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Pure Pleasure and Film Thinking – Watching Instead of Interpreting

Abstract

In his reflection on watching instead of interpreting as a way of getting to know a film, the author wishes to focus on two issues: (i) one related to the sensuous experience of the cinema, the pleasure of the act of watching itself (in accordance with the formula “seeing as only seeing”), and supported by the long tradition of the aesthetic thought (Baumgarten, Dewey, Shusterman, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty), and (ii) one connected with film thinking – inspired by the thesis of Rudolf Arnheim: “The visual perception is visual thinking”. Thus, the concept of watching instead of interpreting raises the status of the pre-intellectual and sensuous way of receiving a film work, which does not act against the interpretation (as Susan Sontag claimed), but constitutes its alternative or complementary version.

Key words

interpretation, perception, senses, film thinking

At the turn of the 1940s, Eric Rohmer, a director but also critic and film theorist, was calling in his texts for simplifying (making more neutral and natural) the film image and changing the approach of the viewer who “concentrates on decoding, not on watching: while learning how to interpret, he has forgotten how to watch”¹. In the mid-1960s, Susan Sontag, in her famous essay *Against Interpretation*, whose arguments, in some parts,

¹ E. Rohmer, *Cinéma, art d’espace*, as cited in: I. Siwiński, A. Helman, *Realizm*, in: *Słownik pojęć filmowych*, red. A. Helman, Wrocław 1998, p. 140 [trans. M. Mazur].

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concerned the film (as the film was an important argument in her reasoning), by standing out against the opinion that the art always and necessarily raises a topic, claimed: "In good films, there is always a directness that entirely frees us from the itch to interpret"².

We can say that her text symbolically opens a real methodological relaxation, also concerning the theory and practice of interpretation (even though this text was neither the first in the history of the aesthetic thought, which I will refer to later on, nor the only one in the structural turning point). However, the post-structuralistic theoretic exaggeration, though often practised under the pretext of anti-theory and anti-interpretation, has had an opposite result and opened a new era of dos and don'ts. From then on, two clashing trends may be observed: (i) the half-heartedly anti-methodical option, and (ii) the inclination to create other, often abstract, theories, usually not reflecting in the interpretational practice. By contrast, if we assume that the later cultural researches became a clear move away from the post-structuralism, we can only confirm that the dialectical see-saw concerning the theory of interpretation has been repeated. On the one hand, we have a return to the context, tangible facts and analysis, and on the other – there is a turn towards the experience as a form of participation being undervalued and not sufficiently described in the culture and intercourse with the art.

Focusing on the first option, anti-methodical and conforming with the ideas of Rohmer and Sontag, I will try once more to go through the way "against the interpretation", not ignoring the aspect of pure pleasure experienced by the body during a film projection, but concentrating mostly on the question whether we can really talk about any form of cognition resulting from this – in general – primitive experience. The main reservation concerns not the old texts I am referring to – as they still inspire many people – but the world of cinema they describe, which today either does not exist or is fading away. The cultural habits, which in the past included going to the cinema, have undergone a big change. Today, the old cinema and its theories (today's point of view makes it even clearer) already belong to a past, mythical era, to recall for example the discussions on the "twilight of cinemaphilia"³. On the other hand, it is this mythology – as well

² S. Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, in: eadem, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York 2001, p. 11.

³ Cf. S. Sontag, *The Decay of Cinema*, "The New York Times. On the Web", February 25, 1996 [<https://www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/12/specials/sontag-cinema.html>].

as the repeated attempts to maintain the myth of the special role of the cinema and the influence of the film – being for some people a sufficient “evidence” in the case and a sufficient reason to return once more to this world and ask about its possible continuations (as it appears, the cinema-philia is also subject to updates, for instance, in the form of collecting films or taking part in numerous film festivals).

Therefore, in the first section of this route it is good to incline towards experiencing the cinema or a film projection sensually, as an adventure or rather experience (in the meaning of *Erlebnis*), and towards going to the cinema (today maybe more watching films) as a way of life. All these activities also appear “instead of the interpretation”, though the expression “instead of” at the discourse level is not considered a lack or an *ersatz*, having a completely different dimension and character: it is sufficient. It seems that a broader category capable of describing the character of such an experience is the category of pleasure. The dictionaries and articles concerning the cinema will usually refer to the achievements inspired by the psychoanalysis, which include all the possible “links” occurring between the viewer and the screen, as well as their various determinants – technological, social, cultural, anthropological, and also directly psycho-analytical, since the influence of Freud’s or Lacan’s theories here was obvious. Wiesław Godzic, while organising these issues, noticed that the knowledge about the cinema taken as pleasure was usually “deprived of legitimisation”, giving way to “the serious pleasure” (intellectual or moral) being widely and confidently raised. In the end, “the pleasures favoured by the academic discourse are the pleasures of analysis and criticism”. By contrast “the unserious pleasure”, related to fun, was rarely mentioned in the articles⁴.

In actual fact, it is all not about the “serious” or “unserious” pleasure, though we know at least since the times of the Frankfurt School that the latter one may be an interesting topic for a research, also today – for instance in the still relevant aspect of the “economy of pleasure”. To put it short, it is about a pleasure not burdened with value judgement and, taken psychoanalytically, making up for any deficiencies, a pleasure resulting from the act of watching itself. In Godzic’s text, the proposal of Lucy Singer, inspired by Merleau-Ponty, would be the closest one: “the pleasure found in going to the cinema regardless of our opinion on the quality of

⁴ Cf. W. Godzic, *Widz filmowy w objęciach przyjemności*, “Kultura Współczesna” 1994, nr 2, pp. 84–85.

particular films. It happens because watching a film – any film – gives us an opportunity to participate in a special kind of a perceptual and locomotive situation”⁵. In the attempt to organise her disquisition, there is also a version being very close to the one I suggest: “the pleasure in respect to the passiveness, when «a vision is only a vision»”⁶. While referring to “the vision as only a vision”, I would just like to add a reservation that it does not exclude either the mentioned carnal dimension of the sensation, or the aesthetic dimension of the reception, though it is a kind of – according to Kant and Gadamer – “free beauty”⁷. The “relative passiveness” is also the pure pleasure of watching – a silent delight.

Following the mentioned manifesto of Sontag, we may say that it includes something even simpler (and having in mind the topic, such a colloquial comparison is appropriate). Simpler, and therefore – to put it literally – placed opposite “never consummated project of interpretation”⁸. Precisely “opposite” – referring to the distance or another position from which a subject speaks – and not “against”, as the author has presented it, maybe a bit too ostentatiously, involving almost revolutionary wording which breaks with the achievements of the aesthetic thought⁹. “The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have”¹⁰ – she wrote, highlighting the role of the sensual perception in receiving the art. And finally: “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art”¹¹. We may add, an eroticism taken figuratively, as it would be about the entire system of sensations and emotions that in the process of receiving a creation engage the body more than the mind, but also an eroticism taken straight.

⁵ L. Singer, *Eye/Mind/Screen: Toward a Phenomenology of Cinematic Scopophilia*, as cited in: W. Godzic, op. cit., p. 90 [trans. M. Mazur].

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *Aktualność piękna. Sztuka jako gra, symbol i święto*, tłum. K. Krzemieniowa, Warszawa 1993, p. 27 [trans. M. Mazur].

⁸ S. Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, op. cit., p. 5 [highlighted R. Koschany].

⁹ By the way, for the sake of justice it should be mentioned that here the “opposite the interpretation” did not have the totalising meaning; Sontag was clearly against particular methodological traditions – the hermeneutics and psychoanalysis – which in their theories of interpretation supposed that the text has a meaning, and the task of its recipient is to decode it.

¹⁰ S. Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, op. cit., p. 7.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 305.

In the latter respect, we can refer to the essay of Arnold Berleant¹², also from 1964. Starting from an observation concerning the absence or a “bad” presence of what is sensual and sensuous in the aesthetics, the author has made a significant semantic differentiation: the *sensuous* “refers to the pleasure connected especially with the sight and hearing”, and the *sensual* “refers to the experiences concentrating mostly on carnal pleasure, as opposed to the intellectual satisfaction, and alludes mostly to the less sophisticated sensual experiences, especially related to sex”¹³. Therefore, the “eroticism” of Sontag’s manifesto is not a spectacular challenge any more, becoming rather a rehabilitation of the participation of the body and senses in receiving the art: “the aesthetic experience, in its most complete and rich form, is a sensory experience of the whole person”¹⁴. In the aspect of receiving a film production, the best expression has been given by Roland Barthes who wrote about “the blackness” of the cinema as “the colour of a diffused eroticism”, and about the erotic “readiness” and “inactivity” of the body while waiting for a show¹⁵.

“To understand is to interpret”¹⁶ – Sontag remarked ironically, calling for a different form of contact with the art. However, if the erotic approach directed “against the interpretation” was just enough, was “instead”, the traditional separation of these two forms of contact with the art as excluding each other, the aesthetic experience and the interpretation, would actually be maintained. Meanwhile, there certainly arises an opportunity to aesthetically weaken the antinomy of these two attitudes. It arises or rather reminds of itself, since the topic of – to put it short – understanding without interpreting, was repeatedly raised in the tradition of the aesthetic thought. According to Baumgarten, as well as in the cognitive theories, the aesthetic experience is a kind of cognition (*cognitio sensitiva*)¹⁷. By contrast, in the pragmatic aesthetics – from Dewey to Shusterman – one of the key categories was the aesthetic meaning, in which the intersec-

¹² R. Barthes, *Wychodząc z kina*, tłum. Ł. Demby, in: *Interpretacja dzieła filmowego*, red. W. Godzic, Kraków 1993, pp. 157 and 158.

¹³ A. Berleant, *Sensualne i zmysłowe w estetyce*, in: idem, *Prze-myśleć estetykę. Niepokorne eseje o sztuce*, tłum. M. Korusiewicz, T. Markiewka, Kraków 2007, p. 98 [trans. M. Mazur].

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 109.

¹⁵ R. Barthes, *Wychodząc z kina*, op. cit., pp. 157 and 158.

¹⁶ S. Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁷ See: W. Tatarkiewicz, *Przeżycie estetyczne: dzieje pojęcia*, in: idem, *Dzieje szczęśliwości*, Warszawa 2005, p. 388.

tion of the non-cognitive experience with the cognitiveness of the meaning becomes possible. The proposal of Gadamer¹⁸ has differently blurred the boundary between the directness of the experience and the cognition, and yet differently it has been erased by the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Dufrenne¹⁹. All these proposals – by including and raising the status of the bodily directness and the senses²⁰ – have marked the cognitive aspects of similar forms of the art reception.

Earlier in this discourse, I used the expression “the body more than the mind”. This time, during the next section of the route “against the interpretation”, it should be shown that the reception process also includes the stage “from the body to the mind”, and constitutes a sufficient version of the cognition or – possibly but not necessarily – is a part of the introduction to this process. Naturally, I will concentrate only on the visual perception. The eye, being the sense of sight, is referred to as an organ of a direct view and contemplation, so also cognition. As Krystyna Wilkoszewska noted, by reconstructing the history of the Latin term “contemplation” (connected mostly with the sight, looking, watching, staring), the metaphor of the eye also hides a reflection, deep thought, meditation and theory (the latter one taken from the Greek tradition)²¹. Hannah Arendt even claimed that in the context of cognition, the majority of the European metaphorical expressions is marked visually. This is because the language – being the only channel of thinking, though not as excellent as the sight for watching – needed a tool of mediation. Especially in the Greek philosophy²², the truth is “visible” but non-expressible, and therefore the senses (mostly the sight) play an important role in the cognition process,

¹⁸ Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, op. cit.; also: G. Vattimo, *Od utopii do heterotopii*, in: idem, *Społeczeństwo przejrzyste*, tłum. M. Kamińska, Wrocław 2006, p. 76.

¹⁹ See: P. Schollenberger, *Doświadczenie estetyczne a fenomenologiczny problem bezpośredniości*, in: *Wizje i re-wizje. Wielka księga estetyki w Polsce*, red. K. Wilkoszewska, Kraków 2007, p. 760 et seq.

²⁰ A report from this stage of changes is provided by K. Wilkoszewska, *Doświadczenie estetyczne – strategie pragmatyzacji i zaangażowania*, in: *Nowoczesność jako doświadczenie. Dyscypliny – paradygmaty – dyskursy*, red. A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, R. Nycz, Warszawa 2008.

²¹ Cf. K. Wilkoszewska, *Od kontemplacji do interakcji*, in: *Odłamki rozbitych luster. Rozprawy z filozofii kultury, sztuki i estetyki ofiarowane Profesor Alicji Kuczyńskiej*, red. I. Lorenc, Warszawa 2005.

²² Cf. H. Arendt, *Filozofia i metafora*, tłum. H. Buczyńska-Garewicz, “Teksty” 1979, nr 5, p. 183 (in the Jewish tradition it will be “invisible”, and thus here the history of relations will take a different course).

even though it is extremely difficult to prove this importance using the language. Thus, the title “film thinking” becomes a direct reference to the famous book of Rudolf Arnheim published in 1969, in which the author – willing to restore the role of senses to the field of cognition – has clearly stated: “The visual perception is visual thinking”²³. The “film thinking” is a pure pleasure of perceiving screen images, as well as a silent act of cognition.

The change of viewpoint proposed here (not the interpretation of a creation, but its understanding, even if being intuitive, pre-intellectual, emotional, somatic) also supposes a particular notion of this creation. Just the fact that it is about a film production – more or less classical, more or less revolutionary in undermining and denying its own constructive elements, though always vivid in a way – makes it much easier to take this special approach. In a typical, most usual situation – for instance with no sight dysfunctions – the image will always act first. *Last Year in Marienbad*, before we try to untangle the story’s time loops, will hypnotise us with a slow monologue and camera move, and then subsequent rhythmic versions of narration and iconographic positions of the characters against the background of the French labyrinth garden and palace. There is a reason why I give an example of the film being widely considered challenging and exposed to different, often contradictory interpretations. As a matter of fact, we could review the history of cinema from its beginning – and the history of the film theory from its beginning – as well as the theories of receiving and/or interpreting a film production, even if it was limited to anecdotes concerning the viewers’ reaction to a train running onto them or to “fragmented” (limited by the screen frame) human bodies, in order to learn that the sensuous experience of the cinema was the common form of reception.

The discourses on the status of interpretation often raise the issue of the relations between the theory of interpretation and the interpretational practice, i.e. particular results of applying these theories, as their final verifiers²⁴. Nevertheless, in an attempt to formulate the theory of the process which may occur before the interpretation, especially in the context of such a usual perceptual meeting as the contact with a film, the examina-

²³ R. Arnheim, *Myślenie wzrokowe*, tłum. M. Chojnacki, Gdańsk 2011, p. 23 [trans. M. Mazur].

²⁴ Cf. R. Nycz, *Teoria interpretacji: problem pluralizmu*, in: idem, *Tekstowy świat. Poststrukturalizm a wiedza o literaturze*, Kraków 2000, pp. 125–126.

tion of such a relation seems more difficult and at the same time easier. On the one hand it is easier, since it does not require documented “records” of these interpretations, including the regular question about the sense of a creation and feeble attempts to answer it. Here, each act of reception is in the area of interest, with the assumption (hard to say it is groundless) that this act in some way influences the audience and leads to some sort of cognition, even if it is partial and fragmentary. In this case, the practice of interpretation, though difficult to catch, occurs continuously, even if its participants are not aware of the results, and even if the theorists disregard it, cannot diagnose it or are satisfied with just theoretic, generalising observations. On the other hand, the problem seems much more difficult. We must admit that the value of the said cognitive acts is just a guess, and moreover it is often placed in the context of the mentioned mythical era of the cinema. While the theory of interpretation should be supported by the interpretational practice, it is difficult to base a similar relation on an “empty” (i.e. non-verbalised) result of the cognitive process.

One of the interesting and inspiring proposals, being a straightforward example of watching instead of interpreting, is *The Third Meaning* (*Le troisième sens*) by Roland Barthes. By basing his thought on the semiotic theory of the sign, the author claimed that apart from the communicative (informative) dimension and the level of (symbolic) sign meaning, there is still a third level (*significance*) which can be described as “significance” or “the power of meaning”. In the analysis of particular scenes of Einstein’s films, Barthes presented the existence of this “third meaning” – apparently obvious (due to the obvious possibility to be seen), but at the same time intangible or impossible to be named and voiced. It is a kind of extra element, “at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive”²⁵. In the theory of the sign we shall say: *signifiant* with no particular *signifié*. From the perspective of the viewer, the third meaning will be “that thing” which appears “here and there”, makes him watch and does not allow to answer the question: why am I watching? Despite the anti-intellectual status of this meaning, we must say it brings some form of cognition. Yet everything occurs in front, beyond or above the language – it is pure vividness. As Barthes declares: “We can do without speaking and still understand each other”²⁶.

²⁵ R. Barthes, *The Third Meaning. Research notes on some Eisenstein stills*, in: idem, *Image – Music – Text*, selected and trans. S. Heath, London 1977, p. 54.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 40.

Continuing this thought, we should refer to the statement of Richard Shusterman, as it includes a polemic with Sontag's claims. Just like Barthes, this researcher talked about the possibility of creating a theory of "non-interpreted acts of comprehension"²⁷, and even though he also made a stand against the omnipresent interpretation and its "pathological excess" and "imperial expansion"²⁸, he put a stress on different elements. He disagreed with Sontag on the formal analysis as a possible alternative for interpretation, as he claimed that the formal analysis is a variant of interpretation. He did not raise the topic of "eroticism" instead of interpretation, or the phenomenological intuition (he perceived Sontag's "transparency" as "an experience of light of a thing itself"²⁹), but claimed that the art "not being subject to interpretation" "may be experienced reasonably", and this is a significant degree of comprehension at the pre-notional and pre-linguistic level³⁰. Considering the film, it is inspiring that Shusterman has taken the following statement from Wittgenstein: "I do not interpret, as in the current image I feel like at home". In his comment, the author of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* states: "[...] the present focus on the interpretation in a large part results from the fact that we actually do not feel comfortable in the frequently clashing worlds of our comprehension; that our times are times of interpretation, since they are times of alienation and disintegration"³¹. Thus, the "watching without interpreting" in the cinema is also a response to this disintegration (I do not interpret as I feel like at home), and at the same time it still allows us to believe in the myth cultivated by the psychoanalytical and cinema-oriented theories of the film (I do not interpret, as a film projection places me "inside the principle of pleasure"³²).

The act of watching a film (including the eroticism of Sontag with everything that is sensual and sensuous, and the directness of an aesthetic experience) will not convert into interpretation, nor will it ever replace it; it even does not pretend to do so. Every time it will remain a single

²⁷ R. Shusterman, *Interpretacja a rozumienie*, tłum. A. Orzechowski, in: idem, *Estetyka pragmatyczna. Żywe piękno i refleksja nad sztuką*, Wrocław 1998, p. 145 [trans. M. Mazur].

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 144.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 147.

³⁰ Cf. K. Wilkoszewska, *Doświadczenie estetyczne...*, op. cit., p. 222 [trans. M. Mazur].

³¹ R. Shusterman, op. cit., p. 166 [trans. M. Mazur].

³² Cf. K. Banaszekiewicz, *Wewnątrz zasady przyjemności*, in: *Film w kulturze. Wokół kategorii instytucji kinematograficznej*, red. I. Opacki, Katowice 1991 [trans. M. Mazur].

and non-verbalised way of participation in the process of receiving a creation. Maybe this is the phenomenon of the experience. Sometimes we receive access to such verbalisations, though they do not record the attempts to understand a creation, but usually just the attempts to understand this particular position of the viewer towards the creation. The cognition which occurs in the process of “watching instead of interpreting” does not always have to refer to the work itself – it may be connected with a much more complex process of cognition: placing ourselves, and finally also the work, in a particular situation. Therefore, in this process, the act of watching is neither a loss (as the interpretation is not always an objective, and it does not have to be an absolute value that we are accustomed to by the humane theories of participation in the culture), nor a better version of cognition. Sometimes treated as a necessary introduction to the interpretation, sometimes as an absolutized form of getting to know a creation: “Our challenge is to cut ourselves off from the content, so we can see the creation”³³.

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