

# BETWEEN THE FILM, THE POSTER, AND THE VIEWER. A CASE STUDY BASED ON SELECTED POSTERS BY MIECZYŚLAW WASILEWSKI

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Both types of cultural communication<sup>1</sup> – the film and the poster – “operate” with images: the former – with many of them and, in addition, introduced in parallel with other semiotic pathways, the latter – with a single one. It must be emphasized that the poster, despite its use of a verbal component, functions above all as an image, in the triple<sup>2</sup>, or even quadruple sense of the term<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The issue of medium and mediation will not be elaborated in the study presented here due to the volume requirement of the article.

<sup>2</sup> Porębski, *Semiotyka a ikonika* [en. Semiotics and Iconic], in: *Literatura a malarstwo – malarstwo a literatura: panorama myśli polskiej XX wieku* [en. Literature and Painting – Painting and Literature: a Panorama of Polish Thought in the 20th Century], ed. by O. Płaszczewska, M. Siwiec, I. Puchalkiewicz, Jagiellonian University, Cracow 2009, p. 209. According to this research concept, posters should be analysed as images in three aspects: 1. – object-oriented – as images of something (e.g. a film); 2. – subject-oriented – as images of someone (e.g. Mieczysław Wasilewski); 3. – formal – as an image (“equipped with their own structure, their own symmetries and asymmetries, their own continuities and singularities, characteristics and distinctions”). Mariusz Knorowski rightly noted the different proportions between the indicated types of images and wrote: “the intrinsic characteristic of a poster is that it is not an observed image – in the sense of a representation of nature (mimesis) – but a conceived one, that is, from beginning to end it is an individual projection tamed by the rigor of form, disciplined in the intellectual sense and synthetic in the style of depiction” (M. Knorowski, *Plakat polski* [en. Polish Poster], in: *Muzeum ulicy. Plakat polski w kolekcji Muzeum Plakatu w Wilanowie* [en. The Museum of the Street. Polish Poster in the Collection of the Poster Museum at Wilanów], Warsaw 1996, p. 18).

<sup>3</sup> And it is this fourth meaning – related to the moment of receptive perception, which consists of the reaction to the distal and proximal stimulus – that is crucial. See M. Knorowski,

Therefore, during the analysis carried out, methodological reference will be made to the iconic proposed by Mieczysław Porębski, the considerations of Mariusz Knorowski and the research on the iconic code by Umberto Eco<sup>4</sup>. The practical experience in poster design of the author of the presented text will also be applied.

The film poster itself, quoting the words of Dorota Folga-Januszewska, is understood in the presented article as “a meeting of two separate worlds of artistic imagination”<sup>5</sup>. This difference in imagination results from the work of artists in different media. It is determined by the heterogeneous viewing situations and therefore the viewers’ diverse expectations of these cultural messages. A film allows sequences of images and sounds (musical and natural) to “last” for a specific time, and is therefore consumed over a long period, during the tens of minutes allocated extra for its viewing. The audience is “obliged” to combine/assemble horizontally and vertically the variously-semiotic paths into relatively coherent narrative wholes. The poster, on the other hand, “freezes” images and words in graphic synthesis on a plane, that is, it “plays” them out here and now<sup>6</sup>. It mediates especially briefly, because it is perceived “on the go” while driving, waiting for a bus, buying a ticket. It works analogically to a road sign, so it “expects” an unambiguous denotation from the viewer, even a reaction (to go to see the movie). This raises key research questions: 1. How to communicate this multi-semiotic, sensory, analytical cinematic permanence in a picture-word, conceptual, simplified poster “moment”; 2. How to read and interpret this “street” message? It was decided to analyze these issues in the context of Mieczysław Wasilewski’s work and this was done for several reasons.

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*Polski plakat XX wieku* [en. Polish Poster of the 20th Century], <http://www.postermuseum.pl/kolekcja/kolekcja-plakatu-polskiego/> (accessed on: 9.05.2024).

<sup>4</sup> See U. Eco, *Pejzaż semiotyczny* [en. A Semiotic Landscape], transl. M. Czerwiński, PIW, Warsaw 1972, p. 163). Cf., the Iconic Semat, in *ibid*: *Nieobecna struktura* [en. The Absent Structure], transl. A. Weinsberg, P. Bravo, Wydawnictwo KR, Warsaw 1996, pp. 155-159.

<sup>5</sup> *Ach! Plakat filmowy w Polsce, koncepcja, tekst* [en. Ach! Film Poster in Poland, Concept, Text], ed. D. Folga-Januszewska, Wydawnictwo Bosz, Olszanica, 2015, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*.

Firstly, Wasilewski emphasized in an interview with Janusz Górski<sup>7</sup> that for three decades he had been making his living from film and exhibition posters. He therefore has extensive experience and a body of work in this fascinating field of design.

Secondly, the poster is one variety of graphic design, and it, according to its etymological meaning, should be understood as: 1. a technical tool, 2. an activity performed with it and, 3., a trace left by the tool. Wasilewski is aware of the etymological conditions of printmaking and is therefore acutely aware of technical tools, which are brushes “soft, thin, hard like brushes, with a sharp tip, disjointed, grated or dried out”<sup>8</sup>; colored papers and the activity – the gestures of the artist’s hand, the act of cutting out. He states: “I wanted to build my workshop out of a gesture that seems clumsy, random, and make something out of it that is not random and clumsy, that carries some meaning. From a brushstroke, seemingly accidental, a pictorial, non-abstract mark is created”<sup>9</sup>. This feature will not be made entirely apparent in the analyzed posters, as they are not the ones painted from gesture. They use photo processing and paper cutting, and both activities demonstrate a sensitivity to the problem of technique and its adaptation to the idea/theme of the poster.

Thirdly, Wasilewski presents graphism in poster art, which is of particular interest to me. He inherited this poetics of representation from his master, Henryk Tomaszewski. In designing his posters, he adopted an attitude that was more intellectual than impressionistic. He constructed his works as “graphic and conceptual charades”<sup>10</sup>. A wealth of ideas “went hand in hand” with

<sup>7</sup> M. Wasilewski, J. Górski, *1 × 1*, ed. by E. Pałasz, Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, Faculty of Graphics, Gdańsk 2018, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Sz. Boyko, *Młodzięncze gesty (graficzne)* [en. Youthful Gestures (Graphic)], <http://www.wasilewski.art.pl/tekst.html> (accessed on: 9.05.2024). Wasilewski himself adds: “I often use either great Chinese brushes, but sometimes also so-called worn-out brushes, completely used up, because they have a completely different structure and allow for seemingly ill-considered strokes, kind of feisty. A mix of these various tools is my arsenal of means” (*Plakat polski i światowy – wywiad z prof. Mieczysławem Wasilewskim*) [en. Polish and World Poster – An Interview with Prof. Mieczysław Wasilewski], <https://www.retroavanguardia.com/plakat-polski-swiatowy-wywiad-prof-mieczyslawem-wasilewskim/> (accessed on: 9.05.2024).

<sup>9</sup> M. Wasilewski, J. Górski, *1 × 1*, po. cit., back cover of the book. This understanding of the poster’s essence was picked up by the artist during his stay in Japan and China.

<sup>10</sup> Wasilewski admitted: “I used to approach the subject slavishly, he would impose shapes on me. Later, as I freed myself from these obligatory elements, I tried to impose my

a richness of techniques and scarcity of form. In the mature period of his work, concept (conceived image) became paramount for Wasilewski, more important than film (subject image), style or technique (subject and formal image)<sup>11</sup>. This is why he took graphic synthesis to its visual limits, limiting his means of expression to simple, flat forms. His trademark became “black and white, profiles also some effect: reflection or penetration<sup>12</sup>, rippling, ‘knitting’”. He used a maximally synthetic graphic form, because not only was it simplified, it was limited to contrasting black and white<sup>13</sup>. He is, in my

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own language on the subject, I described it with my own style. And this language of mine began to prevail” (M. Wasilewski, J. Górski, 1 × 1, op. cit., p. 73). It took Wasilewski about 10 years to arrive at the maximally synthetic poetics of the poster portrayal. He himself said that during this time he had “trained himself in graphic discipline”, i.e. in adapting the means of poster expression to the flat surface on which he creatively worked. Initially – for example in the poster for the *Przygody małej wydry* film [en. Flash, the Teenage Otter] (1969, directed by Hank Schloss) – he flattened the forms representing the film’s characters: otter, fish, bird, and butterfly. He also limited the color range to white, black, brown, marine and green, laid flat, without chiaroscuro effects or tonal transitions. He did, however, simulate a three-dimensional space with an undulating arrangement of waves and successive layering of scenes on which the aforementioned characters and vegetation appeared.

Also present – as has been the case in the poster history – was a fascination with photography as a medium that naturally mediates between film and poster. In the poster promoting the *Historia miłości* film [en. A Love Story] (1972, directed by Jorge Grau), Wasilewski transformed the stills in the poster fashion, that is: he simplified the representation of the faces of the presumably main characters (a man and a woman), and limited the color range to three colors (white, black, ochre). In this way, he eliminated the illusion of space and three dimensions. However, he still simulated the flow of the film narrative (a series of images, sounds), and he did this through the representation of successive negatives of a photographic film. Alongside the images of faces and film, i.e. signs motivated by cinematic icons, there was also a conceptual and graphic concept – the form of the bisected and displaced photographic film conveyed the dramatic mood of the film.

<sup>11</sup> And it was at this stage that I met the professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Students came to the next class with ideas, we discussed concepts at length, and it took a relatively short time for them to be implemented. The professor prepared the adepts for their work. He used to say: “it’s the way it is in this profession that you do everything yesterday. You are constantly looking for an idea, and when it is finally born, there is little time left for execution” (ibid., p. 8).

<sup>12</sup> M. Wasilewski, J. Górski, 1 × 1, op. cit, p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> Wasilewski openly admits that he has never been a colorist (although he initially studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw), just like Tomaszewski and contrary to Młodziejewicz or Waldemar Świerzy.

opinion, one of the masters of the graphic sign/symbol, the pictorial point, the visual aphorism. The mediation between the poster understood in this way and the abundance of forms, colors, perspectives proposed in the film is all the more intriguing<sup>14</sup>.

Fourthly, the relevance of such an abbreviated concept and graphic charade is quite interesting. It draws the audience's attention presumably through its visual contrasts and dissonances when confronted with colorful, illustrative, painterly or photographic posters. At the same time, Wasilewski's posters are also made noticeable by the analogy in terms of the content communicated through film and poster and the contrast between the connotational richness of the movie and the denotational "poverty" of the graphic design.

A prerequisite for the creation of a film poster is to have watched the film or to have become familiar with its plot. The situation of film viewing by poster artists 10 years older than Wasilewski was described in detail by Janusz Stanny, quoted in Katarzyna Stanny's article<sup>15</sup>. It turns to the fact that most often artists watched several films in a row, or even sometimes did not watch them at all, but read their summaries. The poster artist – guided by recognition codes (built on the appearance of the object and knowledge about it)<sup>16</sup>, which provided the transmission of relevant features (content) – selected the fundamental aspects of the object of perception, i.e. the film or its imagery, on the basis of the summary. If such an artist had watched the movie, he or she would select individual key shots or depictions from its colorful, moving continuum of images. Whereas if he or she had read only a summary of the film, then he or she would select one from the multiple imagined images. The recognizability

<sup>14</sup> At a certain point, Wasilewski's posters "became more original and their form and language more relevant. The communicative function had to submit to your style, or at least had to be in harmony with it" (M. Wasilewski, J. Górski, *1 × 1*, op. cit., p. 73). Style and technique (subject and formal imagery) were becoming more important than the intention (the conceived image), as if a certain conceptual exhaustion had occurred.

<sup>15</sup> K. Stanny, *Janusz Stanny plakacista* [en. Janusz Stanny, the Poster Artist], "Załącznik Kulturoznawczy" [en. Cultural Studies Appendix] 2024, no. 12, p.?

<sup>16</sup> Referring to Umberto Eco's theory, iconic signs/messages "do indeed reproduce certain components of the perception of an object, but only after they have been selected on the basis of recognition codes and observed on the basis of graphic conventions, according to which a given sign either denotes arbitrarily a given component of the perception or denotes globally the entire perception, arbitrarily reduced to a simplified graphic form" (U. Eco, *Pejzaż semiotyczny* [en. A Semiotic Landscape], op. cit., p. 163).

of the subsequently constructed iconic message depended on the selection of these relevant frames. They were the prerequisite for “specific performance and adequate social dominance”<sup>17</sup>, i.e. effective communication with viewers. On the basis of the first visual recognitions, the idea for a poster (conceptual image) often emerged. The artists admitted: “The creative process itself was a period of constant change and adjustments. However, in the final result, it often turned out that the core of the idea remained what the first thought associated with the project was. [...]”<sup>18</sup>. Then, the graphic designer established the equivalent of the recognized relevance feature of the film and the conceived concept in the graphic code. A correlation was built between the coded unit of perception and cognition and the graphic medium. If an idea had not yet emerged by this stage, it may have been born on the basis of the perception of the sketch for the poster or the graphic code itself. In this way – e.g. via negative space – shape-puzzles were constructed. The positive pictorial or lettering space itself could also “give birth” to new, non-obvious associations<sup>19</sup>. This concept, commonly referred to as a “mental shortcut”, thus became the product of the intellect and/or the graphic medium. Knorowski rightly observed that this notion of the “mental shortcut” “somewhat underestimates the long distillation process of this visual form for what it actually is. Although it seems simple on the surface, how often it requires an intensified, long and arduous thought process and the elimination of all unnecessary details”<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, the researcher introduced the term *abbreviatio per signum abbreviationis*<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> W. Faulstich, *Muzyka i medium. Szkic historiograficzny od początków do dzisiaj* [en. Music and the Medium. A Historiographical Sketch from the Origins to Today], transl. M. Kasprzyk, “Images” 2009-2010, no. 13-14, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Janusz Stanny, typed copy in the archives of Katarzyna Stanny.

<sup>19</sup> Wasilewski repeatedly used these graphic games in his film posters: the first – *Za rok, za dzień, za chwilę* [en. In a Year, in a Day, in a Moment] (1976), *Gra o jabłko* [Game for an Apple] (1978), *Okupacja w 26 obrazach* [Occupation in 26 Pictures] (1979), *Tymczasowy raj* [Temporary Paradise] (1981); the second – *Kobieta pod presją* [A Woman Under the Influence] (1978), *Trzy kobiety* [3 Women] (1978), *Kilka pytań na tematy osobiste* [Some Questions on Personal Subjects] (1978).

<sup>20</sup> M. Knorowski, *Efekt zwierciadlany* [en. The Mirror Effect], in: *Pierwsze półwiecze polskiego plakatu* [en. The First Half of a Century of Polish Posters], ed. by P. Rudziński, Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin 2009, p. 234.

<sup>21</sup> J. Szymański, *Nauki pomocnicze historii* [en. Sciences Auxiliary to History], Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2006, p. 359.

(abbreviation by means of a sign of abbreviation) to describe the process under analysis. This principle, introduced in Latin paleography, amounted to shortening the writing of words by means of conventional signs, replacing letters or groups of letters. The poster sign (even more broadly, the graphic sign), being this *signum abbreviationis*, is at the same time a product of pictorial abbreviation and mental abbreviation (abbreviation). It must be added at this point – as written above – that this intellectual shortcut can also be the effect of *signum abbreviationis*. Thus, an even more complicated bidirectional interrelation emerges: from the succinct thought to the synthetic image and from the synthetic image to the succinct thought. Taken further, the correlation between: the film's relevance feature, its recognition and cognitive concept (mental shortcut) and the graphic units (image abbreviation) is a prerequisite for the denotational and connotational reading of the poster. The resultant iconic sign (*signum abbreviationis*) is simultaneously: motivated (by the film image) and conventional, even creative.

The first poster under analysis promotes the *Wirujący Seks* movie<sup>22</sup> (English title: *Dirty Dancing*, director: Emile Ardolino, screenplay: Eleanor Bergstein, production: USA, world premiere: 1987, Polish premiere: 1989). The plot of this musical melodrama is not complicated, rather one-threaded. It tells the story of a love fascination which arises between an experienced, but poor, dance instructor and a young, rich girl from a good home. In an interview with Wasilewski, Górski asked with astonishment: “Your radically austere design for *Dirty Dancing* is completely incompatible with this story, which is saturated with eroticism. Why did you make this poster when your poetics or apparatus were from a completely different world?”<sup>23</sup>. After all, the poster maker reduced the multicolored moving images and sounds to a single scene of desire, which he considered to be the film's relevance feature (aptly, it seems). Referring to codes of recognition (anthropologically and culturally conditioned), this scene was “seen” through a dancing couple, in which a teenage woman was identified by her long legs, heeled shoes and very short skirt, and a man by a hand placed on her skirt, below her waist. The poster artist then assigned identifying features in the elements of the graphic code. In this case, the graphic designer used a photo of his wife's legs, which he heavily

<sup>22</sup> The Polish title literally means ‘Spinning/Whirling sex’; [transl. note].

<sup>23</sup> M. Wasilewski, J. Górski, 1 × 1, dz. cyt. 92.



Fig. 1. Poster for the *Wirujący seks* movie, originally titled *Dirty Dancing*, 1989

simplified, adapting it to the structure of the graphic code. He admitted: “It’s made according to a photograph of my wife. After all, you wouldn’t make such legs from memory, even if you are Matisse”<sup>24</sup>. The representation, although simplified, is still strongly realistic, in contrast to the sophisticated synthesis present in later works. The entire scene is placed at the top of the composition, against a black background from which single white forms emerge: two clearly resemble female legs and indicate dancing shoes, one depicts a hand, presumably a male one. The white, single-element, sans-serif, thin lettering introducing the film’s title is placed at the top edge of the poster. The rounded shapes of its letters: “U”, “C”, “J”, “S”, “emphasize” the semi-circular shape of the form suggesting the skirt. The title contrasts with a small inscription, most likely handwritten, introducing the names of the director and actors, which was placed on a form resembling a woman’s thigh. This inscription with its light line contrasts with the heavy, large thigh shape. The line drawn on the other thigh – resembling a garter – visually complements the aforementioned handwritten inscription.

Another analyzed poster was created for the *Nietykalni* film (English title: *The Untouchables*, director: Brian De Palma, screenplay: David Mamet, production: USA, world and Polish premiere: 1987). This gangster picture tells the story of a criminal group, led by Al Capone, involved in alcohol smuggling. This time, the multi-faceted and multi-semiotic narrative was reduced to a single static image of the murderer, on which an ambiguous mental concept, also graphic, was probably built. The murderer, referring to codes of recognition, is identified as a man in a black hat and black coat with a raised collar,

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



holding a cigar. The isolated relevance elements of the gangster film further find their graphic equivalents in the form of a simplified black silhouette of a man placed almost centrally on a white background and combined with a shape of spikes. The equivalent of the spikes in the graphic code are the sharp-edged triangles with which the entire silhouette of the murderer is finished, including his hat, coat and cigar. We also see two white triangles, whose negative space cuts off the hat from the head and the neck from the collar. Here we note the penetrating drilling down of the idea/theme by means of a graphic form which resembles spikes.

The pictorial representation was harmonized with the inscription introducing the title. The typographic element was placed at the left edge of the poster, written from top to bottom. The title was written in a two-element, serif font this time; the thin and serif elements visually allude to triangles. The names of the director and actors have been aligned to the left, thus on the right they construct an irregular form, corresponding well with and conquering the one suggested by the “spiky” coat of the gangster. The rounded letters, probably made by hand, somewhat “soften” the sharp forms, thus – the message of the poster.

The next poster to be examined is one that accompanied the screening of the *Most na rzece Kwai* film (English title: *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, director: David Lean, screenplay: Carl Foreman, Michael Wilson, production: USA, United Kingdom, world premiere: 1957, Polish premiere: 1988). The action of this war drama takes place during World War II. British prisoners of war are ordered by the Japanese to build a railway bridge over the River Kwai in the wild jungle of Thailand. The structure is to be used for Japanese military transports. One relevance element of the film – the bridge – was chosen from this multi-layered and highly complex plot, on which the mental and graphic concept was built. This time, the poster code was composed of letters forming the title word “most” [en. bridge], occupying almost the entire surface



Fig. 2. Poster for the *Nietykalni* [en. *The Untouchables*] film, 1987



Fig. 3. Poster for the *Most na rzece Kwai* film [en. *The Bridge on the River Kwai*], 1988

“most”. The name of the title river was written in a single-element, serif font, located at the bottom edge of the poster. The variable positioning of the words forming the title introduces a multi-directionality to the reading: once we read/see the word “bridge” – from left to right, once the phrase “on the river” – we perceive from top to bottom – and again the word “Kwai” – from left to right. Meanwhile, the names of the director and actors have been introduced diagonally.

The visually ordered poster structures described above are based on image abbreviation and thought synthesis. The former is introduced through visual contrasts (in terms of size and shape) and a synthetic, studied form that is created by eliminating unnecessary pictorial elements. Krzysztof Lenk said:

M.W. is a magician of form. From a few elements stripped of all ornamentation, so simple that there is nothing left to subtract, he creates his magical compositions, which he writes down on paper with a brush or a pen. M.W. thinks

of the artwork. The large and massive typographic characters are distinguished by their changing contours: firstly regular, with straight lines in the upper part; then – relatively regular, wavy at a third of the height of the letter; and finally – strongly irregular, sharp-angled at the base. The stability of the word and picture form in the upper part is broken by its mobility in the lower part, making the whole visually unstable. The rippled contours may suggest the structure’s location in the river or its reflection in the water, while the sharp ends evoke, for example, a cinematic scene of explosive charges. The word “na rzece” [en. on the river] was introduced in a single-element, sans-serif font to the right of the word

visually. He looks for the sign, that most condensed record of the balance between the luminosity of white and the emanation of black.<sup>25</sup>

Oslislo added:

“Wasilewski is a maestro of the sign, of plastic synthesis, of refined formal modesty built on black and white. He is close to Eastern masters of calligraphy and haiku creators. He possesses an extraordinary ability to condense form, which communicates meaningful content to the world without “raising its voice”. These thought-pictures linger in the memory, come back to us, reprimand us and entertain us”.<sup>26</sup>

In Wasilewski’s posters, the features of the object are reduced to the necessary minimum, i.e. maximum simplification, the plane is flat, clearly defined, and there is no effect of illusion or chiaroscuro. The drawing-design, then the graphic form, is largely subordinated to the concept. It also happens the other way round, when a visual surprise, an intellectual discovery is born from the synthesis of forms. The “chaos of emotions” rarely creeps into the logic of reason. The arrangement of forms is well thought out, balanced, like in haiku, where “you substitute one word and already the whole thing falls apart...”<sup>27</sup> Wasilewski wrote:

I have always been more interested in the philosophy of subtraction, of discarding the unnecessary, or “less is more”, than polyphonic narrative. I’m sure you’ve heard ten times by now that the philosophy of Lec’s aphorism is very close to me in the visual field: a word is enough, the rest is chatter.<sup>28</sup>

Through a synthesis of form and condensed thought, graphic and concept puzzles are created. These “crosswords” allow for reception: both of ambiguous connotations (similar to the creation of narratives) as well as unambiguous denotations (close to reading road signs).

<sup>25</sup> K. Lenk, *WM*, <http://www.wasilewski.art.pl/tekst.html> (accessed on: 9.05.2024).

<sup>26</sup> M. Oslislo, *Text*, <http://www.wasilewski.art.pl/tekst.html> (accessed on: 9.05.2024). Wasilewski himself emphasizes the strong influence of 1960s-70s printing on such constructed poetics of representation. However, when the restrictions on reproducing color posters disappeared, he stayed faithful to his black and white synthetic form. He even strongly appreciated it in the context of the plethora of color analogue and later digital posters.

<sup>27</sup> M. Wasilewski, J. Górski, *1 × 1*, op. Cit., p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61–63.

The first attitude is not typical of poster perception; it only appears in the case of the discerning passerby or a researcher writing an article about a poster. In this case, the synthesis of form and thought concept results in a wealth of semantic, emotional and aesthetic readings. In that case, the poster message, without losing its iconic character, ceases to represent a singular object (A.S. specific film scenes) and takes on an abstract meaning, suggesting general and thus vague and ambiguous senses.<sup>29</sup> And this was the reading – probably in a bid to flatter critics and scholars – that Wasilewski himself was hoping for, saying:

Because this is the question of how to make richness out of simplicity. This challenge has always excited me. With a variety of stain, line or brush stroke one can conjure up an unexpected number of effects, which sometimes manage to be assembled into some kind of synthetic and organized whole! This is all the more exciting for a guy like me who doesn't like to work polyphonically, but builds polyphony out of some homogeneous matter.<sup>30</sup>

In the outlined perspective, the poster “encourages” the passer-by-analyst or researcher to make an intellectual effort, which becomes the basis for a variety of connotations. Then, the graphic idea – based on a “particular configuration of iconic signs”<sup>31</sup> depicting a woman's legs and a man's hand placed on her bottom – encoded in the poster for the *Dirty Dancing* movie – can be interpreted as an ambiguity of feelings. Love is, at the same time subtle, innocent (suggested by: the delicate movement of a short skirt, the dancing step, the slim legs) and passionate, predatory (introduced by the hand placed lewdly on the skirt, on the female bottom, the garter, the short skirt, the high-heeled shoes, the legs arranged in a large spread, captured with a low-angle shot), sometimes even dark (through the black and white color scheme).

In the next poster, for *The Untouchables*, by combining the image of the criminal with the titular untouchability, we can obtain, for example,

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<sup>29</sup> S. Wysłouch, *Znak ikoniczny jako symbol* [en. The Iconic Sign as a Symbol], in *ibid.: Literatura a sztuki wizualne* [en. Literature and the Visual Arts], Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 1994, p. 80.

<sup>30</sup> M. Wasilewski, J. Górski, *1 × 1*, *op. cit.*, p. 15. Wasilewski has always been interested in areas of alternation: of single- and multiple-meanings, when, for example, a representation is still a letter and can already become an image, as in Chinese writing.

<sup>31</sup> S. Wysłouch, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

an association with the spines of a hedgehog. By means of the introduced “deformation of the iconic sign”<sup>32</sup>, we read the poster’s representation as an attack, danger on the one hand; on the other, a guarantee of untouchability, i.e. also impunity; from the third perspective – a feeling of security, because one cannot be hurt. Spines can also become a sign of anger, fear, trembling, even alienation, loneliness, inaccessibility.

However, in the poster for the film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, a war story was told in a poster-like way through the variation of synthetic linguistic and pictorial form – from being massive, to wavy, to “shattered”. The film narrative was translated into the graphic one. The cinematic story was interpreted as the variability of military strategies, of warfare, of human fate. The absurdity of war was highlighted, where massive graphic construction trembles at its base.

The interpretations of the three posters analyzed can be further deepened or multiplied. However, let us keep in mind the specificity of the aforementioned poster image. Firstly: it embodies a desire to “distil” the layer of representations contained in the film (images of objects) in order to obtain a poster extract (the image itself), filtered through the poster artist’s style and technique (image of subject and form) and idea (mental image). Secondly, this reduction of the film’s ambiguous descriptive element is related to the specific viewing situation. A person walking by has 2-3 seconds to perceive the poster. Both factors have the effect of evoking only the film’s key theme, mood, tension or aesthetic profile.<sup>33</sup> In this case, the synthesis and form order, accompanied by a condensation of thought, result in an unambiguous – and therefore intense – denotation (as in the case of a road sign), emotion or aesthetic impression. In its message, the poster “takes shortcuts” to reach the imagination of the hurried viewer faster and more suggestively, to “catch his or her attention”. Wasilewski rightly noted that “quiet” posters, by means of contrast with “loud” ones, often do a better job of communicating the content. The artist deftly employed design strategies through which his posters were seen and heard.

Then, the assimilation of the poster takes place without any special receiving competence, in accordance with the principles of this applied art. Wasilewski

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> *Ach! Plakat filmowy w Polsce* [en. Oh! Film Poster in Poland], op. cit., p. 77.

said: “The point is for the ordinary person to understand the poster”<sup>34</sup>, he or she consumes it and may or may not derive intellectual satisfaction from this fact.<sup>35</sup> The passer-by glancing at the poster – unlike the viewer looking at film images – is not immersively drawn into the performance, urged to piece together the narrative. Rather, he or she is surprised and “thrown” out of the poster portrayal, as he or she is shocked by the passionate dance; almost physically touched (injured by the sharp spikes) or terrified by the huge, 100 × 70 cm, bridge trembling at its foundation. The precision of the thoughts (recognition and cognitive codes), and further – of the forms (graphic codes) – corresponds to the precision of the meanings and the encoded and decoded impressions. This is the magic of a good – for it is noticed and read – poster. These unambiguous contents, emotions or other perceptual sensations may seem naive on the one hand, like folk sayings, and obvious on the other, like poetic punch lines. There are no excessive ornaments or rhetorical phrasing in them, just as in aphorisms. Wasilewski would say, regardless of the stage of his work:

The short message has always been more important to me than the longer story, the more polyphonic narrative. To Lec, who is a master to me, four words were enough [...]. How to turn Lec into a painting, how to translate this maxim of his into a poster?<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Plakat polski i światowy – wywiad z prof. Mieczysławem Wasilewskim* [en. Polish and World Poster – An Interview with Professor Mieczysław Wasilewski], op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> “The graphic designer is able to ‘flatter’ the implicit intelligence of the viewer when he is facilitated, enabled or directly visualized by this sentence” (M. Knorowski, *Efekt zwierciadlany* [en. The Mirror Effect], op. cit., p. 228).

<sup>36</sup> M. Wasilewski, J. Górski, 1 × 1, op. cit., p. 113.

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Fig. 1–3. <http://www.wasilewski.art.pl/plakaty.html>.

## Between the Film, the Poster, and the Viewer. A Case Study Based on Selected Posters by Mieczysław Wasilewski

The creators of posters and films represent different artistic sensibilities, which stem from, among other things, their work in different media, resulting in contrasting viewer expectations of these cultural artefacts. A film introduces sequences of images and sounds in a specific time frame, and is therefore watched over a long period of time, during the tens of minutes allotted for its viewing. A poster, on the other hand, presents images and words in their graphic synthesis on a plane. It sends a concise message, because it is perceived “in passing” while its viewer is driving a car, waiting for a bus or buying a ticket. My research problem is related precisely to the communication method of this multi-semiotic, sensual, analytical duration of the film in the pictorial and verbal, conceptual, simplified poster “moment”. I decided to analyze this issue in the context of Mieczysław Wasilewski’s work.

**Keywords:** film, poster, Mieczysław Wasilewski, graphism, form synthesis, concept

**Słowa kluczowe:** film, plakat, Mieczysław Wasilewski, grafizm, synteza formy, koncept

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