences and languages. It provides the basis for inspiring rethinking in postcolonial and feminist thoughts, disability studies or obesity (fat studies)" – says Stańczyk interpreting *sensuous theory* (2019: 201). Sobchack's concept clearly alludes to, among other things, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Bernhard Waldenfels' understanding of the stranger or critical theory, thus gaining the potential to affect deconstruction and change – at the center of which can be placed the phenomenon of disability and the person/character with a disability – as we are dealing with in "The Amateurs" film.

Brigitta Hosea, referring to the *sensuous theory* notes: "Vivian Sobchack argues that watching a film is not a passive experience, but involves a dynamic relationship between the viewer, the film and the lived-body situation in both viewer and viewed. She considers film to be an expression of experience through experience that the viewer constitutes through her own performative dialogue with the work. Hosea quotes Sobchack concept to confirm an argument:

"Watching a film is both a direct and mediated experience of direct experience as mediation ... Watching a film, we can see the seeing as well as the seen, hear the hearing as well as the heard, and feel the movement as well as the moved" (Sobchack 1992 in: Hosea 2015: 8).

Hosea also quotes another part of Sobchack's view and interprets it by explaining, that a film is structured in such a way that the viewer shares in a direct experience of activities depicted in remote locations. In the case of abstract images and by extension animation, she asserts that the viewer identifies with and projects her own experiences onto the animator's own expression of their personal experience:

"And, as we watch this expressive projection of an 'other's' experience, we too express our own perceptive experience. Through the address of our vision, we speak back to the cinematic expression before us, using a visual language that is also tactile, that takes hold of and actively grasps the perceptual expression, the seeing, the direct experience of that anonymously present, sensing and sentient 'other'" (Sobchack 1992 in: Hosea 2015: 8).

Stańczyk explains that "In the cinematic experience there is an encounter with one's own body and the 'body' of the film, but not infrequently this chiasmatic relationship acquires a conscious feature and dimension of confrontation with

¹⁴ Ibidem.

a body that cannot be appropriated – it escapes the power of the eye, does not submit to mental grasping and does not lose its autonomous otherness” (Stańczyk 2019: 201). In her analyses of Sobchack’s *sensuous theory*, Stańczyk makes references to the postcolonial turn, arguing that “(...) it is the very theme in which the other is most highlighted. This will show the openness and critical potential of sensuous theory, which – appealing to the senses – also touches on morality” (Stańczyk 2019: 201). Indeed, post-colonial studies are an excellent intellectual proposal, in the field of which one can “watch” the location and the situation of (community) groups that remain minorities, are disadvantaged, excluded/ marginalized, without access to mainstream (social) life, often deprived of their own voice (Bhabha 2010; Domańska 2008; Ghandi 2008; Loomba 2011; Loska 2016; Said 1991, Spivak 2008; Young 2012). The mentioned communities include also people with intellectual disabilities – characters who are authentic actors of the BRO theater and who, so to speak, “played themselves” in “The Amateurs” movie which is the subject of this paper.

Therefore, it is also worth mentioning the theme of characters with (intellectual) disabilities, who have appeared in film productions for several decades. If one follows Sobchack’s concept and defines film as a tool/ as “a body” “reproducing” experience, then in films a phenomenon of disability/ a person with a disability is “shown” in “some” (specific) way. As pointed out by, among others, Anna Bieganowska-Skóra (2017), Kazanowski (2010), Alicja Mironiuk-Nietreba (2016), Wojciech Otto (2012), the movie characters with disabilities at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries were inaccurate or even offensive:

“Unfortunately, the characters created by the filmmakers most often reproduced stereotypes rooted in the collective consciousness about people with disabilities, they were presented as suffering and disadvantaged by fate, frustrated or burdensome for their families and state institutions. (...) In the second decade of the 21st century, the changes go further – not only do we see an increasing shift away from taboo, but also films about people with disabilities are being produced more often and resonate in the social space” (Otto 2012: 21).

Elżbieta Zakrzewska-Manterys emphasizes a kind of dichotomy, the two extremes in viewing disability, which can also be referred to Derridean “binary oppositions” – this way of portraying people with intellectual disabilities is also present in film productions, which has a significant impact on the social image of this group:

“The notion of disability is stretched between two semantic fields - on the one hand, they are poor, sick, unfortunate, defective people, on the other hand, their unenviable fate can be spoken of with dispassionate professionalism, or with high-minded pathos, reflecting selfless concern, the joy of being together and other equally noble attitudes” (Zakrzewska-Manterys 2003: 79).

Stańczyk, deriving an understanding of a film from *sensuous theory*, states that: “embodied experience has the power to transgress, to demolish or transcend bi-

nary divisions, while replacing hierarchical dualism with an emphasis on margins, openness to difference and an alternative order: both aesthetic and social” (Stańczyk 2019: 201). The researcher further explains – referring also to the views of other representatives of *sensuous theory*, i.a. to Will Higbee (cinema of transvergence concept) or Laura U. Marx – that the cinema of transvergence can “(...) make the exchange between the center and the margins more flexible, perform an inversion of these positions, allow for greater dynamics of difference, as well as the negotiation of both meanings and power relations. Moreover, this category has an aesthetic significance – it changes the cinematic experience through alterations of storytelling and expression. The minority perspective and deconstruction of film form creates an apology of difference. (...) Haptic visuality has a negotiating potential – embodied experience serves as a frame within which the cinema of others and its reception can be described (...)”. The very questioning of viewing habits implies a different level of engagement and suggests a shift in meanings. The perceptual ‘castling’ has not only aesthetic, but also ethical significance – the body becomes the basis for redefining the system of representation that constituted social inequality” (Stańczyk 2019: 203–204).

Discussion

„The Amateurs” (in the context of) the film as “a body which „sees” and is “being seen”

Turning to the presentation of selected excerpts from the analyzed secondary data, I will start with excerpts from the interview with the director of the film, while recalling again the words of Stańczyk (2019), who draws attention to another feature of a movie understood in the light of *sensuous theory*. She points out that the embodied experience (of the meeting of the (body) of the film and the (body) of the viewer, “the somatic encounter with the other makes it impossible to deny the existence of the margin - it emphasizes the incompatibility of certain languages and experiences, but it does not lead to a false identification based on the dominant ideology”. And that was the idea and a set goal of Iwona Siekierzyńska, the screenwriter and director of “The Amateurs”, when working on the film and the goal she set seems achieved. A journalist, beginning an interview with Siekierzyńska suggested, that involving actors with disabilities in the movie may result in the stereotyping and perpetuation of attitudes like patronising, peculiar infantilising of adults with intellectual disabilities or indulgence evoking pity and protectiveness:

“That is a very difficult and risky subject for a movie as disabled actors on the screen may evoke pity and sympathy in the audience. However, in your film, you show admiration for the actors’

*hard work, efforts, and involvement. There is a lot of empathy and understanding; the film makes the audience more sensitive to the world far from their own*¹⁵.

Siekierzyńska retorts to this statement and explains that in her conception of the film she intended to “demolish or transcend binary divisions” in portraying characters with intellectual disabilities and open up to difference and dynamize” it:

*“Thank you for mentioning ‘pity’, which can easily sneak into the conversation about this subject. When I started working on the film, I felt the weight of responsibility; I knew it had to be good, that acting had to be good. If not, people would say, oh well, the actors are disabled, so we have to forgive them. It was essential to me to avoid any form of patronizing. I didn’t want people who came to see the film to feel emotionally blackmailed. I am glad I succeeded*¹⁶.

In a further excerpt from an interview with the director, it can be deduced that “The Amateurs” is a movie, which “makes the exchange between the center and the margins more flexible, inverts these positions, allows for greater dynamics of difference, and negotiates both meanings and power relations, transforms the cinematic experience through alterations of storytelling and expression” (Stanczyk 2019). Siekierzyńska says:

*“In this film, the roles have reversed. The job of the professional actors was to give the disabled actors a chance to play the first fiddle. If they had also played the supporting role, it could have made a good film. However, from the very beginning, I wanted to give them a commanding part. (...) The movie “The Amateurs” has a provocative and educational role to play—so that we can finally get together and so that we can attend the same film festivals. Only a meeting can change people, and when people change, the whole world changes, too*¹⁷.

I would add as an aside that a kind of “making the exchange between the center and the margins more flexible, performing an inversion of these positions” (Stanczyk, 2019) can also be spoken of in reference to the specifics of working with actors with intellectual disabilities and professionals during filmmaking. As Siekierzyńska says:

*„There were good and bad moments on the set, with all actors, not just the disabled ones. Their disability had nothing to do with it – all of them played sometimes well, sometimes badly. There was one excellent disabled actress; when we had to reshoot some scenes, it was not because of her but because of a professional actor. (...) I was hoping that because of the construction of having a play within a movie, even if there were going to be some clumsiness or artificiality, everything would eventually blend in well. Still, combining these two actors’ worlds was not an easy task. The art of editing often came to the rescue. I dream of telling more stories about what was going on between the professional and disabled worlds. Maybe, someday, such a film will be made*¹⁸.

¹⁵ „The fusion of two worlds”. Conversation with Iwona Siekierzyńska, screenwriter and director of *The Amateurs* (Translated by Bożena U. Zaremba); <https://www.austinpolishfilm.com/apff-blog/2021/11/2/the-fusion-of-two-worlds> (access: 16.11.2023).

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

In the next part of the discussion, I move on to another aspect of the cinematic experience, in which “to describe the impact of such (...) work, it is necessary to pay attention to the viewer’s body, especially when the image dissolves towards the viewer and invites him to use all his senses for the act of looking. In this way there is an opening to experiencing/experiencing of the other” (Stańczyk 2019: 204). Thus, I will show selected excerpts from the critics’ reviews, who were most likely provoked by “The Amateurs” to “challenge viewing habits” and at the same time “presuppose a different level of engagement and suggest a shift / change in meanings” (Stańczyk 2019).

Sylwia Sekret – a film critic – says in her review:

“(...) „Amateurs” don’t make victims of anyone. But they also don’t pretend that everything is fine and that all people are the same. (...) The conditions under which the group is to prepare the performance change and turn out to be completely unsuited to what the members of the Personal Affairs Bureau are struggling with. (...) They must put on Shakespeare. Whatever, as long as Shakespeare. From the very beginning it is clear, that actors with intellectual disabilities would not be able to bear the burden of an English playwright. And even if, the question remains: will the audience be able to handle it? Because a performance full of seriousness and lofty language, when confronted with unclearly speaking and painfully honest actors, is rather not what the average theater visitor expects”¹⁹,

Adam Siennica, the author of another movie review, states:

“It manages to show the clash of passion and pragmatism, sincerity and hypocrisy, which is a strange cognitive dissonance and often exposes human hypocrisy. The eponymous amateurs have unconventional methods, but they leave their heart on the screen and in their work. You can feel it in this film, which emotionally allows you to engage on a completely different level, but by no means does it try to force sympathy or manipulate the viewer, because there are people with disabilities on the screen. None of these things. It captures the sincerity of those people who, despite their limitations, show off, become an asset. This is also about this clash and criticism of the world of culture, and although the film is set in Poland, the message is universal. I feel that similar problems can be faced by people with intellectual disabilities in any Western country, including Hollywood”²⁰.

Analyzing selected excerpts from the reviews one finds them testifying how the viewer’s (body) “saw” a disability / person with a disability in the (body) of the film: the audience either notice or experience a change of meanings / a kind of redefinition of the characters with disabilities performing in the movie. The embodied encounter between the film and the viewer seems to trigger a change, which concerns both the status of actors with disabilities and their “seeing” by the

¹⁹ S. Sekret (2021), *Miłośnicy – Iwona Siekierzyńska – „Amatorzy”* (recenzja); <https://www.gloskultury.pl/amatorzy-recenzja/> (access: 21.11.2023).

²⁰ A. Siennica (2021), *Amatorzy – recenzja filmu* [TOFIFEST 2021]; <https://naekranie.pl/recenzje/amatorzy-recenzja-filmu-tofifest-2021> (access: 16.11.2023).

viewer. This embodied cinematic experience subverts seeing a person with disabilities in terms of stereotype and pejorative meanings, but “shows” them “in truth”, with successful avoidance of a patronizing indulgence, but makes them visible/seen as they are, with an identity in which (dis)ability is inscribed with its multidimensionality and ambiguity.

“The Amateurs” and actors of Personal Affairs Bureau theater featuring in the movie raise an important issue regarding the figure / category of an actor with intellectual disabilities / a person with intellectual disabilities as an actor. Kempisty points out that:

„The introduction of similar themes is extremely cleansing for the mind, as it opens it to a completely new experience. This is best seen when a theater group works on Shakespeare, when it becomes apparent that the bronzed lines do not suit people with completely different life histories. The unquestionable authority of the creator of Hamlet makes no impression on actors when the words he wrote do not match their emotions. The reinterpretation of the classic comes out brilliantly in the film – it turns out that the subjectification of the play by introducing a completely different kind of sensibility has opened a new quality, and, above all, gave a chance for the inner development of the characters”²¹.

The embodied filmic experience becomes a kind of intrusion into the (field of) culture, and the emergence of not only the issue of disability in film, but especially actors with intellectual disabilities, establishing a new/other context for understanding of (film) art, in which so far missing/ignored social themes are articulated. The appearance of actors with disabilities seems to question and challenge the meanings ascribed to (the category of) actor (in a film art). “Visuality has a negotiating potential – the embodied experience provides a framework within which to describe the cinema of others and its reception (...). The very undermining of viewing habits implies a different level of engagement and suggests a shift/change in the meanings (Stańczyk 2019). The following excerpts from the critics' reviews of “The Amateurs” reflect this way of understanding of the embodied cinematic experience when the film's body and the viewer's body meet:

“The story of an unusual theater group opens the door to a world we usually don't look inside. Or at least most of us do. It confronts us with an inconvenience we don't think about. It pushes through the gap out of our comfort zone and makes us think about many things. And the films that make us think are the very ones for which the filmstrips were made” – says Sylwia Sekret in her film review²².

Adam Siennica draws attention to a similar aspect of “The Amateurs” movie, referring both to the importance of social problems presented in the film i.e.

²¹ M. Kempisty (2021), *AMATORZY. Pelen ciepła i empatii film o spełnianiu marzeń*; <https://film.org.pl/r/amatorzy-pelen-ciepła-i-empatii-film-o-spełnianiu-marzeń> (access: 27.11.2023).

²² S. Sekret (2021), *Miłośnicy – Iwona Siekierzyńska – „Amatorzy”* [recenzja]; <https://www.gloskultury.pl/amatorzy-recenzja/> (access: 21.11.2023).

threads related to the acceptance and inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in various areas of life, including their access/participation in the (co)creation of art and culture. In particular, Siennica raises the important notion of the place of actors with intellectual disabilities in the art/film industry:

“The Amateurs” is a seemingly simple film about art. The eponymous amateurs are a theater group made up of people with intellectual disabilities who dream of acting. They get a chance to perform in a professional theater in Gdynia alongside professional actors. This is therefore a starting point for addressing many problems of the Polish cultural industry, but also strictly human problems with the acceptance of people with disabilities at the general and social level. The film even seems to openly ask the question: is there a place for such people in the cinema? After all, even abroad, we do not often see actors with intellectual disabilities on the screen – these are rather exceptions (...) than the rule. Why is it like that? „The Amateurs” try to answer and they do it painfully accurately”²³.

Reviews comment on the way the film’s director, Iwona Siekierzyńska, portrayed people with intellectual disabilities. It is worth mentioning that “when we watch film, we perceive the filmmaker’s expression of perception, and in turn reverse this structure by expressing our experience back onto the film (Wichman Strand 2006: 12). Critics agree that she managed to avoid portraying a one-dimensional image of a character with intellectual disabilities – unlike other productions in which a character with a disability becomes an “overwhelming” image of a “victim”, evoking pity, concern, compassion, dependence on others, unhappiness, or, on the contrary, a “super cripple” who, despite his disability, gives the impression of a “strongman” fighting an unjust and exclusionary world (Bieganowska-Skóra 2017; Mironiuk 2020). In the “Amateurs” – as Marcin Kempisty emphatically points out:

“(...) Iwona Siekierzyńska effectively fills a gap in Polish cinema, offering viewers a bittersweet story about people fighting for their dreams despite objective odds (...) One could make of “The Amateurs” a cloying story about how badly people with disabilities have in life, how badly they are disadvantaged by fate, and how our country does not help them and their families in their difficult struggle with everyday life. (...) Yet Iwona Siekierzyńska does not allow herself a moment of weakness and does not bow to the masses’ viewing needs. (...) Instead of patronizing people with disabilities, Siekierzyńska focused on working diligently with the actors playing all the roles. Above all, she succeeded in creating a space within which each of the characters has a chance to present their emotions and thoughts”²⁴.

Marcin Grudziąż describes the film as follows:

²³ A. Siennica (2021), *Amatorzy* – recenzja filmu [TOFIFEST 2021]; <https://naekranie.pl/recenzje/amatorzy-recenzja-filmu-tofifest-2021> (access: 16.11.2023).

²⁴ M. Kempisty (2021), *AMATORZY. Pelen ciepła i empatii film o spełnianiu marzeń*; <https://film.org.pl/tau/amatorzy-pelen-ciepła-i-empatii-film-o-spełnianiu-marzeń> (access: 27.11.2023).

“In her film, Siekierzyńska tries to show the widest possible spectrum of problems related to disability, not even for a moment ignoring that the main axis of the plot is the preparation for the premiere. She manages to portray the very nature of working with actors with intellectual disabilities, which can overwhelm even experienced artists”. (...) “The Amateurs” is an extremely autothematic film, mainly due to the fact that all members of Krzysiek’s group are played by people with disabilities. Many scenes give the impression of being at least partially improvised and relying on the spontaneity of the unusual actors from the Gdynia theater. It is these fragments that best illustrate how difficult it is to work with such artists, and at the same time evoke a kind of embarrassment in the viewer. I consider this to be a huge advantage, because it makes the screening of Siekierzyńska’s work something completely different from watching “Sam” or “What Bites Gilbert Grape”, where professionals play characters with diseases or handicaps...”²⁵.

Stańczyk would add explaining that: “Moved audiences are forced into an ethically committed reception, in which there is no place for pleasant identification and excuses of the intellect. They are confronted with an embodied image (Stańczyk 2019: 208).

Maciej Kempisty adds:

“It seems that the most important truth that emerges after a screening of “The Amateurs” concerns the need to resign oneself to fate when it comes to things that cannot be changed in any way. Why grumble about illness when you can use it to explore a different but equally fascinating kind of life with a full variety of experiences. Using the example of the theater group of Personal Affairs Bureau, it is perfectly clear that anyone can make their dreams come true”²⁶.

The audience of “The Amateurs” as participants of the embodied cinema experience had the opportunity to confront not only with the phenomenon of disability as one of the threads, but above all to experience the presence of an actor with intellectual disabilities on the screen. Owing to the well-directed film, people with disabilities feature with great authenticity, revealing both difficulties, handicaps or disadvantages they experience, as well as those attributes that are inherent in everyone regardless of one’s condition, especially those relating to emotions, feelings, needs, desires or dreams. In this context “The Amateurs” – as “(...) the filmic experience – must be understood as a system of communication that finds its foundation in the bodily experience we all share as people in this world as a vehicle of conscious experience. In other words, as Sobchack says, “when we watch cinema, we see someone else seeing and speak back to this seeing-eye, actively grasping this other eye’s expression through a tactile cinematic experience” – explains Joachim Wichman Strand (2006: 16). “Thus, the viewers will comprehend the audiovisual flow of the moving image with their entire bodily

²⁵ M. Grudziąż (2021), *Chcę zostać wielką aktorką – recenzja filmu „Amatorzy”*; <https://pelnasala.pl/amatorzy/> (access: 16.11.2023).

²⁶ M. Kempisty (2021), *AMATORZY. Pełen ciepła i empatii film o spełnianiu marzeń*; <https://film.org.pl/τ/amatorzy-pelen-ciepła-i-empatii-film-o-spełnianiu-marzeń> (access: 27.11.2023).

sensorium rather than just the eyes and the ears, thus feeling the sound, hearing the images, and seeing the textures. In this way the moving image body is experienced by the viewer's bodies through their eyes and ears. As Sobchack writes: "We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium" (Sobchack in: Wichman Strand 2006: 16).

Conclusions

Not only do "The Amateurs" highlight disability issues, but they also provide an opportunity to show how wonderfully the "Personal Affairs Bureau" actors, who many of us would not at all suspect, can realize themselves on stage.

Marcin Grudziąż, movie critic

Defining a film as a tool that reflects experiences, and thus – in the context of "The Amateurs", reflecting on how a movie could influence understanding just the ways people with intellectual disabilities are, what they experience and how, what problems they may face and struggle with, what they enjoy. Referring to the *sensuous theory* by Vivian Sobchack analyzed by Zsolt Gyenge one can see that "that a radical phenomenological reflection on film involves both an objective (if generally visible) body ("an instrumentality through which the *visible behavior* of an intending consciousness is expressed") and "a visual body-subject, an agent who autonomously, introceptively and visibly perceives the *visual behavior* of others. (...) As the oft-quoted sentence declares: "The film is not, therefore, merely an object for perception and expression; it is also the subject of perception and expression" (Gyenge 2022: 4). I wonder in what way „The Amateurs” as a (body of) the film that contains what it „sees” and moves/ touches the viewer’s (body) eventually results from being “seen”? What questions it raises and whether it can provide a stimulus for social change and emancipation of people with intellectual disabilities, especially as (co)creators of culture? Movie, according to Sobchack, is also by its nature a form of communication with the world and others. Images are not only moving, but also move the viewers. Cinema – “touches us” / moves us in a way close to directness. I will once again recall an excerpt from the interview with the film's director, Iwona Siekierzyńska, since I find it an excellent punchline summarizing the considerations in the paper:

"The film was made to show that disabled actors are artists who can deeply penetrate the creative process. Nobody expects them to play such a role because people conform to this stereotype that

*these people are only destined for a hard life. Certainly, nobody expects them to be artistic and create art on a very high level*²⁷.

The film “Amateurs” is definitely not a film about (intellectual) disabilities / people with intellectual disabilities, but on the staging Shakespeare’s play as artistic endeavor involving persons/actors with intellectual disabilities, who in the movie are played by persons /actors with intellectual disabilities. So, it can be said that the viewer’s body, in an embodied cinematic experience, confronts with actors with intellectual disabilities whose presence can be surprising and who are not expected in the film (art). Actors with intellectual disabilities become visible and seen, draw attention to (themselves as) a marginalized minority group, which thus demands their presence be taken into account, both in the realm of everyday life and in reflection on their place in the field of (film) art and culture. The meeting between the viewer’s (body) and actors with disabilities in the (body) of the film in an embodied cinematic experience understood as a dialogic encounter. As Stańczyk (2019: 209) explains, a dislocation of the traditional perspective occurs and the viewer’s perception is oriented towards himself (self-experience) and the ways in which the work is experienced. This not only creates an intimate relationship between the reader (viewer), the author and the text, but also produces an ethical response and an empowering micropolitical potential for the excluded. In this context “The Amateurs” movie not only appears to make it possible to show /see/ an important and often missing social issues (which eventually become visible/seen), but also reveals a change in the meanings ascribed to people with intellectual disabilities as actors and (co)creators of (film) art and culture.

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²⁷ The fusion of two worlds. Conversation with Iwona Siekierzyńska, screenwriter and director of *The Amateurs* (Translated by Bożena U. Zaremba), <https://www.austinpolfilm.com/apff-blog/2021/11/2/the-fusion-of-two-worlds> (access: 27.11.2023).

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