Paweł Sitkiewicz: Phantasmagorias. Some Thoughts on Bruno Schulz's Cinematic Imagination

Did Bruno Schulz go to the cinema? Did he like films? What did he most enjoy watching? Has cinema left its mark on his work? The surviving letters, memories of the writer, and his literary texts will not help us find a clear-cut, let alone exhaustive, answer to these questions. From the fragmentary accounts and by reading between the lines one can, however, make a few assumptions. But do we even have the right to speculate that far? And if so, to what end?

The life and work of Schulz have been subject to hermeneutic experiments for the past several decades. Scholars fascinated by the author's literary and artistic tastes—not to mention those who seek to understand his thoughts and emotions—must rely on snippets of memories and, above all, texts and drawings. In my opinion, the fascination with the Drohobych writer, who left behind a rather modest body of work in terms of quantity, is like deciphering a forgotten language or reconstructing a lost culture. Therefore, any element that allows for a better understanding of the Schulzian work in progress—such as accounts of his contemporaries, recovered letters and artworks, as well as interpretations and hypotheses—brings us closer to solving the ultimate mystery of this elusive oeuvre. At the end of this journey, of course, awaits the legendary novel *The Messiah*, which—as numerous schulzologists presumably believe—would provide answers to all these questions.

Schulz's generation, not excluding his fellow writers, was almost unanimously fascinated by cinema, though it was not appropriate to speak about it overtly at the time. Most poets and prose writers of the interwar period were to some extent involved with the Seventh Art. Słonimski wrote film reviews, Kaden-Bandrowski—novels that were later adapted for the screen, Irzykowski focused on film theory, Witkacy appeared twice on camera, while Anatol Stern wrote screenplays. The list goes on. "Given the ubiquity of film screenings themselves and the variety of venues, it must be assumed that […] by around 1907 it was simply impossible to avoid an encounter with cinema"[1], wrote Małgorzata Hendrykowska.

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1 M. Hendrykowska, *Śladami tamtych cieni. Film w kulturze polskiej przełomu stuleci 1895–1914*, Poznań 1993, p. 219.

A dozen or so years later, during the interwar period, the ritual of going to the cinema became widespread, especially among the middle class, urban residents, administrative staff, children and young people. When the first film screenings were taking place on Polish soil, Schulz was of school age. As established by Jerzy Ficowski, Bruno's brother, Izydor, ran the "Urania" cinema in Drohobych at the beginning of the 20th century, where the future writer must have spent many an evening[2]. As a result, he gained a solid film education. He later included descriptions of these screenings in the volume *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*. "I spent the evenings of that summer in the town's only cinema, staying there until the end of the last performance"[3], says the narrator of *A Night in July*. Due to the deeply autobiographical nature of Schulz's literary work, this confession may be viewed as a kind of creed. Ficowski openly calls Schulz a film buff [*kinoman*] adding that cinema influenced his "imagination and work", and that his older brother's picture house, along with his father's shop, constituted the "mythological fodder and poetic infatuation" of his youth[4]. He also mentions Halina and Józef Wittlin, who recall Schulz expressing his "enthusiastic interest" in Walt Disney's animated films.

And here we encounter a problem. Even in the film passage in *A Night in July*, the cinema impressions focus mainly on the lobby and the cashier's box instead of the repertoire or the magic of moving images. The narrator mentions "the cinema hall, with its fleeting lights and shadows" and "the fantastic adventures of the film". There is a sense of detachment or even disregard in these words. Moreover, in Schulz's other short stories, his brother's cinema is nowhere to be found, instead, his father's shop serves as a symbolic centre in the private mythology of Drohobych. This one brief reference is hardly enough for an avid film enthusiast. In Schulz's prose, a much more significant role is played by literature, painting drawing, and even circus.

In my opinion, Schulz's attitude towards cinema may have been somewhat schizophrenic. This affliction was common to the entire generation of that time. The problem is best illustrated by the case of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, a close friend of Schulz, whose film preferences we are more familiar with. "Witkacy enjoyed cinema but didn't hold it in esteem", wrote Katarzyna Taras, "he made use of its techniques but spoke of it unfavourably (as did his characters), despite being aware of the role of cinema in 20th-century culture"[5]. Witkacy's taste in films was by no means refined. From a letter written by

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2 J. Ficowski, *Regiony wielkiej herezji i okolice. Bruno Schulz i jego mitologia*, Sejny 2002, p. 130.

3 B. Schulz, *A Night in July*, trans. C. Wieniewska, in: id., *The Collected Works of Bruno Schulz*, ed. J. Ficowski, London 1998, p. 177.

4 J. Ficowski, op. cit., pp. 133–134.

5 K. Taras, *Witkacy i film*, Warsaw 2005, p. 99.

Jadwiga Witkiewiczowa, we learn that her husband was especially fond of Disney cartoons (!), as well as films featuring Rudolf Valentino, Chaplin and Keaton, i.e. trivial, genre-specific things[6]. While shaving, he liked to impersonate popular actors, and afterwards he would seamlessly return to his theory of Pure Form. It may have been similar in Schulz's case. In private conversations he would praise the Micky Mouse cartoons yet remained cautious about using film references in his literary work.

For those growing up in the ambiance of Young Poland and the reverence for traditional art, embracing cinema required some effort. However, Schulz was not an old-fashioned sage in an ivory tower, lost in "spiritual heights". He was a humble teacher uncertain of his own talent. He enjoyed striking a theatrical pose, as evidenced by his self-portraits in countless arrangements and roles, as well as photographs—especially the famous masquerade with Witkacy, Jan Kochanowski and Roman Jasiński, and the carefully staged portrait in slippers. He had a weakness for anything low and degraded. In a letter from Paris, he did not marvel at the architecture or cultural life, but rather the Parisian women, ease of manners, "coquettes" and pace of life, essentially the urban landscape, of which the cinema was a constant element at that time[7]. Before the Great War, the cinema was frequently likened to a prostitute, as it shamelessly exposed what should remain hidden and enticed passers-by with cheap allure[8]. A trip to a small, shabby cinema offered a thrill comparable to visiting a cabaret or perhaps even a strip show. Maybe Drohobych's cinemas could be found on the Street of Crocodiles in the district of "modernity and metropolitan corruption".

When reflecting on Bruno Schulz's film experience, one could take a shortcut and disregard how many times he bought a cinema ticket and whether he did indeed leave only after the final screening. As has been written many times before, the entire culture of the interwar period was imbued with film, which influenced the style of novels, trends in painting and graphic art, theatrical performance as well as poetic language. Film created a new kind of visual experience. Paradoxically, it freed prose from the necessity of a realistic portrayal of the world. One may call it a model symbiosis between the two arts: on the one hand, cinematic imagery brought new life to narrative strategies in novels, while on the other hand, Polish cinema of the interwar period was heavily influenced by literature, drawing inspiration from it to an excessive degree[9]. Marshall

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6 After: ibid., p. 96–97.

7 B. Schulz, *The Collected Works of Bruno Schulz*, op. cit., p. 442.

8 See: Y. Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception*, trans. A. Bodger, London––New York 2005, p. 27.

9 An exhaustive description of this relationship is given by A. Madej, *Między filmem a literaturą. Szkic*

McLuhan argued that the medium is never neutral. Its "message" transforms the entire culture.

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Even if we agree with Ficowski, we will still not get answers to the key questions: in what way did cinema influence the imagination and work of Bruno Schulz? What does it mean to write in cinematic style?

When examining this question, it is easy to make a mistake. Film critics and literary scholars unfortunately tend to attribute cinematic fascination to people who could not have been acquainted with cinematography, as they died before its debut. The second common mistake is defining the essence of cinematic imagination according to the experiences of someone brought up in the second half of the 20th century. From this perspective, the cinematic quality of prose mainly refers to: dynamic composition, image editing, rhythmisation, a fast pace of events, a kaleidoscope of parallel threads, as well as references to popular genre and plot conventions. However, Schulz's prose has little in common with such a definition of cinematicity and may even contradict it. The matter unfortunately turns out to be more complex.

It is true that cinema in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly after the silent era, was already a mature art form fully equipped with means of expression. Nevertheless, the experiences of viewers—especially in Poland, pieced together from three partitions—could vary greatly. This was indeed a period of abundant revolutionary changes in the approach to cinema: from a scientific tool to so-called cinema of attractions, to a social phenomenon and a new artistic language. The generation born in the 19th century and growing up in the early 20th century was fascinated by a novelty that bore little resemblance to modern-day film. A visit to a makeshift picture house, not to mention a travelling cinema, involved a different scale of attraction compared to a feature-length screening at a Warsaw or, especially, Parisian picture palace. In short, during the interwar period "cinematic quality" was a concept understood more broadly than it is today, and the range of on-screen pleasures was richer and more intricate.

Moreover, the nature of film inspiration was dependent on the writer's social circles. Publicists of the interwar period understood these nuances and were able to distinguish between different strains of "film fever". Fascinated by the "city, mass and machine" the literary avant-garde regarded cinema differently to, say, prose writers growing up in the culture of Young Poland, such as Władysław

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o powieści filmowej, in: *Film polski wobec innych sztuk*, ed. A. Helman, A. Madej, Katowice 1979. The present article refers to her conclusions.

Reymont, Stanisław Przybyszewski or Stefan Żeromski. The attitude towards "moving pictures" was different for the modernist Witkacy compared to Dołęga-Mostowicz, whose readers likely enjoyed hanging out at picture houses. The "mad rush" of cinema was something entirely different from what Stefania Zahorska described as the cinematic interweaving of different layers of reality and "exuberant sensualism" in the experimental prose of the 1930s[10].

Stefania Zahorska, one of the most prominent essayists and film critics of the interwar period, argued that cinema influenced how the fictional world is described in novels. As a result, writers can no longer rely on straightforward comparisons or epithets. Young literature, "analytical and sensuous", uses metaphor in a dynamic way. According to this concept, cinematic quality implies a specific model of visual imagination and has nothing to do with either genre conventions, editing ellipsis or fast-paced narrative. It can be identified by a particular type of description that makes images materialise in the imagination in a tangible and vivid yet seamless manner: one scene transitions into another, and a single word sets off a whole cascade of images. "In a slow-motion photo that the writer moves before his reader's eyes, all the features of the objects described are exaggerated. They become individual, singular, one-time, sensuous, tangible [..]"[11], wrote Zahorska in 1934. As an example, she used "the young author, Bruno Schultz [!]".

If one follows Zahorska's line of thought, then a writer raised in a film culture, especially one who liked to experiment with form, could not, at the time, have written: "Mother and I walked through the Market Square. The heat was unbearable." That is why Bruno Schulz unravels a dreamlike vision before us: "Thus my mother and I ambled along the two sunny sides of Market Square, guiding our broken shadows along the houses as over a keyboard. Under our soft steps the squares of the paving stones slowly filed past—some the pale pink of human skin, some golden, some blue-grey, all flat, warm and velvety in the sun, like sundials, trodden to the point of obliteration, into blessed nothingness"[12]. By weaving together images of the walk in the blinding sunlight, great shadows flitting across the buildings, and the sight of cobblestones that seem to come alive in the heat of the air, the narrator transcends the boundaries of conventional description, bringing to life a world composed of sensory experiences.

This kind of quality should be traced back to the origins of the cinema. Even the first essayists and film critics were seduced by the animistic and analytical traits of the Lumière brothers' invention. They discovered that, while the cinematograph might seem to merely capture reality in motion, it actually allows one to look at it from a distance, breaking down space, and even time, into individual

10 S. Zahorska, *Co powieść zawdzięcza filmowi?*, "Kurier Literacko-Naukowy" 1934, no. 29, p. 3.
11 Ibid.
12 B. Schulz, *August*, trans. C. Wieniewska, in: id., *The Collected Works...*, op. cit., p. 10.

elements. It was not until cinematograph that people noticed how much poetry was hidden in trivial images: leaves blowing in the wind or the sea waves hitting the shore. Despite appearances, admiration for the sensory aspects of the world captured on film was not limited to early cinema. It continued to play an essential role during the interwar period. "One must understand that visibility, visual richness, saturation with visual impressions, their novelty and approach to the spectacle of life itself—in cinema all of this is *everything*"[13], wrote Pavel Muratov in 1925. Many more similar statements can be found in anthologies about early film theory.

One does not need to do thorough research to confirm Zahorska's observation about the "cinematic" reception of Schulz's works before 1939. This means that *The Cinnamon Shops* and *Sanatorium*... were already defined according to the experience of the contemporary viewer, who was most familiar with silent cinema of attractions. Reviews often highlighted the dynamic and sensuous nature of the diegetic world. When trying to figure out Schulz's style, many referred to the photographic or quasi-cinematic metaphor. A "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" critic described it as a "bizarre vision", "a dream filled with delusions and horrors"[14]. A columnist from "Dziennik Poznański" wrote about the "phantasmagority" and "phantomness" in the prose of the Drohobycz writer (note that back then films were called "phantasmagorias"), as well as "visions" (suggesting that *The Cinnamon Shops* are perceived visually like cinema)[15]. Henryk Vogler dubbed Schulz a sensualist, noticing how he "catches the external, sensuous side of reality [like a camera—P. S.], from this reality there exists for him only an orgiastic dance of colour, light and sound"[16]. Moreover, in Vogler's view, Schulzian drawings "bear witness to author's pursuit of a greater, optical, sensuous representation of the world". Although Vogler does not mention the word "cinema", the optical capturing of reality in motion evokes clear associations, not only for film experts. As for Emil Breiter writing for "Wiadomości Literackie", he compared Schulz's work to a kind of shadow play or magic lantern—spectacles belonging to film prehistory. "The ability to exaggerate the details", wrote Breiter, "to give them new colours and extraordinary possibilities is a special kind of distortion of reality. It is a reality of shadows, cast by small objects onto the screen of a wall, illuminated by the final flicker of dying candle"[17].

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13 P. Muratow, *Kinematograf [1925]*, in *Cudowny kinemo. Rosyjska myśl filmowa*, transl. and comp. by T. Szczepański, B. Żyłko, Gdańsk 2003, p. 91.

14 J. J., *Sen pełen zmor…*, "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" 1934, no. 19, p. 385.

15 K. Troczyński, *'Sklepy cynamonowe' B. Szulca*, "Dziennik Poznański" 1934, no. 101, p. 2.

16 H. Vogler, *Dwa światy romantyczne. O Brunonie Schulzu i Witoldzie Gombrowiczu*, "Skamander" 1938, n. 99/101, p. 247.

17 E. Breiter, *'Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą' Schulza*, "Wiadomości Literackie" 1938, no. 23, p. 4.

In Bruno Schulz's biography we will also find arguments confirming his cinematic way of constructing the fictional world. Schulz revealed in a survey for "Wiadomości Literackie" that the starting point in his creative process was a snapshot, a singular form which, I assume, must grow, swell, transform into sensuous images and keeps evolving. The first seed of *Birds* was supposedly "a certain flickering of the wallpaper, pulsating in a dark field of vision"; as for *Spring*: "the image of a stamp album, radiating from the center of vision, winking with unheard-of power of allusion"[18]. It proves that Schulz, as a prose writer, was a visualist, a sensualist; he valued "a certain dynamic state" more than a conventional plot. His sensitivity to moving images (on the verge of abstraction) and to the play of colour, light and coincidental forms even brings him closer to the filmmakers of the avant-garde circle, who were interested in escaping from a realistic representation of the world. (As a side note, we should add that Feliks Kuczkowski, a theorist of the so-called synthetic-visionary film, referred to abstract cinematic painting as moving wallpaper)[19].

Schulz's dynamic imagination has been repeatedly discussed by scholars of his work, as well as by filmmakers who have dared to adapt his work. Here, I would like to point out a few accurate observations. In his text on the visual narration of the Drohobych writer, Zbigniew Taranienko highlighted the fluidity of the created world, the numerous metamorphoses, and the "plasticity of matter"; he also wrote about "the animisation of inanimate objects and the anthropomorphisation of animals accompanied by reification of fragments from the organic world"[20]. The spirit of animism was also observed by Jan Gondowicz, writing about "blinking matter" (it is no coincidence that his text appeared both in "Kwartalnik Filmowy" and in the volume on the grey areas of Schulzology). Gondowicz also discovered the instability of Schulz's drawings[21]. He noticed in them the "art of inversion"—the transformation of images viewed from different perspectives. According to Gondowicz, the drawings conceal seemingly invisible meanings. They are transformed before our eyes: for example, a cat when viewed upside down turns into a dog, and a Hasid transforms into Mephistopheles. Images of this kind, i.e. inversions, anamorphoses, hidden figures, are sometimes regarded as the prehistory of cinema, as they perform a function similar to that of optical toys—using

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18 *W pracowniach pisarzy i uczonych polskich [ankieta]*, "Wiadomości Literackie" 1939, no. 17, p. 5. An excerpt from this interview was translated in: J. Ficowski, *Regions of the Great Heresy*, trans. T. Robertson, New York—London 2003, pp. 146—147.

19 F. Kuczkowski, *Wspomnienia o filmie przyszłości*, typescript in Filmoteka Narodowa archive, signature A-129.

20 Z. Taranienko, *Narracja plastyczna w prozie Schulza*, in: *Teatr pamięci Brunona Schulza*, ed. J. Ciechowicz, H. Kasjaniuk, Gdynia 1993, p. 46.

21 J. Gondowicz, *Mrugająca materia*, in: *Białe plamy schulzologii*, ed. M. Kitowska-Łysiak, Lublin 2010. See also: "Kwartalnik Filmowy" 2009, no. 65.

simple measures they attempt to convey the illusion of movement. Schulz's drawings sometimes seem like avant-garde film projects—with endless variations on the same themes, obsessively recurring motifs (especially self-portraits), which often emerge from a tangle of forms only to get lost again in the chaos of lines.

Krzysztof Miklaszewski, fascinated by the cinematic quality of Schulz's prose, referred to his short stories as "shooting scripts written in poetic prose", but at the same time noticed something important: "an excess of possibilities, resulting from the graphic saturation of the image"[22]. It is precisely this "saturation" that lies at the heart of the problem. It is what makes the short stories from *The Cinnamon Shops* and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* seem cinematic, yet difficult to adapt. If someone wanted to use such a storyboard they would be doomed to fail. "This extraordinary world cannot be depicted", wrote Wojciech Grabowski. "It exists only as you read. Only those who realise this have a chance to make creative use" of Schulz's literary oeuvre[23]. The Quay Brothers, whose *The Street of Crocodiles* (1986) is considered one of the most successful adaptations of the Drohobych writer's fiction, rejected his family mythology and characters, simplified the events, but—according to the filmmakers themselves—remained faithful to the idea expressed in *The Treatise on Mannequins* (also known as *Treatise on Tailors' Dummies*): "We tried to find that borderland of fragility, where in the semi-darkness one can peek at the vibrations and trembling of things, as if trying to resurrect, re-animate themselves"[24]. It seems that they instinctively guessed the essence of the cinematic nature of *The Cinnamon Shops*. Paradoxically, this kind of cinematic nature is almost untranslatable into the language of contemporary cinema, as it refers to the original, animistic qualities of the Seventh Art, rejecting fast-paced action or filmic narrative techniques. Directors who, in their adaptations of Schulz's prose, focused more attention on ideas than poetics, have without exception failed artistically.

So if one were to look for cinematic inspiration in Bruno Schulz's work, it would certainly not be in the elegant film theatres and not in the 1930s. Bruno Schulz's literary imagination seems more in line with the poetics of early cinema (or perhaps even its prehistory!) than with the formally mature film of the classical period, such as Walt Disney's cartoons. Schulz set great store by the "iron capital of the spirit" deposited in childhood, writing that creativity consists in the exegesis of "the secret entrusted to them at the outset"[25]. Perhaps, then, the

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22 K. Miklaszewski, Zatracenie się w Schulzu. Historia pewnej fascynacji, Warszawa 2009, pp. 148–149.

23 W. Grabowski, Schulz w Krakowie, "Kino" 1993, no. 1, p. 33.

24 *Gabinet Braci Quay. Z Braćmi Quay rozmawiają Kuba Mikurda & Michał Oleszczyk*, in: *Trzynasty miesiąc. Kino Braci Quay*, ed. K. Mikurda, A. Prodeus, Kraków–Warszawa 2010, p. 97.

25 *Bruno Schulz: An Essay for S. I. Witkiewicz*, in: *The Collected Works of Bruno Schulz*, op. cit., p. 368.

cinematic inspirations (or even fascinations) were instilled unconsciously, during his first visits to the local picture house [*iluzjon*], or maybe they stemmed from his youthful admiration for the magic of moving images, which he so beautifully described in his short story *A Night in July*? The aura of film screenings before the First World War seems to confirm this hypothesis, which, it should be noted, has already been formulated by Jerzy Ficowski.

Early audiences were rarely interested in the films themselves, as their plots were mostly petty and formulaic (which is why the narrator in *A Night in July* does not mention the repertoire at all). They were more excited by the very atmosphere of the cinema, likened by contemporaries to an "underwater realm", a place both mysterious and threatening, as well as the creation of a non-existent world in the image and likeness of off-screen reality. The small provincial cinema was dark and warm (the apparatus would heat up significantly, it was stuffy, as the rooms had no ventilation), and there was a strange smell, since gas burners were often used as a source of light. The projector light had a yellowish hue, the silver-plated screens and the monotonous sound of the rattling cinematograph intensified the sense of unreality. Whatever appeared on screen would still arouse the enthusiasm of the audience, who were fascinated by the dynamism of forms, the movement of something that should have remained lifeless. Many screenings began with a still photograph which, after turning the crank, suddenly came to life, arousing a mixture of awe and amazement. The simplest tricks, from a train heading towards the screen to Meliesian magic of disappearances and transformations, unsettled the audience. It is this kind of experience that film theorists inspired by psychoanalysis compare to a waking dream, a Platonic cave or even fetal life. In all three states, the subject perceives phantasmagorias—distorted images of the real world. Exactly as in the short story *A Night in July*, where the cinema theatre is an unreal place and "time stood still". The spell only breaks when the protagonist crosses the glass doors of the waiting room and walks out all alone into the immensity of a July night.

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Defining Bruno Schulz's cinematic imagination according to the nature of early cinema allows us to perceive his literary work somewhat differently. It is not only about the language or the narration style, but also the sense of those ambiguous images. Can we thus consider poetic visions in *The Cinnamon Shops* and *Sanatorium…* as variations on films seen as a child in his brother's picture house? I do not think we have the right to do that. It is a shame that the famous letter to Witkacy did not start with something like: "The origins of my writing get lost in a mythological haze. I could not yet write well when I was already covering the pages with my first stories. At first, they were just film stories". If this were

the case, interpreting Schulz's vision through a cinematic lens would have solid grounds.

Ultimately, it is the readers who decide which interpretive framework to use. Perhaps the cinematic sensibility of contemporary viewer, more common than before the war, allows us to better understand why these two volumes of short stories were such a success in the history of Polish literature. To the generation raised on audiovisual culture from an early age Schulz spoke convincingly and up front—his poetic prose revealed hidden meanings for both literary experts and all the readers sensitive to the "plasticity of matter". Schulz's biography at least gives us the right not to hastily dismiss filmic tropes in his short stories. And there are a lot of them. Unfortunately, the majority are hidden away under multi-layered metaphors. It is a true paradise for psychoanalytic film critics who could easily prove that numerous phantasmagorias are literary processed and heavily mythologised memories from early XX-century cinematography. The power of mythologising causes film screenings to acquire characteristics of the prehistory of cinema.

The short stories repeatedly feature the motif of the sky becoming a screen, once even decorated with curtains; fantastic and even abstract images are projected onto it, made up of either celestial bodies or a flock of birds. An equally frequent motif is shadow play, generally incidental, evoked by an "oil lamp with a spotlight" or a dying candle. Allusions are made several times to the camera obscura, the oldest projector in human history. In *The Age of Genius*, a "flood of paintings" flows in through an open window, creating a quasi-film show on the wall: "That dark room came to life only by the reflections of the houses far beyond the window, showing their colours in its depth as in a camera obscura"[26]. A similar effect can be found in *The Cinnamon Shops* and *Visitation*.

Cinematic associations are also evoked by animated drawings (*The Age of Genius*); the wind rustling the pages of The Book, "merging the colours and shapes", and "the crystals hanging from the lamp" refracting light and casting rainbow colours onto the walls of the room (*The Book*); a photoshoot with dream-like decorations (*Spring*); the lenses through which the protagonist observes the world (*Dead Season*); "a kind of enormous bellows", a combination of a telescope, camera obscura and automobile (*Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*); and countless "illuminations" and "reflexes" on walls, wallpapers and vaults.

The most cinematic story is, in my opinion, *The Comet* published in "Wiadomości Literackie". It can even be interpreted as a sequence of night film screenings projected onto the sky illuminated by the comet filtered through Schulzian. The magic tricks of Georges Méliès with multiplicated rabbits,

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26 B. Schulz, *The Age of Genius*, in: ibid., p. 120.

burlesque cyclists, the transformation of a flickering and blinking sculpture into Aunt Wanda ("true image"), and especially a chimney which is neither a telescope, nor a microscope, nor a camera. In its lense the Moon turns into a brain, and then an embryo. Perhaps Schulz was referring to a technique popular at the time known as the "cat's eye" (the aperture obscures the edges of the frame so that the image has a circular shape; it was mainly used for large close-ups, for example to create a magnifying glass or microscope effect, but also to isolate a critical part of the frame). Near the end of the story, as the comet disappears over the horizon, the narrator announces that "the cosmic perspectives were hurriedly rolled down" (meaning the screen's sheet) and everyday activities were resumed.

The study of film tropes in Schulz's prose may help answer the question posed at the outset: if Izydor's cinema supposedly had the same function as his father's shop, why does cinema appear only once in the short stories, and that in his early work, published almost a decade after it was written? In my opinion, cinema appears much more frequently, but it is impossible to separate the individual treasures within this "iron capital of the spirit". Schulz undertook an interesting process in his imagination. He decided to recount blurred memories of early cinema—an extraordinary and ethereal phenomenon in itself—in a "cinematic" and poetic style, and then rewrote them into the language of a private mythology, once again deforming the already faded images, and finally blending them with other threads. What has emerged from all this is a phantasmagoria with a cinematic power of expression, but how far were they from the original fascination with "the fantastic adventures of the film". This explains why something like a faithful film adaptation of Schulz's prose—inspired by the atmosphere of early cinema, difficult to reconstruct, and written in a cinematic style that, after all, refers to film prehistory—seems like an impossible task.

Cinematicity can sometimes be far from cinematic. In Schulz's short stories everything is possible.

Translated from Polish by Natalia Dore and Kamil Walczak