

INTRODUCTION ||| The Cult of Visibility

WHEN HE ARRIVED IN Kraków to give the first demonstration of the Cinématographe in late 1896, itinerant Lumière exhibitor Eugène Joachim DuPont realized that counterfeit copies of the apparatus were circulating in the region. He defended his patented apparatus by referring to it as the only “real” one. An advertisement for the first demonstration concluded, “The Lumière brothers from Lyon are the exclusive inventors of the real Cinématographe.”¹ For DuPont, “real” may have been an expression for “patented” or “high quality.” Nevertheless, he probably knew that audiences would understand it, at least in part, as a synonym for the national-cultural institutions of France. The initial program of short films featured national symbols of European powers, including images of the Plaza Mayor in Madrid, the French cavalry, and the Spanish artillery. It included none of the short films that had been shot in the lands annexed by Austria, Prussia, and Russia at the end of the eighteenth century and partitioned among them until 1918. In its emphasis on the symbols of existing nation-states rather than those of the occupied territories, the first program offered viewers the opportunity for national and personal identification with the screen images without the burden of actual participation. Although the first audience complained about the poor quality of the projection, critics expressed awe for the “truth” of which DuPont spoke when he claimed that his apparatus was the only real one—a complex truth that grew to encompass more than the provenance of the motion picture camera or the pictures themselves. This truth was a blurry notion of the way that things had been, were, and should be. As depicted in the first short films projected in the eastern lands, Europe was a modernizing society complete with confidence-inspiring national militaries and sausage-grinding machines.

In addition to being novel, early cinema in the partitioned lands revived a distant familiarity with these objects. Its shameless kindling of nostalgia for the embryonic republic of generations past prompted viewers both to identify with and to long for a nation-state.

In the partitioned lands, cinema roused the first audiences to compare the images on the screen to the aesthetic, linguistic, and economic conditions of their own communities. Audiences, and later, filmmakers, formed a multifarious and fickle relationship with the apparatus and the screen. No writer more thoroughly describes the complexity of the situation than does Karol Irzykowski in his book on film theory, *Dziesiąta muza: Zagadnienia estetyczne kina* (The Tenth Muse: Aesthetic Considerations of Cinema), published in the reconstituted Poland in 1924 and republished in 1957. In a chapter titled “The Law of the Looking Glass,” Irzykowski considers the ways in which cinema both reflects and distorts reality. He claims that cinema allows viewers to study the world without directly engaging in it:

I once saw the moves of some English gymnasts as they marched in time, breaking up to form patterns such as stars, etc. I am not embarrassed to admit that I liked these performances in the *cinema* better than the many live ones I had seen. There is in man a *desire to view things and events in abstraction from reality*. The more directly he has experienced them, the more he would like to have them before him once again in a less committal, harmless and more exact form. This is one of the sources of art (as well as of science). For only half of the world is ruled by the principle of action; the other half is subject to the *laws of reflection*.²

Irzykowski argues that cinema offers an escape from the necessity of physical interaction with the world even as it extends the possibility of studying others’ interactions with it. As such, it may have cushioned the blows of modernity—including those resulting from its lack—for audiences in the partitioned lands. Irzykowski explains

In cinema, a locomotive rushes straight toward you. It is already approaching, expanding more rapidly than in reality, like a monster, in order to devour you . . . when suddenly it is surrendered, it has infiltrated you; you still feel anxiety for a moment—an anxiety that is truly nice, maybe the kind that some English lord experiences when he is hunting in the jungle with a protective shield. But if you also had heard the chug of a locomotive and the clang of its wheels and had sensed its horrifying weight, if the foul odor of its smoke had reached you, you

would have been petrified and would have jumped up and run away, thinking that under the pretense of a motion picture show you had been lured into a trap. . . . But this is only an optical locomotive, a locomotive-apparition, which passes through you.³

Because film is a visual medium, Irzykowski implores filmmakers to pay attention to the consumption of its imagery by viewers. Audiences lord over the screen, according to Irzykowski. In doing so, they become masters of the terrain presented there, impassively devouring even the most terrifying images. He writes

By all appearances, photographic objectivism is one of the cinema's features. However, a certain mystical possessiveness resides in humans, which identifies "seeing" with "having." This is why cinema aims to make the world optical. . . . It not only renders what we usually see. It also spies for us, persistently and courageously, that which we do not see because of inaccessibility or impatience. It shows the struggle of a polyp with a crab in the water, it breaks a horse's gallop into its components, it sees in ellipsis how grass grows; in the end, it even makes us believe that it sees unusual and supernatural things (special effects, fantasy films).⁴

Two issues are at stake here. First, Irzykowski's claim that cinema is an entirely visual medium derives from an intellectual tradition that considered an organic desire to overcome linguistic barriers an essential element of Polish national culture. For more than a decade before writing his book, Irzykowski had been declaring his opposition to the transition from silent to sound film, which occurred in independent Poland in 1929 and 1930 and which contributed to the widening divisions among speakers of the welter of languages encompassed by the new state. Irzykowski, for one, considered words amorphous, insubstantial, and detrimental to communication. Inside the motion picture theater, language differences led to ethnic tension, segregation, and even violence. In his view, cinema was undergoing "the same sort of basic cultural transformation of the soul that happened in the invention of writing or script. However, those changes took place slowly, while this one is occurring abruptly and before our own eyes."⁵ His struggle to cut short this transformation is one of the major issues in the region's cinema.

The second issue arises as early as the first projections. Viewers' "mystical possessiveness" of the objects on the screen is of particular relevance to the partitioned lands. Cinema granted audiences a peek at the symbols of modern

national consciousness, of which they had long read and heard. They had seen these symbols in still photographs, but now they could glean meaning from people's interactions with them and the other objects on the screen. Every movement, from the way that the leaves rustled to the tipping of a hat, took on meaning. Film exposed movement—and, therefore, motivation—that viewers brought under their control by the very act of comprehending it. Irzykowski writes, “The optical surface of the world is becoming larger. Let's imagine that it had been twisted, wrinkled, and creased until now and that the folds are now slowly smoothing out, in order to obey the law of reflection.”⁶ Yet Irzykowski accentuates the potential for misunderstanding the world through cinema. He concludes, “Cinema is a cult of visibility. Cinema registers the world, but it may also turn it into fiction.”⁷ What, then, may it turn into fiction?

Because cinema in Poland is associated with the country's political and cultural situation, a brief introduction to Polish history may be helpful. In the late eighteenth century, Austria, Prussia, and Russia annexed parts of the region. In the partitions of 1772, 1793, and 1795, the empires carved new borders through the corresponding eastern, northwestern, and southwestern lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, or *Res Publica*, until, little by little, it ceased to exist. The Polish constitution passed on May 3, 1791, which promised to create a modern constitutional monarchy, never had a chance to take hold. For the most part, the territories' ties to the empires were based on historical, ethnic, or geographical connections that existed only on paper. In reality, the inhabitants retained many of the diverse cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions known under the *Res Publica*. The languages spoken in the region included German, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, and Yiddish. A serf-labor, agrarian socioeconomic structure remained intact for many years. Members of the powerful Roman Catholic Church lived alongside Jews, Orthodox Christians, Protestants, and Uniates. Most significantly, a revolutionary spirit—a free, curious, polyglot spirit—took hold during the final partition. The opening line of the anthem adopted by the newly formed Polish foreign legion in Italy, “*Jeszcze Polska nie umarła, kiedy my żyjemy*” (Poland has not died as long as we live), illustrated the new sense of nationhood.⁸

Consequently, in 1896, cinema did not arrive in Poland but in parts of Austria-Hungary, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Russian Empire, where

descendants of some of the inhabitants of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had carried on a century-long struggle for independence. Inhabitants were usually allowed to move freely among the formerly Polish areas of the empires, though for most of the nineteenth century, their opportunities were limited by informal social restrictions on movement between classes, in particular the continued exploitation of peasants and Jews (even after the abolition of serfdom) by landowners. The political and cultural state of affairs of the region varied according to empire and period. As a result, each part of the region greeted the introduction of cinema a bit differently.

The southern region of Galicia, which was under Hapsburg rule, included the present-day Ukrainian towns of L'viv (Ger. Lemberg, Pol. Lwów) and Drohobych (Ger. Drohobytsch, Pol. Drohobycz). In 1846, Austria also annexed Kraków (Ger. Krakau), the most culturally active city in the region. Consequently, the areas arrogated to Austria-Hungary (as the imperial state was known after 1867) became the most densely populated of the partitioned regions. The late 1860s brought the emancipation of the Jews, who long had maintained a degree of cultural and linguistic latitude, and greater freedoms for everyone else. Speakers of German, Polish, Ukrainian, and Yiddish enjoyed a great deal of cultural autonomy, which allowed for an active university life as well as publications and theater productions in several languages. It should come as no surprise, then, that the very first demonstrations of moving pictures in the partitioned lands took place in Kraków.

The northern and western parts of the former commonwealth, including the Baltic Sea area called Pomerania and the southwestern area of Silesia, were under control of the German Empire, or Kingdom of Prussia, and comprised a mixture of German-speakers and Polish-speakers. The cities of Bydgoszcz (Bromberg), Gdańsk (Danzig), Królewiec (Königsberg, present-day Kaliningrad), Poznań (Posen), and Wrocław (Breslau) were part of this region. The Prussian lands of the former commonwealth enjoyed more economic stability than the other partitions as well as such social privileges as obligatory elementary school education (from 1825). But its Catholic and Jewish residents experienced severe limitations on their religious and cultural activity. In many areas, the majority of inhabitants were Lutheran and German-speaking.

The Russian partition constituted almost 60 percent of the lands of the former commonwealth but was less densely populated than either Galicia or Prussia. It included parts of present-day Belarus (including Minsk), Lithuania

(including Vilnius and Kaunas), and Ukraine (including Zhytomyr). This area witnessed much insurrectional activity during the partitions for several reasons, including friction between the large percentage of Polish-speaking Catholics living there (as high as 80 percent) and the Russian-speaking, Orthodox ruling class as well as several reactionary political moves by both Russia and the insurgents.

Twentieth-century Polish filmmakers often sought their subject matter in the major events of the nineteenth century, seeing in them the essence of Polish nationhood. Literature dealing with failed uprisings, in particular, inspired many a filmmaker. The first revolt, known as the November Uprising of 1830–31, spurred the Great Emigration, in which several thousand military and intellectual leaders fled to Paris and other European cities out of fear of reprisals. Many of these intellectuals turned the failure of the revolution into an internationally supported movement for independence. They drew plans for the reinstatement of the former borders and formed a literary movement known as Polish Romantic nationalism, which flourished in the 1830s and 1840s. The Polish Romantics, particularly their most important poet, Adam Mickiewicz, took very seriously the unifying possibilities of the Polish language. Their attachment to the language was as political as it was emotional and nostalgic. It offered proof that a nation could flourish as a diaspora of citizens of various empires and countries. However, their attachment to language was also universalistic, asking speakers of other languages to understand its messages, even if they could not understand its words, and to align themselves with its cause. Many of them looked to mysticism and religious radicalism to find expression for a homeland that existed without land—a home in words, simultaneously universal and national. In their longing for and preoccupation with the fate of the nation, they wrote passionate, imploring poetry and drama that drew from the traditions of Slavic folklore, kabbalah, Martinism, and other mystical outlets of expression. They glorified patriotism and strove to awaken a Polish national consciousness, which they felt was asleep within the hearts and minds of Polish-speakers. A second failed insurrection in 1846 and revolutionary activity in other parts of Europe during the so-called Spring of Nations in 1848 strengthened the resolve to regain independence. A third failed insurrection, the January Uprising of 1863 in the Congress Kingdom, was a turning point for the nationalist movement. Russian powers renamed the area “Vistula Land” and removed its autonomy,

triggering the transformation of its socioeconomic structure. Insurgents were executed or deported to Siberia, the Polish nobility lost its status, and local languages were made unofficial. The Polish nationalist movement reacted by intensifying its campaign in the German Empire. In Galicia, where cultural autonomy accompanied a lack of economic control, some people expressed a need for agricultural modernization and economic overhaul.

At this time, there emerged a new literary movement, Positivism, which supported “organic work,” scientific progress, and economic reform. Positivist writers such as Eliza Orzeszkowa and Bolesław Prus examined daily life in the empires, the relationship between human beings and nature, and Polish history in their novels. The Positivists were avid translators, acquainting readers in the partitions with Western traditions and encouraging the influx of new ideas and technology. They supported industrialization, openness to other countries, and free labor, which resulted in the migration of the emancipated peasants and minorities to large cities. In 1887, visionaries and intellectuals took notice of yet another example of Positivist ingenuity: the publication of a guide to the artificial language Esperanto, written by Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, of Białystok (Bielastok). In later years, many Positivists took an active interest in cinema and saw their works adapted for the screen, and film critics were counted among the most avid proponents of Esperanto.⁹ At the same time, Yiddish emerged from the neighborhoods and the shtetls as a rich language, full of original metaphors and colorful proverbs expressive of the folkloric traditions of Jews in the region. It, too, became a source of inspiration for filmmakers.

It was in the 1890s, toward the end of the Positivist movement, that local activists began to form political organizations. The multiplicity of these organizations and of the schools of thought that separated them demonstrates the ideological chaos that accompanied the introduction of cinema. The Polish Socialist Party (PPS) came into being in 1892 to promote the reestablishment of the Polish state and the implementation of a socialist program. Józef Piłsudski soon became its leader. A year later, Rosa Luxemburg and other doctrinaire Marxists formed the Social Democratic Party (SDKP). Although the SDKP sought to bring socialism to the region, it did not seek Polish independence. A modern Polish nationalist party, the National Democratic Party, found a leader in Roman Dmowski, whose nationalist ideology was decidedly xenophobic, anti-Jewish, and anti-German. Dmowski demanded the

full assimilation of non-Polish minorities to his view of Polish tradition, which did not include the custom of religious and linguistic tolerance known in the former *Res Publica*.

The actual role of language in daily life varied according to time and place, ranging from the liberal policies of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the strict prohibitions on use of language in education and government that characterized the Congress Kingdom of Poland. In the hearts and imaginations of Polish speakers, Polish flourished. To speak Polish—for Jews and Lutherans, as well as for Catholics—was to be Polish, and to be Polish was, with little room for exception, to long for a homeland. One of the main arenas for the cultivation of this desire for national sovereignty was Polish-language theater production. In spite of its limitations with regard to language, early traveling cinema fulfilled at least one function that theater could not. As entrepreneurs traveled with their exhibits, moving constantly among the small towns in the empires, they were potential carriers of the kinds of information—national, educational, social, and cultural agendas—that supporters of Polish autonomy wanted to transmit.

The first two decades of cinema were also the last decades of the partition period, a chaotic time in those regions. Discrepancies among the empires in the levels of modernization, education, and wealth, as well as in the general feeling of community made the thought of reunifying Poland difficult. Piłsudski and the PPS supported the Russian Revolution of 1905 by organizing strikes and boycotts in the Russian partition. Reaction to the revolution varied among the many political groups vying for popular support, but this particular activity of the PPS drew attention to Poles' possible willingness to engage in armed conflict to bring about independence. In this atmosphere of chaos, fear, determination, and pride, a new literary-cultural movement, *Młoda Polska* (Young Poland), was born. Young Poland was as disordered as the period in which it arose; decadent writers and artists stressed the ideals of aestheticism, pure form, and art as an absolute. Art, they felt, should be divorced from politics and created only for its own sake. Reconciling their approach to art with the political situation of the time, however, they also brought the Romantic nationalist poets back into vogue and supported the use of the Polish language.

Almost ten million people in the three territories considered themselves Polish in 1870. In spite of the emigration of more than three and a half million people of Polish descent (mainly to the United States and South America), this

number had doubled by 1914. Thanks to the support of the Western Allies in the war, good timing, and a lot of luck, what had seemed impossible finally happened. In 1918, the empires fell apart, and Poland became an independent country. Released from captivity in Germany, military leader Piłsudski was named provisional head of the Rzeczpospolita Polska, or the Second Republic of Poland. His political party, the PPS, supported a democratic parliamentary system, a collective system of industrialization, agricultural reform, and labor unions. The new country had many social and economic issues to resolve, and both external hostilities and internal dissension marred the first years of independence.

First, the Polish-Soviet War of 1919–21 erupted over the issue of Poland's eastern borders. In April 1919, the Polish army acquired Vilnius and, in July of the same year, secured the eastern part of Galicia from Ukrainian independence-seekers living there. One of the most decisive battles, called the "Miracle on the Vistula" by the Polish victors, became a popular subject for filmmakers in the years that followed. The war ended in March 1921 (one day after the country's new constitution was passed) with the Treaty of Riga, which established the eastern borders almost exactly where they had been before the partitions (to the disappointment of Lithuania, which had wanted to keep Vilnius).

In the west, violent arguments over border issues became common in the mixed German- and Polish-populated area of Upper Silesia. Mutual resentment led to the migration of these groups away from each other, and several thousand people fled the country in the first years of independence. As the interwar period progressed, the lack of trust between Poles and Germans in the areas of the former German Empire hampered the development of good relations. This was particularly apparent in the regional film industry, where spats over film distribution and exhibition were commonplace until World War II.

The country was in a dire political and economic situation. The first elected president, Gabriel Narutowicz, was assassinated just one week after his election in 1921. It took several years to replace the interim currency with the new, permanent *złoty*. In the meantime, the government had to deal with both inflation and the demands of citizens, many of whom had expected immediate economic stability and good working conditions along with independence. Perhaps the most devastating government control on the film industry was put in place under the difficult economic conditions of the early

1920s. Strapped for funds, the government placed taxes on so-called luxury items. Tickets to the cinema were among the most heavily taxed of these items, putting moviegoing out of the reach of poorer citizens and subsequently leading to the closing of cinemas across the country.

According to census records, the population of Poland was just over twenty-seven million in 1921. Nearly one-third belonged to non-Polish minorities. When the final borders were drawn in 1923, Poland stretched from Poznań and Katowice in the west, Zakopane and Drohobych in the south, Białystok in the east, and Vilnius in the north. Present-day Gdańsk became the Free City of Danzig. Ukrainians (approximately four million people) and Belarusians (approximately one and a half million people) inhabited much of the eastern lands, speaking their own languages and aspiring to national independence. Among the Ukrainian lands, the desire for independence was so strong that violence between Poles and Ukrainians was commonplace. Ukrainians and Belarusians did not hold positions in the Polish government, universities, or other professional offices.

In May 1926, an armed coup led by Piłsudski replaced democratic institutions with authoritarianism. Piłsudski, who took the position of minister of war instead of president, was determined to rule with a heavy hand. He called his program of reform *sanacja*, or purification. His regime brought much-needed economic stability to the region in the late 1920s, which was reflected in the golden age of silent film production. However, the crash of the New York Stock Exchange and the ensuing Great Depression in the United States took their toll on the Polish economy in the early 1930s. The Polish economic depression and Piłsudski's growing intolerance of opposition were obstacles to filmmaking, as they were to other social and cultural endeavors. To some, Piłsudski was Poland's savior; to others, he was a dictator with no tolerance for political opposition. Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany heightened tensions between the neighboring states, which the signing of the Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact in January 1934 did not altogether alleviate. More changes came with Piłsudski's death in June 1935, when arguments and accusations broke out over the relevance of his regime. After an initial period of general reluctance to participate in elections and in public life, minorities, conservatives, socialists, and other groups engaged in fierce battles in the political arena. Even as the country regained economic stability in the late 1930s, it lacked social and political stability.

A lively café culture and literary movement known simply as “the twenty years between the wars” took shape (*dwudziestolecie międzywojenne*) as a refuge from this chaos. The enthusiastic, optimistic poets associated with the literary magazine *Skamander* inaugurated this era with their gatherings at Warsaw’s Café Ziemiańska. After them, in the capital and, to a lesser extent, in the country’s major cities, energetic writers and artists gathered in informal literary-artistic associations to search for new means of expression. They did not have to look further than out the windows of the cafés—on the same stretch of Marszałkowska Street in Warsaw that hosted the most sophisticated of cafés were the cinemas. Some recognized a potential new art form in the films shown at these cinemas, others repudiated them, and still others viewed them with ambivalence.

Any study of cinema requires deep attention to the processes of inclusion and exclusion. How does one account for the fact that cinema is concurrently an international commodity and a national product? How does one account for regional differences in cinema production and exhibition? The tendency has long been to draw the line along the languages chosen for production and, within these boundaries, to consider the influences of the major world centers of production on filmmaking in the smaller centers and to trace the influence of immigrants from smaller centers on works from major ones. Cinema in Poland, then, has become Polish cinema, Yiddish cinema, Ukrainian cinema, and Lithuanian cinema. Because of the great care that scholars have shown to avoid ingesting the cultural products of neighboring countries, it has become Russian and German cinema to a lesser degree. As a result, certain cinematic events have disappeared entirely from the history books.

This book attempts to recapture the multilingualism and social diversity of cinema in the partitioned lands and independent Poland and to show that the establishment of a national identity through film is a complicated matter in which oppositional principles were only sometimes at play. To this end, it accepts all films, regardless of language, made in the regions of the three empires that later became an independent country and, thereafter, in that country. It avoids mention of the careers of filmmakers, actors, and others outside of this geographic area because of space constraints and the inevitable judgments concerning loyalty to the nation that such mention entails. Instead, this book is concerned with the activity that took place in a certain region at a certain time. As it challenges established models of the region’s

national cinemas, it creates a new framework for the study of film production and exhibition in early, silent, and early sound cinema. At the same time, this project seeks to expose and analyze an enduring ambivalence to a language-based national cinema and a unique belief in the communicative properties of images in Poland. Using Irzykowski's "law of the looking glass" as its starting point, it locates these characteristics in the privileging of visual imagery over dialogue by film directors, producers, distributors, critics, and audiences in every stage of the industry's development during the first four decades of cinema.