

Editorial

The goal of this volume is to sketch a map of contemporary fiction film, to delineate its contours, to point out and describe its basic tendencies. There have been many more attempts of this kind in film studies. It is, perhaps a sign of a state of a certain confusion that contemporary film studies run into. Everything is on the move now, relatively safe and clear conceptual categories, mostly binary ones, like classical/unclassical, genre/auteur, art/commercial cinema, European/American, which organised thinking about cinema for a long time are not satisfactory to do this job any more, and new maps are necessary.

Our present endeavour sketches four groups of films: fast, puzzle, hybrid and slow. To our mind, these groups seem to express the most important tendencies of contemporary cinema, the most characteristic trends and directions of development. Fast cinema belongs to a big family of action films, of cinema-movement, and to its sub-class, cinema of spectacle, being their most evident and clear representative. Puzzle films share many of their features with modernist films, but also with classical film noir, to the point that sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference. Hybrid films belong to the long tradition of impure cinema, where cinematic qualities have mingled with borrowings from other arts, media and spheres. Slow cinema, apart from its own tradition harking back to Rosellini's films from the 1950s at least, also has links to other branches of modernist cinema, embodying perfectly the idea of "image time", which comes to the fore when the movement and the action die out.

The four styles depicted in this volume seem dominant in such a sense at least, that they attracted particularly big attention among movie goers and commentators, although they may differ with regard to the kind and scope of this attention. Fast cinema, which is inextricably linked to spectacle and attraction, has flourished in recent years more than ever, with the Marvel series and sequels, prequels or spin-offs of big blockbusters. Puzzle films and slow cinema have become probably the hottest topics in film studies debates of the last 15 years or so, which is testified to by innumerable books, papers, conferences and presentations. Hybridity can be regarded as a peculiar *signum temporis* of our time (we have hybrid wars, hybrid cars, even hybrid wax and nails) and also, in many disguises (such as, among others intermediality, intertextuality) it draws strong attention of film audiences and film studies.

The first part of this volume concerns fast films. **Carlo Comanducci** sees fast (and slow) cinema not in terms of thematic and formal velocity, but in terms of tensions between four kinds of temporality: diegetic, cinematic, narrative, and the temporality of reception. It turns out that “fast” cinema can be surprisingly slow, in an aesthetic sense (extensive use of slow motion), in terms of narration (in spectacular scenes of action the story almost freezes, it does not move forward), or ideological message (“the action cinema genre indeed hangs on a balance between the maximum of life-changing, and life-threatening action, and the maximum of preservation of the *status quo* in most of its senses”). What is most important is the relationship between the various elements of film form which determine “fastness” and “slowness” of a film, and not the relationship to any sort of external norm, be it established by fiat or by statistical analysis.

William Brown links speed with norification, that is a constant tendency in Hollywood cinema of the last 60 years to gradually darken the screen. So, the point of reference for Brown’s philosophically minded essay is not the average speed of Hollywood film, but – if anything – the speed of light. Darkness is when the speed of light is exceeded, so the light does not manage to reach the recipient. A number of metaphors ensue from this equation. Cinema at the speed of darkness overcomes separation between people and the universe and brings about participation. Darkness opposes the logic of total illumination performed on behalf of control of the capital. It opens the human imagination to impossibilities. Cinema at the speed of darkness “ceases to be one that we can see, but rather one that we feel, it is a cinema of affect rather than cognition. Like in “Interstellar”, the speed of darkness allows cinema to be a wormhole, which, connects us to different times and places and makes it possible to reach some new worlds which enrich our own temporary world. A fascination with quantum physics is evident here, and indeed, Will Brown, its well known adherent, reaches for it, alongside the theories of Giorgio Agamben and others.

Filip Cieślak investigates an issue of spectacularity in modern cinema. At first sight it seems to refer to the old dispute over the relationship between cinema of attraction and cinema of narrational integrity. Although these issues are not new, Cieślak gives them a fresh tack. He does not refer new films to the classical ones, but makes a comparison between subsequent films from action cinema series, focusing especially on five series: *Die Hard*, *Predator*, *Mad Max*, *John Wick* and the *Fast and Furious*. Cieślak analyses quantitative and qualitative dimension of films from the series and on this basis he formulates certain generalisations concerning contemporary action cinema. He is far from seeking one

definite “yes” or “no” answer to the question whether spectacle has superseded narration. Indeed, such a generalisation would be preposterous, as it is plainly visible that contemporary films combine more or less peacefully narration and spectacularity. So, Cieślak does not ask the question whether spectacularity supplanted narration; he asks whether the relationship between these two dimensions has changed, and – if so – what the nature of this change is. His answer to the first question is positive. Yes, this relationship has changed. Spectacular scenes in most recent action films, at least from the analysed series, are longer, more condensed, occupy larger stretches of films; they take place simultaneously in various locations; they use a vast array of visual techniques. The price which is paid for this expansion of spectacle is a simplification of character psychology and narrative complexity, but not in comparison with spectacular films from the classical era – Cieślak does not employ this perspective at all – but in comparison with earlier films from each series.

The next mode described in this volume is called “puzzle”. It refers to what is probably the most hotly discussed phenomenon in film culture of the last 20 years or so, bearing many names, described, among others, by David Bordwell, Warren Buckland, Allan Cameron, Thomas Elsaesser, Steven Hven, Elfetheria Thanouli, Milos Kiss and Steven Willemsen, to name a few. What has fascinated the researchers was and is not merely the sudden flow of “difficult” films which confuse time, space and characters – such films happened before, although not in such a number. What was extraordinary was that this flow appeared not in the art-house niche, but within popular cinema, which was regarded as a stronghold of simple, easy-to grasp films. So, the question appeared, which many researchers attempted to answer, to what extent this wave is a new phenomenon, and to what it is a modified version of “business as usual”, that is well known and well-defined classical cinema.

Barbara Szczekała tackles the same issue as Filip Cieślak, that of the relationship between narration and spectacle, from yet another perspective. She focuses on the mutual influences of two strands of modern cinema: puzzle (or mind game) films on the one hand and spectacular blockbusters on the other. Traditionally placed on two sides of the commercial / art cinema division, here they come closer, mingle with each other. Szczekała points to the aspects of attraction in mind-game films and to the aspects of narrative complexity in spectacular blockbusters, but, above all, she insists that both kinds of cinema elicit the same kind of viewer response, which combine disorientation and some sort of affective discomfort, reminding of “ilinx”, a type of game described by Roger Calloix, which draws a participant into “a state of kinetic or mental chaos.”

Matthias Brütsch asks whether classical cinema should be the point of reference for essays on puzzle films and immediately answers that such a question suffers from a lack of methodological rigour, not least because of the diversity of the films under discussion. Therefore Brütsch limits his research to only one kind of puzzle films, in which a loop appears. Even within this limited scope he refrains from a definite conclusion, but rather takes an “in-between” stance, stating that loop films occupy a wide spectrum of narrative positions from classical mainstream to experimental complexity, as “the same basic time-loop device can be used to forge narrations which vary considerably in their adherence to or departure from classical norms of storytelling.” The core of the essay is a set of tools for analysing loop films. It consists of twelve key features with two to three variables for each of them. Theoretically this could give a large number of types of loop, but Brütsch confines himself to only four types, conceding that more are possible. Brütsch also suggests a penchant of each type of loop for some kind of moral philosophy, as well as a film genre.

Seung-hoon Jeong's paper concerns yet another form of puzzle films, called most often “network narratives”, analysed extensively, among others, by David Bordwell (2008). Yet Seung-hoon Jeong chooses a different path. His paper belongs to the most philosophically-minded in this volume. He draws on Agamben, Lacan, Foucault, Latour and other eminent philosophers. Network narratives usually present several protagonists inhabiting distinct yet interlocking storylines. What is characteristic of this type of narratives is the tension between chaos and unity. At first sight it seems that they present the world as a site of disparate characters, stories and events which do not make up any sensible whole. Yet, the idea of the whole, of some sort of higher order, which magically or metaphysically unite what seems to be dispersed, hovers over network narratives, either as an intended film message, or as a viewer's expectation. Seung-hoon Jeong examines this tension along a sociological axis. For him a rapid expansion of network narratives reflects an important sociological phenomenon, namely, a transition from community to network. Seung-hoon Jeong focuses on the notion of abjection, borrowed from Julia Kristeva, as a central theme. Along this axis he distinguishes three types of narrative, each of them expressing a different type of societal organisation. First, there is a type of narrative centred around a dominant father-figure “who controls a family, a city, an army, a religious group.” This narrative is characteristic of a community, which nurtures the sense of belonging, membership, or nationality among the subjects and forming the boundary between inside and outside, ‘us’ and ‘others,’ our friends and enemies — the latter is the potential object of collective abjection. The next kind of narrative is what is usually regarded as typical network narrative – “several protagonists

inhabiting distinct yet interlocking storylines.” Seung-hoon Jeong links this kind of narrative with globalisation and its paradoxes: globalisation forms a planetary system of inclusion, and yet it leaves many people behind, generating symptoms of exclusion. He calls this type of film “global network narratives”. The third kind of narrative examined by Seung-hoon Jeong is called “*pure network narratives with free-floating agents*”. Their characters are also “abjected”, that is, excluded from society, but they do not strive for reintegration. These films are built around series of haphazard encounters and events, around aimless *flâneur* – like wanderings and philosophical discussions with various people on free will, metaphysics, situationism. “What matters is solely the continuity of “networking as a process rather than a map or figure,” a process of navigational, performative movement liberated from any universal social model that enforces and rigidifies habitual modes of living”.

The third part of this volume concerns “hybrid” films. Its natural juxtaposition would be “pure cinema”, and a “medium specificity” argument (Carroll, 2008, pp. 35-52). Yet, one can hardly meet anybody today who would advocate a “pure” cinema. Since Bazin’s famous defence of impurity in cinema at least (Bazin, 1951), and probably for much longer it has been obvious that cinema thrives on impurity (Rosen, 2014; Helman, Ostaszewski, 2007), in an atmosphere of intermediality, dialogues and exchanges among arts, traditions and cultures. Lucia Nagib and Anne Jerslev are more than right when they state that “the expression ‘impure cinema’ is a tautology, given cinema’s very nature as a mixture of arts and media” and that cinema from its early days “never ceased to be defined as hybrid” (Nagib, Jerlev, 2014, p. XIX). So the question is not whether cinema is or is not impure, but rather, what kind of hybridity is particularly relevant to a given period. There were times when cinema was perceived most of all in combination with theatre (early years), music (the 20s) or literature (the 60s). In this volume we would like to focus on hybridity which is especially characteristic of our times, namely, to mixes of cinema and videogames, an intercinematic mix of live-action with animation, and a combination of comic strips with feature theatrical cinema. There can be no doubt that this kind of hybridity is specific to our times.

It is a cliché to say that videogames have exerted a great influence on contemporary visual culture in general and on feature films in particular, but the exact forms of this influence and its consequences demand ongoing scrutiny. **Warren Buckland** belongs to those researchers who consequently, in a series of papers published over many years, has investigated this issue. His paper in this volume on the one hand summarises his findings to date, while on the other, opens

up new paths for research. Buckland combines a focused, technical perspective, with a much wider breadth. From a technical standpoint, he lists 16 “rules of videogame logic” and shows how they are used in two films, *Source Code* and *Inception*. These two films are, for Buckland, exemplary instances of a hybrid narrative-videogame logic. This hybrid is one more consequence of digitalisation, for videogames are digital by nature. So, a hybrid of narrative and videogame logic is a by-product of an encounter of a tradition of cinematic narration, rooted in XIX century photography and literature, with new phenomenon of digital data-processing. This encounter, in turn, must lead to verification of the notion of realism, and to massive changes in designing and understanding fictional worlds, which do not obey the rules of mimesis and probability. A question can be asked, whether these films signify a transitory stage, where an old order, doomed to vanish, defends itself, trying to adapt to new circumstances, or do they prove that the state of a new equilibrium has been reached.

Another form of hybridity so prominent nowadays concerns an intersection of cinema and comic books. **Tomasz Żaglewski** attempts to explain the unprecedented success of MCU productions, their followers and imitators. In his account, the bedrock of this success was the decision to transfer to cinema a strategy launched by comic book producers in the late 50s / early 60s, which in essence meant a turn “from the ‘serialised’ to ‘universe-alised’ narrative model”. Basic tools [ingredients] of this strategy, namely “reboot/retcon”, “crossover” and “universe/multiverse”, have co-mingled with convergence, transmediality and remediation, so characteristic of our times, and this combination produced a powerful explosive. Żaglewski depicts a history of this strategy in comic books, and subsequent early, unsuccessful attempts to adapt it to cinema. These attempts were, in his account, either not good enough, or not brave enough to succeed, but to my mind the real reason for their failure lay elsewhere. They were premature, the film audience was not yet prepared to embrace this form of narration, which essentially consists of rejection of an idea of a self-contained movie (which formed the basis of film experience throughout almost the whole history of cinema) and its replacement with an idea of all-encompassing inter- and transtextuality. In this form, “virgin” (i.e. uninitiated) audience members are sacrificed at the altar of an interconnected reading, once the domain of comic geeks, nowadays probably the most expansive habit of film viewing.

It can be said that the idea of a multiverse, where various timelines coexist, where past, present and future intermingle, where characters from many different comic books meet and interact, where various genres, such as sci-fi, fantasy, teen comedy, thriller and heist movies blend perfectly together, that such an idea

gives a final blow to the concepts of coherence, purity and medium specificity. The latter category, so cherished by film theorists and practitioners for the major part of film history, has also been undermined by another form of hybridity, which, by the way, occupies a prominent place in the *Avengers* franchise as well, but goes far beyond it: a combination of animation and live action. This phenomenon is discussed by **Michał Piepiórka**. For a long time animation and live action films were regarded as oppositional poles of cinema: the former being closer to fine arts, imagination and worlds of fantasy; the latter to photography and realism. Until recently they were kept apart and only exceptionally met in a film, on the screen. Nowadays, in times of digitality, such encounters have become easy to achieve and are very frequent, and a palette of their forms, meanings and possible usages have expanded. Each animation / live action encounter is in essence a form of a multiverse, where radically different worlds clash, meet, intersect, interact and/or intermingle. Piepiórka painstakingly lists and describes various types of relationships between them, pointing out, that while animation “still symbolises what is transcendent towards the world of live-action” and acts as a sign of what is what belongs to a distinct order, at the same time it intervenes in a known reality. Films which combine live action with animation are based if not on paradox, then at least on a constant tension: on the one hand, each form must manifest its distinctiveness and otherness; on the other, they must somehow cooperate, cohabit and relate to each other.

Slow cinema, the topic of the last part of the volume, is at the other end of the spectrum from fast cinema, which opened the volume. Bipolar opposition seems to be more than natural here, with slow cinema as a form of image time (when action stops and we can experience purely optical or aural situations, juxtaposed to sensory-motor schema of image-movement; as a form of transcendental cinema of quasi-religious experience (Schrader, 2018; Stańczyk, 2019), juxtaposed with materialistic cinema of action; as a radical act of rebellion against the speed of the contemporary world; as a new embodiment of modernist, art house cinema (Syska, 2014), juxtaposed to commercial films; as a kingdom of boredom juxtaposed to constant, ceaseless and breath-taking attraction. The authors of this part of this book avoid these paths and search for other contexts and more diversified structures. **Thomas Elsaesser** puts slow cinema in a double context of cinema and museum on the one hand, and attention and distraction on the other. Both these pairs seem antagonistic and traditionally have been regarded as such. Moreover, they seem to create an antagonistic structure: cinema/distraction against museum/attention. And yet, Elsaesser takes pains to dismantle these oppositions. He proves that the mode of reception in museum and in cinema does not differ so much: in both places concentration of attention is recommend-

ed and in both many communal diversions interfere. Also, both institutions, for the most part of XX century kept apart, while in XXI century they have become close allies to the extent that it is almost impossible today to see a museum which does not make use of moving images. Likewise, the opposition between attention and distraction is being dismantled. Attention is not the opposite of distraction, but one possible mode of reception within the multi-tasking structure of perception in our society; distraction means an ability to concentrate partial attention on several objects or processes at the same time. This is exactly the structure into which Elsaesser puts slow cinema, as a channel of partial attention within a society, where distraction, multi-tasking and a sensory division of perceptual labour are the new normal.

Marta Stańczyk combines slow cinema with sensuous theory based upon the tradition of existential phenomenology. She focuses on rhythm in slow cinema, perceived through the prism of corporeal narratology. She, therefore, rejects theories in which rhythm is perceived as an external force imposed upon film from outside, particularly by editing, but also by music. Metric measures as a form of rhythm depiction are not convincing either. Rhythm is rather a matter of internal feeling and intuition. Slow cinema, in which all external forms of rhythmisation, such as editing, music and action are reduced, is the best tool for emphasizing a pure rhythm, which, in turn, corresponds to the internal rhythms of both filmmakers and viewers. In Stańczyk's "visceral rhythmology" an internal rhythm bonds films with bodies and leads to an embodied experience.

Mirosław Przyłipiak in the last essay of the volume refers to Stańczyk when he polemicalises with a view expressed, among others, by András Bálint Kovács, that slow cinema is anthropomorphic and it imitates regular human perception, because it is based on continuity of the human gaze. Przyłipiak argues that the human gaze is not continuous and that long takes in slow movies are very far from resembling the way human perception works. In fact, they do not produce a reality effect, but rather a *verfremdung effect* which alienates the viewer. This *verfremdung effect* is not a goal in itself, but a "portal" through which slow movies are able to realize their potential in producing transcendental states in the viewers. Przyłipiak supports this view with ideas drawn from Amédée Ayfre, Paul Schrader and Henri Bergson, taking as an example *Satantango* by Bela Tarr, an ultimate movie, which combines all of the tendencies discussed in this volume, not only being a paramount example of slow cinema, but also sharing some important characteristics with puzzle, hybrid and even fast movies.

So, four modes – or styles – which reflect dominant tendencies of contemporary cinema. And twelve essays, which reflect dominant approaches of contem-

porary academic writing about cinema. Film studies today display a penchant for philosophical contextualisation of aesthetic means and solutions. In addition, a system of binary thinking, in which a dominant side acts as a background and point of reference for subsidiary ones, is superseded by a model of multiple relations between many factors.

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