

FILM ADAPTATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY POLISH LITERATURE. AN ATTEMPT TO CHARACTERIZE THE PHENOMENON

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The discussion about cinematic adaptation of literature, which in Poland is often associated with outdated trends and methodologies that primarily originate in linguistics and literary studies, is hardly a matter of consideration in the field of contemporary film studies in Poland. The decline in interest in adaptation can be attributed not only to changes in the media landscape, in which literature has gained powerful competitors in the form of digital media, but also to institutional factors – the autonomy of film studies and its emancipation from the power of Polish literary studies at universities certainly did not contribute to literary and film filiation research in the past decades. Perhaps these factors are the reason behind one of the most remarkable phenomena in Polish cinematography in recent years – a strong reinforcement of the relationship between contemporary literature and film – which has not attracted much interest in the academic field so far.¹ Meanwhile, this cross-media symbiosis is complex and multifaceted in nature – filmmakers quite often resort to recent Polish literature, while writers actively participate in filmmaking at the preproduction (script writing) and production stages (*cameo* in films), as well as taking part in the promotion of the adaptations of their works. This phenomenon is not only quantitative, but also qualitative: one

¹ In 2013, the publication *Literatura i kino po 1989 roku* [en. Literature and Cinema after 1989] was published. The authors point out that in the 1990s and 2000s, writers such as Marcin Świetlicki, Jerzy Pilch and Wojciech Kuczok had strong connections with the cinema. See. *Literatura i kino po 1989 roku*, ed. by P. Marecki, A. Pilarska and K. Pluto, Krakow 2013. However, the phenomenon described in this article has gained momentum after the publication of the said monograph.

can even speak of an interesting trend of adapting works of artistic ambition, with complex narratives, stylistically “opaque” and, it would seem, quite challenging to present on screen. Authors, whose works are eagerly screened, include the leading Polish writers of the middle and young generation, honored with the most prestigious literary awards in the country, such as Dorota Masłowska (b. 1983), Olga Tokarczuk (b. 1962), Szczepan Twardoch (b. 1979) and Jakub Żulczyk (b. 1983).² Adaptations of their works employ resources characteristic of arthouse cinema, although they often breach the boundary between art and popular film.³

If we were to look for a work that initiates a new phenomenon, then without a doubt one should point to Xawery Żuławski’s *Wojna polsko-ruska* [en. Snow White and Russian Red] (2009), a movie based on Dorota Masłowska’s famous 2002 debut presenting the story of a drug-abusing young man nicknamed Silny [en. Strong]. The novel, maintained in the form of a chaotic internal monologue, in which “plot twists are linguistic twists”,⁴ was unexpectedly perceived by Żuławski as having great cinematic potential. At the same time, the director did not follow the well-trodden path of Polish cinema and did not attempt to make the story credible, but, with the use of near-surreal poetics, exposed its grotesqueness even more. The artistic courage, unconventional form, contemporary themes, textual and paratextual accentuation of the film’s connection with the novel, make the *Snow White and Russian Red* a precursor to a number of adaptations made in the following years.

The trend of the recent literature being adapted, which has been gaining momentum for more than a decade now, not only demands a scientific description, but also raises the question of what modern *adaptation studies*

² Although Żulczyk has not received as much critical acclaim as the other writers mentioned above, his work has also received numerous awards.

³ In this article, I omit adaptations of contemporary works that are characterized by a conventional form and primarily draw plot ideas from literature, such as *Uwikłanie* [en. Entanglement] (2010) by Jacek Bromski (based on the 2007 novel by Zygmunt Miłoszewski), *Ziarno prawdy* [en. Grain of Truth] (2015) by Borys Lankosz (based on the 2011 novel by Miłoszewski), or *Chyłka* (2018-2022) by Łukasz Palkowski and Marek Wróbel (based on the 2015-2022 series of novels by Remigiusz Mróz).

⁴ M. Stroiński, *Wojna polsko-ruska z flagą i bez flagi* [en. Snow White and Russian Red With and Without the Flag], [in:] *Od Mickiewicza do Masłowskiej. Adaptacje filmowe literatury polskiej* [en. From Mickiewicz to Masłowska. Film Adaptations of Polish Literature], ed. by T. Lubelski. Krakow 2014, p. 412.

should look like. The field of adaptation studies, which is not widely known in Poland but develops rapidly in the UK, USA or Australia, may provide inspiration in this context. Firstly, more contemporary publications on the subject (e.g. Simone Murray's monograph) draw attention to the need to take into account contextual factors such as the position of the writer in the market, the cooperation of writers with the film industry, or promotional strategies. Secondly, it is emphasized that in an era of media convergence, research should move beyond the analysis of unidirectional literature and film relationships to a characterization of the entire media configuration. While both postulates seem to be rather tenable, the anti-formalist stance of those adaptation studies representatives who radically reject textual analysis and *medium specificity* research,⁵ is highly questionable. The most recent Polish films, which face the stylistically "non-transparent" literary works, are the best testimony to the fact that adaptations are not only products of a specific industry (as characterized by Murray⁶), but also works in search of artistic forms that manage to express complex social content in the best possible way. It seems that comparative research should also include inquiries into how such content is communicated through literary discourse and how it is expressed through cinematic discourse, which may reinforce, complement or reorient the meaning of the original.

The aim of this article is a general characterization of the phenomenon of contemporary Polish prose adaptation, taking into account 4 aspects of this phenomenon:

1. the collaboration between writers and the film industry (the level of extratextual literary and cinematic contacts);
2. meta references to the literary medium in film, which are a feature of contemporary adaptations;
3. the multi-directionality of cross-media references and inspirations in novels and their adaptations;
4. the dialogue that emerges between literary works and adaptations in the transformation of literary discourse into that of the cinema;

⁵ Por. S. Murray, *The Adaptation Industry. The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation*, New York 2012, p. 32.

⁶ Ibidem.

With regard to the aspect of extratextual literary and film contacts, the collaboration between writers and filmmakers, although it has a long and momentous tradition in Poland,⁷ is now clearly modeled by the new media configuration. The observations made by Murray, who believes that nowadays the model of the literary writer has given way to that of the “cross-platform author”,⁸ gain an excellent illustration on Polish soil as well, in the work of writers such as Dorota Masłowska or Jakub Żulczyk. The relationship of both creators to audiovisual culture is multidirectional. Żulczyk, who admits that he has always wanted to “write for the screen”,⁹ quite often refers to film in his novels, writes film reviews, and also creates screenplays, both based on his own texts (*Ślepnąć od światła* [en. *Blinded by the Lights*], a 2014 novel, a 2018 TV series), and original screenplays (*Belfer* [en. *The Teacher*], 2016-2023; *Warszawianka* [en. *Still Here*], 2023). Although Masłowska is not a screenwriter, she co-creates music videos and willingly participates in various film projects.¹⁰

A factor particularly conducive to the development of complex literary and film affiliations and the inclusion of writers in the film industry is the growth of media platforms such as Netflix, which invest in local productions and leave room in their portfolio for ambitious works. Writers, who are not afraid of experimentation, are finding their way well into the new media space and are increasingly working on series and mini-series – HBO produced *Blinded by the Lights* and *Still Here* (the latter series eventually bought out by Sky Showtime), Canal+ *Pisarze. Serial na krótko* [en. *Writers. A Short Series*]

⁷ In virtually every period of film history, selected Polish writers (Anatol Stern, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Marek Hłasko, Jerzy Pilch or Wojciech Kuczok) wrote screenplays and occasionally wrote film criticism as well. During the times of the People’s Republic of Poland, acclaimed writers also often acted as literary directors in film studios.

⁸ S. Murray, *The Adaptation Industry...*, op. cit., p. 32.

⁹ See an interview by Marcin Radomski with Jakub Żulczyk, available on the channel KINORozmowa. Marcin Radomski on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NO-Si1HhERws&t=313s> [accessed on 13.07.2024] I owe some information about Żulczyk’s media activity to Ms. Monika Sikorska, who is writing her doctoral dissertation on the author’s work and his self-promotional strategies.

¹⁰ For example, the writer created a mocking commentary on Marek Piestrak’s horror film *Wilczyca* [en. *She-Wolf*] (1983), which was added to the film, distributed in this form in selected arthouse cinemas in Poland.

(2019–2021; based on scripts by more than a dozen of Polish writers)¹¹ and *Król* [en. *The King*] (2020; a 2016 novel by Szczepan Twardoch), while Netflix produced *Informacja zwrotna* [en. *Feedback*] (2023; a 2021 novel by Jakub Żulczyk). Additionally, the works of contemporary writers are adapted into cinema films, which, even if they receive mixed reactions, are sometimes widely discussed, as in the case of *Snow White and Russian Red*, or *Pokot* [en. *Spoor*] (2017; *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* novel by Olga Tokarczuk from 2009).

Significantly, the literary provenance of adaptations is often highlighted, not only within paratextual promotional strategies,¹² but also within the film text itself. In other words, one of the characteristics of the phenomenon under discussion is that filmmakers evoke the literary medium's inherent context for the story in various ways. The most obvious example is the physical appearance of the authors of adapted works on screen, or allusive references to them.¹³ As Murray notes, although post-structuralism has long “put the author to death”, the writer still remains an extremely powerful brand in the contemporary publishing and media market, which is facilitated by the mechanisms of the capitalist system.¹⁴ Authors promote not only films but also themselves, both in the various paratexts accompanying adaptations and in the film works. While traditionally “guest” appearances by authors – e.g. Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz in *Panny z Wilka* [en. *The Maids of Wilko*] (1979), or Tadeusz Konwicki in Andrzej Wajda's *Kronika wypadków miłosnych* [en. *Chronicle of Amorous Accidents*] (1985) – were primarily an homage to the literary masters or a gesture of the writers' approval of the film adaptation, it seems that nowadays they constitute to a far greater extent an element of the transmedia strategy

¹¹ Each episode was scripted by a different writer or publicist, including Krzysztof Varga, Jakub Żulczyk, Dorota Masłowska, Manuela Gretkowska, Sylwia Chutnik, Michał Witkowski, Ignacy Karpowicz, Łukasz Orbitowski, Ziemowit Szczerek and Małgorzata Rejmer.

¹² One example is a program produced by Canal+ entitled *Król. Prolog* [en. *King. Prologue*], featuring a conversation between the novel's author (Szczepan Twardoch), the series' director (Jan P. Matuszyński) and the actor playing the lead role (Michał Żurawski).

¹³ For example, the main character in the TV series “*Blinded by the Lights*” is called Kuba, just like the author of the novel Jakub Żulczyk, although in the literary original his name was Jacek.

¹⁴ S. Murray, *The Adaptation Industry...*, op. cit., p. 34. See also D. Antonik, *Autor jako marka. Literatura w kulturze audiowizualnej społeczeństwa informacyjnego* [en. *Author As a Brand. Literature in the Audiovisual Culture of the Information Society*], Krakow 2014.

of the writers, who build their image across numerous platforms and have a group of fans who follow them regardless of the medium in which they create.¹⁵

From the point of view of “cultural economy” as practiced by Murray, the appearance of writers in films could be considered a fact from the same level as the self-promotional participation of writers in television programs, podcasts, etc. However, such a generalizing approach fails to recognize the multiplicity of functions that *cameos* can serve. Jakub Żulczyk’s appearance in the role of one of the participants of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in *Still Here* constitutes an element of a code of understanding with the fans of the author’s works, who has repeatedly – including in the popular podcast *Co ćpać po odwyku* [en. What to Get High On After Rehab] – admitted to struggling with addiction. Żulczyk’s presence in the series may serve to build a strategy of witnessing, the aim of which is to lend credibility to the story of the protagonist (a forty-year-old man falling into alcoholism and destroying his professional and personal life) through a mythically biographical reference to the experiences of the script’s author. However, this figure may simultaneously impinge on the reading of the entire story by suggesting a plot alternative – while the protagonist of *Still Here* leaves the AA therapy group and sinks into destruction, Żulczyk himself has repeatedly admitted in podcasts and interviews that, thanks to therapy, he has not succumbed to his addiction. In contrast, the appearance of the writer Joanna Bator in *Ciemno, prawie noc* [en. Darkness, Almost Night] (2019; a novel from 2012) is devoid of biographical references, but may instead be read as an expression of the author’s identification with one of the characters, who is a feminist transformation of the figure of a witch. Suitably disguised and difficult to recognize, Bator plays Kocińska, one of the so-called “cat ladies”, mysterious, seemingly crazy women who ultimately turn out to be the only

¹⁵ According to Murray, contemporary audiences cannot be classified as book lovers or cinephiles, as they tend to be rather passionate about certain sub-genres distinguished by the type of content (sometimes identified with a particular author’s work) appearing in different media forms. This is one of the factors driving writers to create across multiple media. S. Murray, *The Adaptation Industry...*, op. cit. p. 43.

positive characters in a grotesque world on the borderline of a dark fairy tale, crime story and horror film.¹⁶

Although *cameos* may only be considered as part of the self-creative project of transmedia-oriented writers,¹⁷ this procedure also has great potential of meaning within individual textual structures. Considerably more complicated example in comparison of *Still Here* and *Darkness, Almost Night to Snow White and Russian Red*, in which Dorota Masłowska has impersonated herself to some extent. The novel already employs the figure of the authorial metalepsis – during his arrest at the police station, Silny meets a certain Dorota Masłowska, a woman who has a surprisingly extensive knowledge of him. Żuławski reinforces the self-reflexive dimension of the text not only by visualizing the metalepsis in question (Frame 1), but also by building a higher diegetic layer over the action of the entire film, depicting the process of creating a story. The writer already appears in the prologue and begins to deliver the text said in the novel by Silny. Masłowska later appears several more times in the adaptation – we see her at home or at school writing a story about Silny, which is then visualized on screen. It can be assumed, of course, that the film fragments referring to the circumstances of the creation of *Snow White and Russian Red* were created with the intention of discounting the popularity of the original and exploiting the legend that accompanied it (the writer was supposedly working on her brilliant debut during her preparations for high school graduation exams, which is also featured in the film). However, this procedure is an interesting extension of the novel's self-reflexive devices. From the very beginning of the film adaptation, Silny speaks in sentences said

¹⁶ Less meaningful is the cameo by Szczepan Twardoch, who – perhaps drawing a self-reflexive parallel between literature and the market of consumption – appeared as a waiter in two scenes of *The King*. The main character – Warsaw gangster Jakub Szapiro – gives a tip to a man with the words “Thank you, Mr. Szczepan”. The writers responsible for the scripts of particular episodes also appear in the first season of TV series *Writers. A Short Series*. The phenomenon of *cameo appearances* of writers in Polish films – not only in recent cinema – was pointed out by Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz: P. Dunin-Wąsowicz, *Pisarz polski w filmie i serialu* [en. *Polish Writer in Film and TV Series*], <https://zaiks.org.pl/artykuly/2021/pazdziernik/pisarz-polski-w-filmie-i-serialu> [accessed on 6.08.2024].

¹⁷ This procedure is discussed by Dominik Antonik in this context. See D. Antonik, *Sława literacka albo nowe reguły sztuki. Studia z socjologii i ekonomii literatury* [en. *Literary Fame or the Rules of Art. Studies in the Sociology and Economy of Literature*], Krakow 2024, pp. 123-129.

to him by Masłowska, which emphasizes the protagonist's lack of agency and puppet-like character. The protagonist's ontic status seems to metaphorically reflect the condition of the postmodern subject – controlled by the “voices” of Others, deprived of autonomy and free will. The appearance of the protagonist's creator on the screen significantly strengthens the film's semantic potential, which does not have to be understood solely as a story about the personality disintegration of a drug-abusing “dresiarz”.

The second way of evoking the literary medium in adaptations involves making use of characters of fictional writers (who usually have their prototypes already in literary texts). This kind of theme building is sometimes limited to just showing the literary milieu on screen, which incidentally, is portrayed ambiguously at times.¹⁸ Sometimes, however, the filmmakers encourage a kind of meta-reflection on the relationship between literature and film. A good example is Wojciech Smarzowski's *Pod Mocnym Aniołem* [en. *The Mighty Angel*] (2014), an adaptation of Jerzy Pilch's 2000 work about the struggling alcoholic writer, Jerzy, who returns to his addiction after each stay in rehab. The elaborate phrases of the novel's first-person narrative are confronted in the adaptation with a brutal visual naturalism. While Pilch presents the story of a writer, who tries to mask his alcoholism with sophisticated linguistic figures, Smarzowski constantly undermines the words spoken by the protagonist and focuses on the purely bodily experience of the alcoholic disease, which cannot be structured through language. In the adaptation, characterized by, among other things, subjectivized, incoherent editing, a clear tension is created between Pilch's literary mannerism and Smarzowski's cinematic style, which represents a sense of chaos. The filmmaker seems to encourage viewers to ask what experiences the novel's narrator (and perhaps the author himself, too?) who depicts alcoholism through erudite and sophisticated multiple-complex sentences, was trying to mask.

One can risk the claim that in many contemporary adaptations the literary form retains its different status (in relation to the film conventions defined by

¹⁸ This is the case, for example, in *Still Here*, produced on the basis of a script by Jakub Żulczyk. On the one hand, the main character – a forty-year-old writer who has not created anything since his debut and is mainly involved in partying – is shown critically. On the other hand, however, it seems that Żulczyk, for all his criticism of the protagonist's passivity, tries to romanticize him a little and shows the writer as a special person, wanting more from life, not agreeing to live through the daily grind.



Fig. 1. Silny meets his creator. Dorota Maślowska in the “Snow White and Russian Red” film

tradition and usage), and functions as an heterogeneous element, inclusively incorporated into the audiovisual matter. The protagonists of *Snow White and Russian Red*, *The Mighty Angel*, *Sąsiedzi* [en. Neighborhooders] (2014; Adrian Markowski’s 2007 short stories), *Między nami dobrze jest* [en. No Matter How Hard We Tried] (2014; Maślowska’s 2008 drama), or *Inni ludzie* [en. Other People] (2021; Maślowska’s 2018 novel) do not use colloquial language, but a distinctly “literary”,¹⁹ unnatural, stylized form. It doesn’t result from the lack of creativity on the part of the filmmakers, who failed to sense the “nature” of the target medium and failed to adapt literature to the film form,²⁰ but rather from a belief – inherent in the age of convergence – that there is no such thing as “purity” of a medium, and artistic works can combine heterogeneous components. While evoking literary contexts in adaptations may be considered merely one of the marketing strategies, the examples of *The Mighty Angel* or *Snow White and Russian Red* show that thanks to such a procedure, literature and film can enter into new meaning-creating relations

¹⁹ When I speak of literary language, I do not, of course, mean a normative, supra-regional variety of Polish, but a clearly characterized language that does not mimetically imitate colloquial language, but refers to the literary idiolects used in the originals.

²⁰ This intermediacy of the adaptation was not to everyone’s taste. For example, a critic of Filmweb accused *Snow White and Russian Red* of an excess of “boring and lengthy dialogues”. See Ł. Muszyński, *Barwy dresu* [en. *The Colors of the Tracksuit*], Filmweb, <https://www.filmweb.pl/reviews/recenzja-filmu-Wojna+polsko+ruska-8046> [accessed on 7.07.2024].

with each other. Freed from the obligation of being faithful to the “essence” of cinema²¹ contemporary adaptations absorb overtly literary elements, but at the same time modify and recontextualize them, encouraging the viewer to confront both media.

Intermediality, which “occurs when aesthetic conventions and/or visual and auditory properties of some other medium are attempted to be carried out within a given medium”²² is one of the most important features of literary and film filiation in contemporary cinema. Its manifestation is not only the evocation of literary conventions in film, but that of film conventions in literature as well. This is well demonstrated, for example, in Żulczyk’s *Blinded by the Lights*, a novel about a young man from Olsztyn who, seeing little prospect for himself in the capital, becomes a thriving drug dealer. Describing Warsaw as a city of lost illusions, tempting with unfulfillable promises, the author refers to the iconography of neo-noir films, e.g. he alludes to Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976). Certain film “dispositions” were thus already contained in the novel, which the creators of the adaptation were able to put into specific terms in various ways. The director of the series, Krzysztof Skonieczny, reinforces the cinematic clues, including through the visualization of the title metaphor by means of artificial, bright lighting, characteristic of the neo-noir style. The novel and the TV series do not have an antagonistic relationship, but complement each other perfectly in the creation of the mythical Warsaw, with both media modeling the image of the city somewhat differently.²³ Notably for the era of transmediality,²⁴ the literary and cinematic creation also affects

²¹ Contrary to popular opinion, Kamilla Elliott argues that discourses on adaptation have tended to promote loyalty not to the literary text, but – to the target medium (arbitrarily defined by “essentialists”). K. Elliott, *Theorizing Adaptation*, Oxford 2020, p. 99.

²² Ch. Balme, *Wprowadzenie do nauki o teatrze [en. Introduction to the Science of Theatre]*, transl. W. Dudzik and M. Leyko, PWN Scientific Publishers, Warsaw 2002, p. 204. Quoted after: K. Chmielecki, *Estetyka intermedialności [en. Intermediality Aesthetics]*, Cracow 2008, p. 46. The author gives many different meanings of the notion of intermediality.

²³ For example, there are references in the series to the poetics of the music video, which, by increasing the immersive nature of the message, accentuate the hyper-sensual nature of the urban experience.

²⁴ A characteristic feature of “*transmedia storytelling*” is the simultaneous creation of fictional worlds on different media platforms. Cf. H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, transl. by M. Bernatowicz, M. Filiciak, Warsaw 2008. The best Polish example of this type of practice may be the storyworld of *The Witcher*, which had its

the real space – walks were arranged in the capital through the locations appearing in Żulczyk’s work and in its adaptation.²⁵

The influence of film conventions on literary works is nothing new, but the intermediality of literature and film is not limited to bilateral inspirations, but extends to a range of other media. A very interesting example is *Other People*, a novel that refers to the musical form on multiple levels. The cover of the hardback publication of Masłowska’s work resembles a record cover, and the narrative is modeled on the text of a hip-hop song (through the choice of lexis, type of rhymes, syntax, evoked images of reality, and intertextual quotations), which remains in close connection with the theme of the novel, depicting the fate of an unemployed thirty-year-old who dreams of making his rap debut. In Terpińska’s adaptation, intermedia references can be substantiated through the nature of the film medium. While in the case of Masłowska’s work one can speak at most about the “musicality” of the work (which among other things is carried out at the level of sound instrumentation and prosody²⁶), the multimodal film medium operates with the *sensu stricto* music – the text rapped by the actors is accompanied by the sound of beats. Furthermore, the film medium allows to extend the play with genres with references to the music video form. Remarkably, however, in this particular case as well, one cannot speak of a unidirectional transformation of a verbal text into an audiovisual one. For the music video – as a paratextual form – had already accompanied the novel. Even prior to the production of the adaptation, Aleksandra Terpińska directed a music video promoting the literary work, on which Masłowska herself rapped excerpts from the work. The author, by

origins in literature (in Andrzej Sapkowski’s short stories and novels), but has been expanded in computer games, comic books, film adaptations, cosplay, etc. The example of *Blinded by the Lights* proves, however, that we can also deal with a kind of transmediality in relation to texts that do not form elaborate “franchises”.

²⁵ The guides were both Jakub Żulczyk and the actor playing the lead role, Kamil Nożyński. See <https://waw4free.pl/wydarzenie-114286-jakub-zulczyk-powarszawsku-czyli-spacer-sladami-warszawskich-ksiazek>; <https://warszawa.eska.pl/spacer-sladami-bohaterow-slepnac-od-swiateł-w-warszawie-odtworca-głownej-rol-i-oprowadzi-po-zakamarkach-stolicy-znanych-z-serialu-aa-aeJn-6E7n-9hf9.html>.

²⁶ Cf. Andrzej Hejmej’s identifications of the different types of musicality of a literary work: A. Hejmej, *Muzyczność – muzyczność dzieła literackiego* [en. *Musicality – Musicality of a Literary Work*] [in:] idem, *Muzyczność dzieła literackiego* [en. *Musicality of a Literary Work*], Toruń 2012, p. 61.

the way, has previously appeared in music videos that accompanied her debut album *Spoleczeństwo jest niemiłe* [en. Society is Unpleasant] (2014; released under the pseudonym Mister D.), which combines rap, punk and dance music. In addition, a play based on the novel premiered at TR Warszawa in 2019, featuring quasi-music videos of Masłowska's text created especially for the show.²⁷ Thus, when talking about the adaptation of literature today, it is necessary to keep in mind “the dispersion of literary content across all media platforms and in different spheres of culture”.²⁸ Contradictory to film scholars who analyze adaptation as a “linear” process of transformation of an older medium (literature) into a newer one (film), Murray rightly notes that the relationship between media is considerably more complicated, as they *de facto* exist “contemporaneously, rearranging themselves into new patterns of usage and mutual dependence”.²⁹

The aforementioned example illustrates that the latest adaptations of Polish contemporary literature are strongly marked by a hybrid character of both the media and the genre, manifested in the area of production and promotion, as well as in the sphere of the poetics of the texts. However, while this situation makes traditional studies of “intersemiotic translation”, focusing on the transfer of a message from medium A to medium B, reductive, it does not invalidate the reflection on the specific features of literature and film at all. For between a literary work and its adaptation, a dialogical relationship is created, which is shaped to a large extent precisely by the characteristics of both media. For example, the literary discourse in the novels of Masłowska or Tokarczuk is quite often oriented towards criticism of the language itself, which, for obvious reasons, cannot assume a dominant role in films. It seems

²⁷ In turn, the paratexts of the *Blinded by the Lights* series were music videos by Krzysztof Skonieczny, available on YouTube, featuring the fictional character of the rapper Piorun, played in the adaptation by the director himself. Some of the clips were created for the series, but one of them – PIORUN feat. DARIO #hot16challenge2 – was made two years after the premiere of the adaptation. In the context of the transmedia issue, it is worth mentioning that Skonieczny himself did the voiceover for the *Blinded by the Lights* audiobook.

²⁸ D. Antonik, *Autor jako marka...*, op. cit., p. 88.

²⁹ S. Murray, *Adaptation Industry...*, op. cit., p. 14. One of the earliest representatives of adaptation studies advocating for a departure from unilateral literature and film relations to the study of a complex web of intertextual connections was Robert Stam. See, among others, R. Stam, *Beyond Fidelity: the Dialogics of Adaptation*, [in] *Film Adaptation*, ed. by J. Naremore, New Brunswick 2000, pp. 53-76.

that one of the most important tasks facing contemporary literary and film comparatistics is to characterize how film discourse transforms, complements, reduces or expands the meanings of literary works, placing the stories in a different media environment.

An example of an interesting remodeling of criticism originally expressed through literary discourse is the *Snow White and Russian Red*. In the novel, Silny's idiolect, rich in anacolutha, *ad absurdum* slogans and clichés, can be read as a representation of degraded, meaningless language, which does not provide the postmodern subject with the possibility of expression.³⁰ Żuławski does not negate the diagnosis of culture expressed by Masłowska, but rather makes the medium of the “pop culture trash” not necessarily the verbal language, but the “language” of audiovisual media. It is no coincidence that the film begins with shots that imitate the phenomenon of zapping, characteristic of the neo-television era – we watch short fragments of randomly juxtaposed television programs.³¹ This frame (cf. Frame 2) seems to suggest that it is the chaotic, hypersensual, consumerist, ahierarchical logic of the media that governs the depicted world and determines the way in which the characters experience reality. The novel's ironic accumulation of linguistic clichés is replaced by a proliferation of audiovisual clichés (including quotations from *The Exorcist* or *The Matrix*). The film discourse evokes different archi- and intertexts compared to the literary discourse and takes the critique of post-modern culture into different areas than the novel. At the same time, both works do not fall into a moralistic tone and expose their own entanglement with the dominant type of culture.

³⁰ Cf. P. Ryś, *Podmiot „rozbity” w polskiej prozie współczesnej. Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą biało-czerwoną Doroty Masłowskiej i Barbara Radziwiłłówna z Jaworzna-Szczakowej Michała Witkowskiego* [en. The “Broken” Subject in Polish Contemporary Prose. The Snow White and Russian Red Under the White and Red Flag by Dorota Masłowska and Barbara Radziwiłłówna z Jaworzna-Szczakowej by Michał Witkowski], [in:] *Pęknięcia, granice, przemiany: tożsamościowe transgresje w literaturze XX i XXI wieku* [en. Cracks, Borders, Transformations: Identity Transgressions in XX and XXI Century Literature], ed. by J. Wróbel, Krakow 2013

³¹ Dorota Dąbrowska also draws attention to this motif: D. Dąbrowska, *Przez zdradę ku wierności* [en. Through Betrayal to Fidelity]. “Snow White and Russian Red” by Xawery Żuławski in relation to the novel by Dorota Masłowska, [in:] *Rejony twórczej zmiany. Tekst. Adaptacja. Medialna re-kreacja* [en. Regions of Creative Change. Text. Adaptation. Medial Re-creation], ed. by B. Pawłowska-Jądrzyk and K. Gołos-Dąbrowska, Warsaw 2019, UKSW Publishing House, p. 240.



Fig. 2. The image of a TV, giving a Fig. to the whole story in the "Snow White and Russian Red"

This juxtaposition of literary and cinematic discourses is also encouraged by the *Spoor*. Given Olga Tokarczuk's work, the *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* novel, which forms the basis of the film's screenplay, has a fairly linear plot – it tells the story of an elderly woman, Janina Duszejko, an animal lover who takes cruel revenge on hunters. In this instance, literature becomes a medium for post-humanist discourse, and the object of criticism is to a large extent the language, which perpetuates an anthropocentric view of the world. As the first-person narrator of the novel, Duszejko opposes the exclusion of animals and tries to develop a more inclusive way of talking about non-humans. In the adaptation, Agnieszka Holland extends this criticism to iconographic medium, drawing attention to the fact that animals are also reified in Polish culture in the visual sphere. The director amplifies the novel's motif of taking photographs of a hunting end ritual (Frame 3), begins successive sequences with drawings from a hunting calendar and emphasizes the ways in which animals are objectified in official culture, in which they are reduced to the role of figurines, symbols, emblems. Through the use of film discourse as a medium for post-humanist ideas, Holland draws attention to the presence of not only verbal but also visual discursive practices that serve to exclude animals.

The phenomenon of transferring the latest Polish prose to the screen indicates that the issue of film adaptation, neglected by domestic scholars, urgently needs to be updated. Following the footsteps of radical representatives of the contextual approach in *adaptation studies*, such as Murray, one should



Fig. 3. A shot of the hunting end ritual in the film "Spoor"

consider the mechanisms of selection of adapted texts (e.g. the consecutive role of literary awards in the "adaptation industry") and the interaction of the market and art in the transmedia projects of contemporary writers and filmmakers. Although needed, this kind of research seems reductive, as it neglects issues of artistic mutual inspiration, social interaction and the critical potential of literature and film. Of particular interest seems to be the fact that the creators of such works as *Snow White and Russian Red*, *Spoor*, and *Other People*, reach for experimental contemporary prose in search of new poetics that could refresh the Polish cinema. The filmmakers do not attempt to "erase" traces of the literary character of the original, which is characteristic of the age of convergence, but rather create hybrid works, in which overtly literary elements interact with the new media context. New adaptations, regardless of their artistic value, introduce unusual – and sometimes even innovative – solutions in terms of the relation between image and word (*Snow White and Russian Red*, *The Mighty Angel*, *Other People*), genre conventions (*Spoor*, *Darkness*, *Almost Night*, *Blinded by the Lights*) or references to other media forms (*No Matter How Hard We Tried*,³² *Other People*). It seems that

³² It is worth mentioning that Masłowska's drama was written specifically for the Teatr Rozmaitości [en. Variety Theatre] and was therefore created with a different medium in mind.

the search for inspiration in literature does not result from the desire to diversify the language of the film as such, for it also stems from the need to construct new forms that could be a good medium for current social and cultural issues which are not satisfactorily represented in a set of conventionally used cinematic formulas. The development of quality television and streaming services creates a favorable field for ambitious inter-media experiments, and the facilitators between literature and film are often the writers themselves, bringing their own fresh perspective on the audiovisual medium.

When compared to enquiries on whether an equivalent of a linguistic technique has been created, a complex examination of novels and films as links in a social discourse manifesting itself in culture seems to be more fruitful from a cognitive point of view. In the works of writers such as Dorota Masłowska, Olga Tokarczuk or Jakub Żulczyk, literature becomes a medium for post-humanist discourse (*Drive Your Plough Over the Bones of the Dead*), sociological (*Blinded by the Lights, Other People*) or cultural (*Snow White and Russian Red*). What is left is the question as to how film catches up with this social dialogue, extending its reach into the space of audiovisual culture. What is the potential of the cinematic form to express criticism of specific discourses? What aspects of audiovisual culture are brought to our attention by the adaptations that expand the field of reference of the literary text? Through a comprehensive analysis of contemporary works, as they interact with other texts, with paratexts and with reality itself, we should not neglect the study of what individual media forms (novels, films, series, music videos) bring with them into this social and cultural dialogue.

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Film Adaptations of Contemporary Polish Literature. An Attempt to Characterize the Phenomenon

The article is devoted to the latest phenomenon of adapting contemporary Polish literature into film. As the author assumes, starting from *Polish-Russian War* (2009), Polish filmmakers have been increasingly interested in adapting narratively and stylistically complex prose, which seems to be rather difficult to express using the language of film. This new trend raises the question of how contemporary adaptation studies should look. The author analyzes adaptations taking into account four aspects of this new phenomenon: 1. collaboration between writers and filmmakers, 2. metareferences in film to the literary medium, 3. multidirectional references and inspirations between literature and film, 4. dialogue between literary texts and their film adaptations. To describe this new trend, the author refers to the contemporary field of adaptation studies. He characterizes writers such as Jakub Żulczyk and Dorota Masłowska as “multiplatform authors” and shows their complex film activities. The author argues that in the latest adaptations, such as *Polish-Russian War*, *The Mighty Angel* (2013) and *Inni Ludzie (en. Other People)*, filmmakers emphasize the literary character of the original. These examples also show that intermediality of contemporary works of art encompasses a number of other media, such as music and theater. However, the author opposes the scholars specializing in adaptation studies who radically reject textual analyses and medium specificity research. In his opinion, one of the most important tasks facing contemporary comparative literature and film studies is to characterize the way in which film discourse transforms, reduces, or extends the meanings of literary works, placing stories in a different media context.

Keywords: film adaptation, adaptation studies, contemporary Polish literature, Polish writers, transmediality, intermediality

Słowa kluczowe: adaptacja filmowa, *adaptation studies*, współczesna literatura polska, pisarze polscy, transmedialność, intermedialność

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