



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 2, Issue 2

Winter 2019

---

*The Powerful Man*: Young-Poland Decadence in a Film by Henryk Szaro

Weronika Szulik

---

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 December 2019

Date of Publication: 21 December 2019

**Citation:** Weronika Szulik, 'The Powerful Man: Young-Poland Decadence in a Film by Henryk Szaro', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 2.2 (2019), 72–94.

**DOI:** 10.25602/GOLD.v.v2i2.1344.g1463

[volupte.gold.ac.uk](http://volupte.gold.ac.uk)

---



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

## *The Powerful Man: Young-Poland Decadence in a Film by Henryk Szaro*

Weronika Szulik

University of Warsaw

In the Polish cinema of the interwar period, especially in the 1920s, it is difficult to find any depictions of the decadent worldview, although authors affiliated with decadence once dominated the artistic imagination prior to the First World War. To some extent, the disappearance of decadence was a result of Poland regaining national independence in 1918 after having been partitioned by three neighbouring countries for over one hundred years. Such films as *Dla Ciebie, Polsko* [*For You, Poland*] (dir. Antoni Bednarczyk, 1920) or *Cud nad Wisłą* [*The Miracle at the Vistula*] (dir. Ryszard Bolesławski, 1921) concentrate on a propagandist reconstruction of Polish identity by presenting a cohesive narrative of Polish history. Moreover, popular melodramas, often period pieces, referred to subjects previously barred by censorship. For example, a novel by Stefan Żeromski about one of the most tragically unsuccessful Polish uprisings, *Wierna rzeka* [*The Faithful River*] (1912), was adapted for the screen in 1922 as *Rok 1863* [*The Year 1863*] (dir. Edward Puchalski), while the Polish national epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz (1834) was filmed in 1928 (dir. Ryszard Ordyński). Commercial filmmakers also produced entertaining films inspired by Hollywood.

It was only in 1929 that a production entitled *Mocny człowiek* [*The Powerful Man*], by the director Henryk Szaro (1900–1942), reminded the audience somewhat of the fin de siècle.<sup>1</sup> *The Powerful Man* is based on a literary trilogy by Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868–1927): *Mocny człowiek* (1911), *Wyzwolenie* [*The Liberation*] (1912), *Święty gaj* [*The Holy Grove*] (1913). The main character of the novel, Bielecki, is a sort of *Übermensch*, but also a decadent, torn between his art and his career, between common theft and true artistic creation. Having contributed to the death of a writer named Górski by giving him a lethal dose of strychnine, Bielecki steals Górski's manuscripts and poses as their author, gaining extraordinary fame. By exploiting lovers and collaborators,

committing further crimes, and destroying the works of other artists, he climbs higher and higher on the social ladder, while hitting rock bottom as an artist and a man. The novel concludes with Bielecki's ultimate self-annihilation when he decides to put his will to a definitive test and confesses to all of his crimes publicly. He is then shot by a painter named Borsuk, whose works Bielecki made his lover burn in the first volume of the trilogy. In the film, Bielecki commits suicide in a theatre after the première of the play he has stolen, abandoned by his lover Nina and tormented by Górski's ghost.

Here, I will analyse certain decadent themes in Przybyszewski's novel and in its 1929 film adaptation. I have two central concerns. First, I will consider the changes the scriptwriters (Jerzy Braun and Henryk Szaro, in collaboration with novelist Andrzej Strug) and the director made to the idea of decadence in the face of the flourishing medium of cinema. Second, I will reflect more broadly on how decadence, also understood as degeneration and the deterioration of certain values, was part of the change in mass culture at a particular period in the development of the Polish film industry, situated at the periphery of the West but striving to meet European standards. What seems especially interesting about decadence in this context is the ambivalence of the relationship between extraordinary individuals – or at least individuals who perceive themselves to be extraordinary – and the rest of society which they fear will reduce them to mediocrity. As Regenia Gagnier observes in her analysis of decadence as modern individualism with respect to the globalization and technologization of culture: 'decadence is not a fixed state but a relation of part to whole within systems that change. Individuation as progress (autonomy) and individuation as decadence (alienation or isolation) are differently imagined relations to the whole'.<sup>2</sup> The complicated, fluid, and time-dependent relationship Gagnier describes between the individual and the masses is also an apt description of decadence in the Polish context.

Before I begin analysis of the film *The Powerful Man*, I would like to briefly outline the origins of Polish decadence and the role played by Przybyszewski in its development.

## The Diagnostician and the Meteor

In 1898, Przybyszewski, already renowned in the community of German Bohemia, arrived in Cracow, a city located in Galicia, a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He would go on to fill the editor's position at the literary magazine *Życie* and start a literary revolution. He introduced truly modern artistic trends from the culturally distant Germany and Norway that caused a stir in the provincial city of Cracow, which had once been the seat of Polish kings before it became a city dominated by a conservative circle loyal both to the Emperor and to the traditional values of Polish culture.<sup>3</sup>

In his introductory manifesto, *Confiteor*, printed in *Życie*, Przybyszewski presented Cracovians with a new artistic programme that included the provocative ideas of art for art's sake, decadence, and symbolism, which he had derived from artists such as Edvard Munch and August Strindberg. His debut essay, *From the Psychology of the Creative Individual* (1892), subverted positivist-naturalist theories on sickness and health by presenting an extremely individualistic theory of art inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>4</sup> Przybyszewski wrote about the modern artist suffering 'the painful tension of his nerves' making him 'incapable of action', but from this painful tension 'the unhealthy creative individual' arises who 'feels [...] differently from other people, he feels where others do not'.<sup>5</sup> The creative individual is a tragic figure, characterized by a sense of loneliness in the crowd and the resulting deep revulsion towards the mediocre masses. Thus, the decline of an era is a testament to the exhaustion of 'materialist paradigms', whereas the appearance of brilliant neurotics who pursue self-annihilation foretells a civilizational shift into a higher metaphysical register.

In *Życie*, Przybyszewski also presented his own notion of amoral art whose only role is to 'recreate the soul in all of its manifestations'<sup>6</sup> and whose only value is the energy, will, or power of the artist who is a high priest of art, one who 'stands beyond life, beyond the world, who is the Lord of Lords, unbridled by any laws, unrestricted by any human force'.<sup>7</sup> Przybyszewski thus

abandoned the tradition of Polish art and liberated writers from the necessity of popularizing nationalist and moral teachings among readers deprived of Polish statehood. He expressed his revolt against the tendentiousness and utilitarianism of literature by removing the social commentary section from his magazine.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, Przybyszewski sealed his propositions by publishing the long poem *Requiem aeternam* in 1900, originally written in German as *Totenmesse*, then translated into Polish. Not only did it present daring sexual themes that revolutionized Polish literature and indicated the crisis of masculine identity in the late nineteenth century, it also introduced the concept of art as the expression of an artist's individual and unique soul by breaking with mimesis or a realistic representation of the world. Thus began the search for a new language for Polish literature: one that would be idiomatic, poignant, original, and capable of articulating an individual's previously inexpressible emotional states.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, these experiments produced a long poem unintelligible to the audience of the time, devoid of plot and based not on cause and effect but on the memories of a narrator tormented by strong emotions and planning suicide. The mixing of emotional registers, the use of colloquialisms, and even an idiolect, together with numerous literary devices such as hyperbole, synaesthesia, sophisticated metaphors, and a style akin to stream-of-consciousness, were all intended to express the tragedy of a modern man submerged deeply in the fin-de-siècle crisis. This is why Przybyszewski still remains a 'meteor of the Young Poland',<sup>10</sup> the brilliant diagnostician of the sentiments and atmosphere of that era.<sup>11</sup>

Przybyszewski's ideals fell on fertile ground because many young artists – especially writers and literary critics – had already started looking for radically new artistic models, especially from France.<sup>12</sup> As a result, Przybyszewski's own Cracow bohemian circle began forming around him, fascinated by the charismatic decadent figure who proclaimed the re-evaluation of all previously-established cultural values. Clearly, Przybyszewski's arrival in Cracow was a turning point in the history of Polish literature – a symbol of its receptivity to entirely new trends and truly European ideas.<sup>13</sup> Przybyszewski's success was emulated by a number of other writers who adopted the poetics of his *Requiem aeternam* and shared with their mentor a faith in the hypersensitive, creative

individual. Ultimately, Przybyszewski's original project became an affectation and a fashion – eventually a cliché. *Życie* collapsed from bankruptcy brought about by the over-ambition of the editor-in-chief, who then moved to Warsaw before leaving for Munich in 1906.

During the First World War – in 1917–1918 – Przybyszewski collaborated with the magazine *Zdrój* (founded in Poznań), which in 1920 sought to define Polish expressionism and distinguish it from the German original. He returned to the inspiration provided by Polish romanticism, especially the poetry of Juliusz Słowacki from his so-called 'mystical period' towards the end of his life.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, his writing began to be coloured with nationalism and an 'awareness of the Polish historical mission'.<sup>15</sup> Around this time Przybyszewski also authored *Krzyk* [*Scream*] (1917), a novel classified as expressionist.

*Scream* is one of Przybyszewski's last novels. In many respects, it is similar to *The Powerful Man*, especially in its structure and themes. On the one hand, popular, sensationalist conventions dominate in the novel, but, on the other, it addresses the most critical problems a modern artist can face. Gasztowt, an artist and painter, tries to transfer to the canvas the essence of the city, which manifests itself as a suicidal scream. Przybyszewski implements the aesthetic theory he called 'soul scream', which consists of trying to find form and language to express a precognitive shout, a sound that begins and ends life. Despite the expressionist motives (reality as a dream, the city as a labyrinth, the timelessness and indeterminacy of space), the novel undermines the possibility of expressing a man's soul – Gasztowt is defeated eventually – and the artist appears as a maniac and persecutor of others. Also, the author continues the pre-war elements of Young Poland's modernism – blatant anti-urbanism and naturalistic, physiological depictions of not only the character but also his surroundings.<sup>16</sup>

Polish expressionism was first and foremost a guarantee of a certain continuity between the pre-war and the later avant-garde aesthetics that dominated the art of independent Poland.<sup>17</sup> Its dual preoccupations are the demonic, monstrous modernist city and man's foundationless identity.<sup>18</sup> Thus, expressionism was not just a response to the traumatic experiences of war but

was supposed to blend in with the modernist vision of the world where the artist is the one and only high priest.

In all of his later novels, stylistically closer to popular literature (among others *Dzieci nędzy* [*The Children of Misery*] (1913–1914)), Przybyszewski called into being a kaleidoscopic world of hopelessly doomed characters who maniacally believed in ‘metaphysical’ intuition, absolute truth, and cosmic synthesis. Bielecki, the main character of *The Powerful Man*, seems more of a parody of the demonic protagonist or the Nietzschean *Übermensch* than anything else.<sup>19</sup> He is a destroyer of his own life and of everyone around him – in his books Przybyszewski portrays the *Übermensch* as a person affected by illness.<sup>20</sup> Bielecki is aware that he is not a real artist; he knows that he must lie, steal, and finally engage in a game with public opinion, which makes him dependent upon the commercial requirements of the publishing marketplace. In contrast, Henryk Szaro’s adaptation of *The Powerful Man* in 1929 gives us a Bielecki who becomes entangled in his own conscience. Unlike the true Nietzschean *Übermensch* who is beyond good and evil, Szaro’s character cannot escape morality.

### ***The Powerful Man* and a Powerful Film**

Szaro’s film version of *The Powerful Man* premiered in an atmosphere of awareness of the fossilized clichés of Przybyszewski’s style, so-called ‘Przybyszewskianism’ [Przybyszewszczyzna].<sup>21</sup> The Polish novelist Andrzej Strug, who adapted the novel to the screen, was already aware of the archaic character of the piece. In an interview for a film-industry newspaper, he admitted that the difficult task of updating the novel to contemporary times ‘required not only for the psyche of the “Powerful Man” to be modernized, but also for certain key themes of Przybyszewski’s book to be modified’.<sup>22</sup> To Strug, Bielecki’s demonic features, so thrilling before the First World War, would be received by the late-1920s audience as completely unfamiliar and too one-sided. Because the modern cinema-goer wanted to see a psychologically complex protagonist, Strug argued that

Bielecki 'had to be made more human – and his slightly unrealistic spiritual darkness brightened up by remorse, doubt, uplifts and hopes which are not foreign even to the worst of scoundrels'.<sup>23</sup>

The main theme of the novel was structured around its title: Przybyszewski attempted to say who 'the powerful man' was – Górski or Bielecki – and what he was like. The first figure, Górski, is bestowed with literary talent and tirelessly makes his art, producing manuscript after manuscript until his apartment is buried under heaps of disorganized papers. The character is isolated from society and dying of tuberculosis, going so far as to allow his body to gradually disintegrate. It seems that all those papers are a record of the artist's soul and the fragile cord that attaches the dying writer to the material world of the living. Once Górski has rejected his legacy in its entirety, he gives his manuscripts to the con-artist Bielecki and suggests he burn them; he then decides to commit suicide and thus rule over his own death. It is only then that he is enlightened, ready for his demise:

And he felt such a power now that it seemed to him that if he wanted, he could control his blood flow [...]. Now, if he had wanted, he could have even stopped it entirely so that he could be buried alive, and he would rise from the grave in a couple of months. ... Because even Christ sweat[ed] blood and begged his Father to take that cup away from him, and on the cross, he moaned why [God] had forsaken him. ... Let alone these two-legged, shabby vermin which crawled around, swarming and disturbing his peace!<sup>24</sup>

Still, Górski's apotheosis of death as ecstasy or even a godly will to power is complicated by the appearance of a young woman named Łusia (Łucja in the film). In the end, the artist decides to commit suicide by injecting the strychnine supplied by Bielecki with his new companion by his side, as though he wanted another person to bear witness to his existence for the last time. Clearly, Górski is not as detached from the human world as might be suggested by his vision of himself as someone greater than Christ, who had feared death.

After the shocking scene of Górski's suicide, the narrative turns to the man who enabled Górski's death: Bielecki. He enters the storyline to start a chain of crimes which will lead him to the top of the social hierarchy. Bielecki, the editor and critic, dreams of entering the literary world himself – as a writer, a real creator. Gabriela Matuszek has aptly observed that *The Powerful Man* presents the complicated problem of the ambivalent judgement of the pure, authentic record of



Górski's soul – which, incidentally, is unreadable – versus Bielecki's laborious task of making Górski's literature understandable to readers.<sup>25</sup> The question of who the author or artist really is, and whether Bielecki had the right to sign the works he appropriated and edited, is left unanswered in the novel. But it is not the question of authorship that proves to be the slippery slope leading to Bielecki's self-destruction and the final public confession to all of the atrocities. Instead, his demise is caused by the numerous crimes that lead to a development of a personal moral code based either on achieving individual goals and fame or on experimenting with the morality of the people attached to him rather than upholding social values. However, the punishment is inflicted on him externally.<sup>26</sup> Bielecki is shot by the painter Borsuk, whom Bielecki has deprived of all his artworks. However, Bielecki meets his death calmly, like a long-lost friend, and feels it like bliss which 'drops heavily onto his eyelids'.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the reader never learns whether the novel concludes with complete moral degeneration and the spiritual fall of a man or, rather, the birth of a new man created on the debris of all the values that connected him to society.

In an article preceding the première, Szaro explained that he wanted to 'accommodate Przybyszewski to Poland; popularize the author of *The Powerful Man* and demonstrate the novel's atmosphere in a visual, vivid manner'.<sup>28</sup> It is worth mentioning that Szaro's was not the first attempt to put Przybyszewski's trilogy on the screen. In 1916–1917, the Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold – who also staged Przybyszewski's plays – adapted the novel and played the role of Górski. He had great expectations that the production would reform Russian cinema, but the unintelligible editing likely discouraged distribution of the film.<sup>29</sup> It was only Szaro who succeeded in the adaptation fourteen years later. The Polish director maintained that after obtaining an engineering degree, he studied in Moscow under Meyerhold.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, we do not have more detailed information about this relationship and cannot say with certainty whether each director created his adaptation independently or whether Szaro was inspired by the achievements of his master Meyerhold. After returning to Warsaw, Szaro had already directed six films, including the

popular *Przedwiośnie* [*Seedtime*] (1928), based on Stefan Żeromski's novel (1924). Eventually, he became a member of the 'Union des Artistes Cinématographiques'.<sup>31</sup>

*The Powerful Man* succeeded because Szaro had no ambition to transfer the novel onto the screen intact, especially not the complicated psychology manifested through long descriptions of the characters' internal states, which resemble the stream of consciousness style in the poem *Requiem aeternam*. Szaro appreciated Przybyszewski's prose for its universality and topicality because it did not have a national-independence or social-progress bias, unlike much of Polish literature during the period.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, he unwittingly ascribed to Przybyszewski's writing the status of popular literature addressed to a mass audience, even though it had originally been intended for elite readers.

Szaro's changes to the original aimed to transpose the plot into a truly contemporary world, symbolized in the film by images of Warsaw, the capital city of a country under reconstruction. The cinematographer Giovanni Vitrotti ensured that the opening sequence of *The Powerful Man* included all the elements that would introduce the viewer into the world of the modern city. First, the camera offers a panorama of the Vistula riverbank extending before the audience's eyes, only to travel to the centre of the city, identifiable by landmarks such as the Chopin Monument, Sigismund's Column, and the Grand Theatre. We then see the fast pace of urban life in Warsaw, when, at the end of the sequence, a double-exposure montage cleverly combines the symbols of modernity – trams, cars, pedestrians – in interpenetrating vignettes, emphasizing its fragmentation [fig. 1].

Later, the nocturnal landscape of Warsaw appears in the film with its cafés and crowded, smoky clubs. In one of these clubs, Bielecki (Gregori Chmara) finds refuge after the first quarrel with his lover; in the film, he is not a critic but an unfulfilled artist pulling his hair out over a manuscript. His motivation is clear. Reading a daily newspaper, he finds a notice about the incredible success of Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* [*All Quiet on the Western Front*] (1929): suddenly all the headlines in the paper turn into a call to fame which he, too, might achieve.

Later, Bielecki again hallucinates the word *śława* [fame] emerging from Górski's manuscript [fig. 2]. As in the novel, the opportunity to fulfil his desire appears with the manuscripts abandoned by the dying Górski (Artur Socha). In the film, Górski's character resembles images of Christ to some extent, with his minimalist acting and tired, slow movement. This impression is dismantled with a close-up of Górski's naked breast scarred and pocked by numerous morphine injections. Thus, he becomes merely an addict wanting to shorten his suffering [fig. 3].



Fig. 1 (00:01:48): A montage of Warsaw modernity.

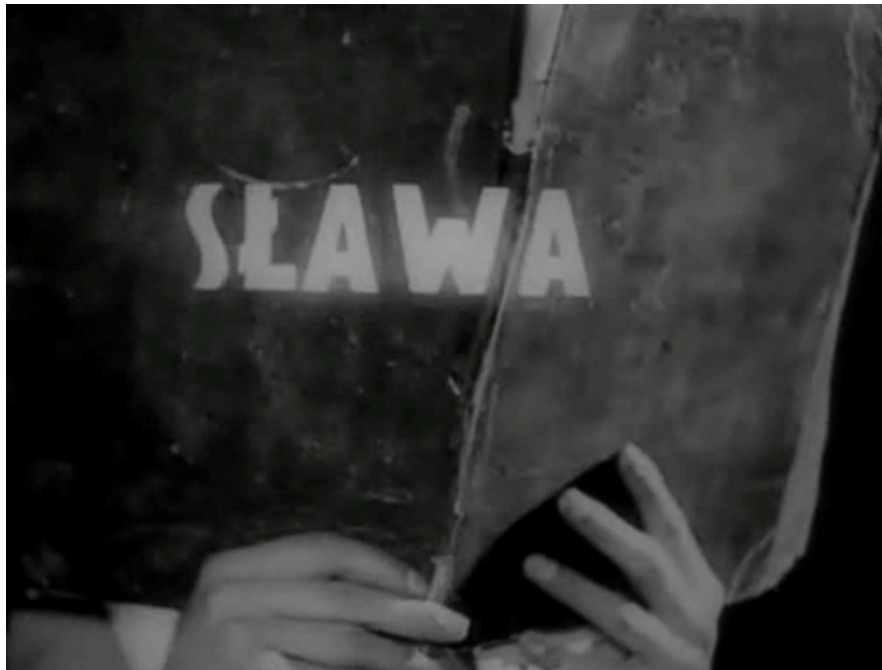


Fig. 2 (00:06:23): Bielecki becomes obsessed with 'sława' [fame].



Fig. 3 (00:10:27): Górski injects morphine into his chest, scarred and pocked from previous injections.

Another serious modification to Przybyszewski's original plot, as Strug explained, was making Bielecki appear more human. Whereas in the novel he mostly seeks to manipulate everyone he encounters to his own ends, the film shows the sincerity of both Bielecki's love for Nina – who is abused by her husband, and Bielecki's remorse for his crimes against Górski and his former lover Łucja, whom he tried to drown. Interestingly, the film depicts the theme of the 'overwoman' – a true ideal which Bielecki seeks in his lovers – in a much more modern, less misogynistic way than the novel does. The novel's Nina, who is in love with Bielecki, commits suicide at the end of the third volume as a result of a premonition that her lover is also dying. She decides to follow him faithfully, even if that means following him to death itself. By contrast, the film's Nina finds within herself the power to resist such toxic, humiliating love. When she learns what her beloved has done, she leaves him and therefore contributes to Bielecki's ultimate demise.<sup>33</sup> Rejected, unmasked, and haunted by visions of his crimes, 'the powerful man' decides to deliver a speech on stage during the première of a play that he stole from Górski and commits suicide among a group of mysterious masked actors. Unlike the opening sequence, the conclusion of the film plays out on an intimate, individual level. Bielecki dies surrounded by figures who represent not just his guilt but also the desire to be who he is not, hiding his face behind the mask of a modern artist.

*The Powerful Man* was enthusiastically received by audiences and critics alike. The innovative formal properties of the film met with accolades as they drew inspiration from German expressionism, the Gothic, and romanticism.<sup>34</sup> Some critics, however, said that Szaro was doomed to fail from the outset because of the psychological dimension of the adapted novel.<sup>35</sup> Critics also praised the change in the ending as one more consistent with 1920s bourgeois morality. One reviewer wrote that he had seen 'a powerful film which is firmly set in the standards of what is demanded of film art by the postulate of visual aestheticism and technology. The final parts of the film are at the highest level of Western European film class'.<sup>36</sup> Another critic argued:

[I]n its social role, film must be a constructive factor, leaving the viewer with at least a margin of optimism. [...] It is a great advantage of the film that the moral face of the protagonist was tempered. Before every offence of Bielecki's, a title card gives psychological motivation for his deeds.<sup>37</sup>

Doubtless, the Polish film was expected to follow a set of values, such as ‘optimism’ and ‘the constructive factor’, to which Przybyszewski’s novel had to be adapted. In other words, a work of art was modified to fit the demands of a modern medium. It seems that the reasons for the critics’ beliefs can be found precisely in the properties of film as a medium: the audience took its visuality literally, accepting the images concretely, without understanding the particular arbitrariness of the visual language.<sup>38</sup> The new ending was suited to cinema as a mirror medium in which viewers could mainly see themselves.

The adaptation of *The Powerful Man* from page to screen is an excellent example of the transformation of high art to popular art under the conditions described by Gagnier that create the necessity for the artist to keep up with the developing modern world and mass culture at a time of ‘the rapid interface of technologies and subjectivities [...] the rise of the giant corporation, mass production, and mass consumption’.<sup>39</sup> Przybyszewski himself had an ambivalent attitude toward the popular culture developing at the time and was able to successfully combine a decadent worldview with the demands of mass entertainment. After all, the novel was commissioned by the publishing house Gebethner and Wolff, which paid its authors handsomely for conforming to the demands of bourgeois readers.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Caligari* and Modern Berlin, *The Powerful Man* and Modern Warsaw**

*The Powerful Man* is often discussed in the context of German expressionism,<sup>41</sup> as evidenced by some deformations of the world shown in the film; for example, Bielecki sees strange visions and ghosts from his past, represented on the screen by a series of overlapping images [fig. 4]. These distortions of reality represent the sense of remorse that haunts the protagonist, rather than an ontological change in reality. In addition, the Stanislavski method of acting that asks performers to feel the emotions of the characters they play is employed by the lead actor Gregori Chmara and sometimes brings to mind the actors’ wide-open eyes or mouths contorted by screams in expressionist productions. (Incidentally, the Russian émigré played the title role in *Raskolnikov*

(dir. Robert Wiene), a 1923 Weimar Republic film unambiguously considered to be part of the German expressionist movement.<sup>42</sup>) There are also multiple references to Gothic romanticism in the representation of the shattered, evil interior world of the main character, as in, for example, ‘the glow of candles, deformed shapes of objects (the monstrous “devil’s horns”) and the elongated shadows on walls’<sup>43</sup> [fig. 5]. Another feature of Weimar cinema is the representation of the modernist, blasé metropolis as a critique of modernity and the industrialization of life in Berlin. Similarly, in Szaro’s film the nighttime cityscape is also presented in an expressionist style – artificial lights flash in the dark, making Warsaw seem like a distant shadow. Such effects were often achieved in expressionism through hand-painted sets, but *The Powerful Man* captures many outdoor locations of Warsaw, on the one hand, through long shots taken from a moving camera and, on the other, by montage segments made up of double-exposure images of buildings and crowds. As such, they are closer to psychological Polish cinema<sup>44</sup> than to the abstract aesthetic effects of German expressionism. However, they also have something in common with the more realistic aesthetics of the new objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*).



Fig. 4 (01:10:12): Bielecki haunted by ghosts from his past: Górski, Nina, and Łucja.



Fig. 5 (00:47:36): The shadowy world of Gothic romanticism.

Henryk Szaro stayed in Berlin for only a year (1923–1924), where he collaborated with the well-known cabaret of Russian immigrants in *Siniaia Ptitsa* [*Berlin Blue Bird*]. The new objectivity developed as a counter to expressionism after WWI and was most pervasive during the period of economic stabilization of the Weimar Republic after the hyperinflation of 1923 (*circa* 1924–1925), so it is difficult to say whether it inspired the director.<sup>45</sup> In its various manifestations, the new objectivity can be regarded as a particular cultural sensitivity in response to the experience of war and a dynamically developing civilization with all its social, political, and economic problems.<sup>46</sup> In addition to the ‘neutral’ and ‘sober’ cityscapes in *The Powerful Man*, more ‘conscious’ motifs appear that could be equated with the socialist elements of the new objectivity. In this context, it is worth mentioning how Szaro portrays objects in the film; for example, in the first shot of Bielecki, viewers can see only his hands and a piece of paper in a medium shot as he helplessly tries to put his thoughts into words [fig. 6]. The film also features shots of a printing press, representing the modern, mechanized world; or a sea of white hats representing crowds gathered at a horse race [fig. 7]. Similar shots can also be found in Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* [*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*] (1927). The German director focuses not only on



the Berlin cityscape in general but also on objects symbolizing urban life (for example, store mannequins, neon lights, cars, trams). He shows human legs hurrying through the streets like objects isolated from the rest of the body. Most of the images from *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* show the enthusiasm, movement, and dynamism of the city, while *The Powerful Man* sometimes reveals the demonic nature of a modern city, exposing the characteristic loneliness resulting from individual isolation in the mass of urban society<sup>47</sup> despite the fact that many of these scenes have the mainly informative value characteristic of Polish psychological film.<sup>48</sup> This effect is achieved partly by close-ups that bring objects to the foreground.<sup>49</sup> Even the last scene of *The Powerful Man*, when Bielecki is lost on the stage among surreal figures, can be interpreted in terms of the new objectivity. Wieland Schmied has postulated that such a presentation of objects might make them appear simultaneously real and uncanny because they are accompanied by a sense of alienation.<sup>50</sup> The impassive masks of the actors in the final scene suggest a wordless judgement on the deeds of the main character [fig. 8], symbolizing the ambivalence between Christian morality and the hard reality of the twentieth century.



Fig. 6 (00:01:53): The first shot of Bielecki: hands and paper.



Fig. 7 (00:24:11): The modern crowd.



Fig. 8 (01:16:50): The passive, wordless judgement of the masked figures.

However, at the same time the theatrical staging of Bielecki's play – from the last scene of the film – is also reminiscent of expressionist conventions. In addition to actors in masks, a tall, demonic figure with spectral make-up appears, wearing a long robe; moreover, the set design resembles the optical exaggerations of Weimar expressionist films. For example, the angular, painted door in the centre of the set creates the impression of unreality, an entry into a dreamspace detached from the everyday [fig. 9]. The decision to imitate the expressionist aesthetic here seems justified based primarily on Przybyszewski's affiliation with that movement (see discussion above). Nonetheless, it is vital to remember that Przybyszewski was not attempting to introduce the new expressionist aesthetic into Polish literature by collaborating with *Zdrój* – which never caught on.<sup>51</sup> Instead, in the post-WWI period he wanted to revive the tendencies and qualities for which he was best known, namely Young Poland decadence.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Szaro's film returns to the proper moral order of bourgeois cinema by making the repentant Bielecki, a villain dressed up as a law-abiding citizen, commit suicide.



Fig. 9 (01:06:11): An expressionist portal.

Fascinatingly, both the revolutionary ideas of German expressionism and socially engaged new objectivity had to be dulled as well. The original screenplay for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), a film which some expressionist writers saw as a harbinger of the death of the expressionist movement,<sup>53</sup> turned out not to contain the narrative frame of the final version of the film but instead suggested that the tyrant-doctor was a product of the protagonist's sick mind and should not be taken seriously by the bourgeois audience. According to Siegfried Kracauer, this means that the director Robert Wiene preferred to adapt the message of this originally revolutionary screenplay to the needs of the mass audience:

This change undoubtedly resulted not so much from Wiene's personal predilections as from his instinctive submission to the necessities of the screen; films, at least commercial films, are forced to answer to mass desires. In its changed form, *Caligari* was no longer a product expressing, at best, sentiments characteristic of the intelligentsia, but a film supposed equally to be in harmony with what the less educated felt and liked.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, the expressionist style, developed by artists such as Alfred Kubin, Hermann Warm, Walter Rohrig, and Walter Reimann and originally corresponding to the themes in the film, ultimately proved to be a mere formal property, a style detached from the message of the artwork. Moreover, the original theme of liberation from the authority of the tyrannical doctor, and therefore an expression of faith in the power of a creative individual, was entirely reversed. In Kracauer's words, the final version of the film 'seemed to combine the denial of bourgeois traditions with faith in man's power freely to shape society and nature'.<sup>55</sup> The final message was that the individual can either succumb to tyranny or be swallowed by chaos.<sup>56</sup>

The new objectivity, to the extent that it was understood as a search for a 'national style', was sometimes considered to be a prelude to fascist aesthetics.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, by using elements of technology and symbols of modern civilization in the field of art – best exemplified by cinema – the new objectivity began to shape a 'program for unitary, "middle-brow", and predominantly escapist mass culture'<sup>58</sup> expressive of both conservative values and the capitalist-imperialist worldview.<sup>59</sup> As Steve Plumb noted, 'Siegfried Kracauer ascribes "New Objectivity" to social resignation and cynicism'.<sup>60</sup>

Apparently, extremely individualist or radical art has no chance in a duel with the constant development of modernity followed by the technologization of art, the production of conservative bourgeois clichés, and the appropriation of its values by the mass audience. In Przybyszewski's novel, the character's rejection by society, his isolation, and ultimately his self-annihilation are the only means of escape, as exemplified by Górski's control over his own death. It seems that Szaro's film avoids that question, concentrating instead on the melodrama. Nonetheless, the film still manages to reflect a measure of individualism despite the appeal to mass culture, remaining at once artful and popular.

According to Gagnier, 'progress was decadent because increasing individuation led to the disintegration of the whole'.<sup>61</sup> Paradoxically, degeneration is an integral part of progress – gaining awareness of one's identity leads to the destruction or collapse of old structures. This was the case with Przybyszewski's arrival in Cracow: by diagnosing a crisis of culture and bringing decadent art from the West, he introduced new themes and tendencies, and contributed to the revival of the otherwise conventional language of Polish culture. At the same time, Przybyszewski's own body of work, cultivated rather than renewed by many, including its author creating his own legend, was beginning to ossify into clichés, easily understandable by the audience. In other words, it was starting to atrophy. The film version of *The Powerful Man* returned to decadent clichés not to administer them to the contemporary audience, but to adapt them to the new visual language of cinema and change them so that they might be understood in a different context altogether – both in terms of a historical moment and the new medium, as the filmmakers themselves declared in their statements to the press. This meant that something had to be destroyed. Przybyszewski's grand project, based on the values of individualism, was transformed into a drama of ethics familiar to the audience. Yet the dismantling of the novel led to the making of the first Polish artistic film which referred to the aesthetics of expressionism and new objectivity, experimented with editing, and attempted to represent the plot in its visual dimension rather than just adapt the narrative onto the screen. In this context, Gagnier's words ring true when she reminds us that

creative repudiation can mean creative destruction or war [...] as easily as critique [...]. Death can imply rebirth. As Baudelaire's figure suggested, the dominant organic metaphor of decay and degeneration could turn seamlessly into a cross-fertilized compost of amazing light and color.<sup>62</sup>

The case of *The Powerful Man* is therefore another example of how modern culture emerges from the remains of old paradigms.

In fact, *The Powerful Man* continued the cycle of death and birth. As a silent film, in 1929, the year of its première, it was already a thing of the past. Like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which German expressionists considered to be the first and last expressionist film, *The Powerful Man* was the first and last Polish silent art film.<sup>63</sup> Across the Atlantic Ocean, the so-called 'talkies' led by the 1927 *Jazz Singer* were starting to triumph, and the press was wondering whether sound on screen was the beginning of an entirely new era in the world of cinema. The transition to sound was also reaching Poland,<sup>64</sup> slowly but surely eradicating silent film. In hindsight, it does not seem like a coincidence that *The Powerful Man* was one of the last silent films. After all, it was a production which referred to the decadent worldview by reproducing schematic, clichéd tropes of bohemian café life, amoral criminals, artists isolated from social life, and finally death – which becomes a foundation for something new. The work of the individual artist, namely Przybyszewski, who managed to start a revolution in his own country, was thus adapted to the bourgeois requirements of the mass medium of cinema. It seems that was the only way this unique work could become a permanent part of Polish culture.

---

<sup>1</sup> This silent film was produced in the late 1920s. It was lost during the Second World War. A copy was found in 1997 in a Belgian archive, which suggests its international distribution. For more about the history of the film's production, see Marek Kochanowski, 'Modernizacje mocnego człowieka (Mocny człowiek Stanisława Przybyszewskiego i Henryka Szaro)', in *Kody kultury: interakcja, transformacja, synergia*, ed. by Halina Kubicka and Olga Taranek (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Sutoris, 2009), pp. 320–29.

<sup>2</sup> Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859–1920* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> The autonomy of Galicia allowed Poles, whose territory was partitioned into three sectors ruled by Austria, Prussia, and Russia, to cultivate their history and pursue careers in state institutions. Therefore, loyalism towards the Austro-Hungarian Empire prevailed in the second half of the nineteenth century in Cracow; see Larry Wolf, 'Inventing Galicia: The Josephine Enlightenment and the Partitions of Poland', in *The Idea of Galicia: History and Fantasy in Habsburg Political Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 13–62.

<sup>4</sup> For Przybyszewski, depravity was a characteristic of a genius rather than of an individual unnecessary to society. He likely developed this idea based on Cesare Lombroso's fashionable theories of the late nineteenth century. In his book *Genio e follia* (Milan, 1864), Lombroso proposed that the more complex human bodies are, and the more

advanced the stage of evolution is, the more prone they are to sickness and degeneration, especially of the nervous kind.

<sup>5</sup> Stanisław Przybyszewski, 'Z psychologii jednostki twórczej', in *Wybór pism*, ed. by Roman Taborski (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1966), pp. 7, 9. All fragments from Polish literature translated into English specifically for the present paper unless indicated otherwise in the footnotes.

<sup>6</sup> Stanisław Przybyszewski, 'Confiteor', in *Programy i dyskusje okresu Młodej Polski*, ed. by Maria Podraza Kwiatkowska (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1977), p. 236.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See Przybyszewski, 'Confiteor', pp. 241–43.

<sup>9</sup> See Ryszard Nycz, 'Język modernizmu. Doświadczenie wyobcowania i jego konsekwencje', in *Język modernizmu. Prolegomena historycznoliterackie* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2013), pp. 49–90 (p. 55).

<sup>10</sup> See Wojciech Gutowski, 'Wstęp – Meteor czy konstelacja?', in *Konstelacja Stanisława Przybyszewskiego* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2008), pp. 7–14 (p. 7).

<sup>11</sup> See Gabriela Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski – pisarz nowoczesny. Eseje i proza – próba monografii* (Kraków: Universitas, 2008), p. 16. Notably, the long poem *Requiem aeternam*, along with the proposition to extract the most profound mysteries from one's internal world in order to describe them, corresponds to Freud's psychoanalytical theory, whose founding text *The Interpretation of Dreams* was only published in 1899.

<sup>12</sup> In Cracow, they included Adam Górski, who returned to the Romantic roots of Polish literature, especially to Adam Mickiewicz's poetry. In Lviv, Maria Komornicka, Cezary Jellenta and Waclaw Nalkowski extended the naturalist law heredity with the Nietzschean vision of the evolution of a unique individual who dwarfs the mediocre masses with his spirit. Finally, in the Russian sector, the so-called Kingdom of Poland, Zenon Przesmycki (Miriam), the editor-in-chief of the Warsaw *Życie*, in 1901 founded the most ambitious magazine of that time: *Chimera*, which published pieces representative of the latest Western European artistic movements, especially French and Belgian symbolism and Art Nouveau.

<sup>13</sup> The greatest Polish critics of that time, namely Karol Irzykowski and Stanisław Brzozowski, agreed on the importance of the event. See Karol Irzykowski, 'Dwie rewolucje', in *Czyn i słowo oraz Fryderyk Hebbel jako poeta konieczności; Lemiesz i szpada przed sądem publicznym; Prolegomena do charakterologii* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1980), p. 220. See also Stanisław Brzozowski, *Legenda Młodej Polski. Studya o strukturze duszy kulturalnej* (Lwów: Księgarnia Polska Bernarda Polonieckiego, 1910), p. 238.

<sup>14</sup> See S. Przybyszewski, 'Ekspresjonizm – "Słowacki i Genezis z Ducha"', *Zdrój* 1–6, 2–5/6 (1918).

<sup>15</sup> Heinrich Kunstmann, 'O związkach między ekspresjonizmem polskim i niemieckim', trans. by Józef Zaprucki, in *Pisma wybrane*, ed. by Marek Zybura (Kraków: Universitas, 2009), p. 245. This is not surprising at a time when Poland associated the end of the war with the hope of regaining independence.

<sup>16</sup> Kunstmann sees the most significant difference between Polish and German expressionism in the baroque inspirations of Polish expressionists, which meant a lack of civilization in their work. See 'O związkach między ekspresjonizmem polskim i niemieckim', p. 243. Gabriela Matuszek confirms this thesis, placing Przybyszewski's anti-urbanism with pre-war modernism. See G. Matuszek, 'Współlistnienie dwu poetek: ekspresjonistycznej i modernistycznej w powieści "Krzyk" S. Przybyszewskiego', *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Historycznoliterackie*, 43 (1981), 83–102.

<sup>17</sup> See Marek Bartelik, *Early Polish Modern Art: Unity in Multiplicity* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> See Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski*, p. 348.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 303.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>21</sup> The much-needed crisis would later emerge as the crisis of language in 1910. Once writers had realized that language is a code, malleable and prone to deformity, they began deconstructing conventions, one of which was the aforementioned Przybyszewskianism. See Nycz, p. 57.

<sup>22</sup> 'Na drogach "Mocnego człowieka"' (wywiad z Andrzejem Strugiem), *Kino dla Wszystkich*, 95 (1929), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> See Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Mocny człowiek* (Warszawa: Gebethner i Wolff, 1912), pp. 29–30.

<sup>25</sup> See Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski*, p. 299.

<sup>26</sup> Bielecki repeatedly exploited others for personal gain. The clearest example of this is the character of Karska, on whom he experiments in order to make a 'overwoman' of her, akin to his overman. See Przybyszewski, *Mocny człowiek*, p. 219.

<sup>27</sup> Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Święty gaj* (Warszawa: 'Lektor', 1923), p. 320.

<sup>28</sup> Henryk Szaro, 'Dlaczego "Mocny człowiek"?' Wywiad z samym sobą', *Kino-Teatr*, 20 (1929), 13.

<sup>29</sup> See Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski*, p. 297. Natasza Korczarowska-Różycka, 'Ekspresjonizm to gra... Ale właściwie, czemu nie? Mabuseria, czyli eksperyment ekspresjonistyczny w "Mocnym człowieku" Henryka Szaro', *Konteksty*, 89–90 (2015), 306–19 (p. 310).

<sup>30</sup> See R. Włodek, 'Henryk Szaro (Henocho Szapiro)', *Internetowy Polski Słownik Biograficzny* (Warszawa: Narodowy Instytut Audiowizualny), <http://www.ipsb.nina.gov.pl/a/biografia/henryk-szaro> [accessed 25 November 2019].

- <sup>31</sup> See 'Dookoła "Mocnego człowieka". Siódmy film reżysera Szaro', *ABC*, 270 (1929), 7.
- <sup>32</sup> Szaro, 'Dlaczego "Mocny człowiek". Wywiad z samym sobą', p. 13.
- <sup>33</sup> Even in the 1920s, the romance subplot of the novel was interpreted as Bielecki's search for a 'overwoman', a lover with whom his body and soul would connect completely. In Przybyszewski's works, this was a fulfilment of the myth of Androgyne: the ideal combination of the male and female element. See W. Z., "'Mocny człowiek" a kobiety, *Ziemia Lubelska*, 175 (1929), 5. Maria Majdrowicz (who played Nina) said in an interview that the idea behind Nina's relationship with Bielecki was that a woman would draw out the human face of the criminal. See 'Kiedy "mocny człowiek" kocha... (co mówi Marja Majdrowicz?)', *Ziemia Lubelska*, 210 (1929), 4.
- <sup>34</sup> See 'Ze świata filmu. Casino: "Mocny człowiek"', *Polska Zbrojna*, 275 (1929), 5; and 'Recenzje filmowe. "Mocny człowiek"', *Nasz Przegląd*, 280 (1929), 6.
- <sup>35</sup> See 'Mocny człowiek', *ABC*, 83 (1929), 8; and 'Ze świata filmu. Casino: "Mocny człowiek"', 5.
- <sup>36</sup> 'Z ekranu. Kino metropolisy – Mocny człowiek', *Dziennik Poznański*, 251 (1929), 4.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup> The necessity of developing a vocabulary of the modern film language was stipulated by the literary critic Karol Irzykowski. He was the author of a very early Polish monograph on the medium of film – *The Tenth Muse* (1924), where he distinguished between communication in reality and certain signs used by film. See Karol Irzykowski, *Dziesiąta muza oraz pomniejsze pisma filmowe* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie: 1982), pp. 274, 324. See also Elizabeth Nazarian, *The Tenth Muse: Karol Irzykowski and Early Film Theory* (Saarbrücken: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2011), p. 130.
- <sup>39</sup> Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization*, p. 95.
- <sup>40</sup> Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski*, p. 297.
- <sup>41</sup> See Korczarowska-Różycka, 'Ekspresjonizm to gra... Ale właściwie, czemu nie?' and Jerzy Stachowicz, 'Ekspresjonista', in *Komputery, powieści i kino nieme. Procesy remediacji w perspektywie historycznej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2018), pp. 110–11.
- <sup>42</sup> See Dietrich Scheunemann, 'Activating the Differences: Expressionist Film and Early Weimar Cinema', in *Expressionist Film – New Perspectives*, ed. by Dietrich Scheunemann (New York: Camden House 2003), pp. 2, 12.
- <sup>43</sup> Korczarowska-Różycka, 'Ekspresjonizm to gra... Ale właściwie, czemu nie?', p. 313.
- <sup>44</sup> Irzykowski wrote that the feature film ('life drama') – cheap and fast in production – was prominent in the Polish cinema. For such a drama, he noted, 'apart from the actors, you only need a living room, a sofa, several chairs, a dance hall and a piece of Tatra Mountains' (*Dziesiąta muza oraz pomniejsze pisma filmowe*, p. 203).
- <sup>45</sup> Steve Plumb, *Neue Sachlichkeit 1918–33: Unity and Diversity of an Art Movement* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi 2006), p. 13.
- <sup>46</sup> Richard W. McCormick, 'Private Anxieties/Public Projections: "New Objectivity", Male Subjectivity, and Weimar Cinema', *Women in German Yearbook*, 10 (1994), 1–18 (p. 3).
- <sup>47</sup> Plumb, *Neue Sachlichkeit 1918–33*, p. 51.
- <sup>48</sup> Irzykowski, *Dziesiąta muza oraz pomniejsze pisma filmowe*, pp. 207–08.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- <sup>50</sup> Wieland Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit and German Realism of the Twenties*, Exhibition Catalogue (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), p. 13.
- <sup>51</sup> 'The local variation [on Expressionism] was jokingly called "Mabusery" by Polish critics – a combination of Dr. Mabuse's name with buffoonery' (Korczarowska-Różycka, 'Ekspresjonizm to gra... Ale właściwie, czemu nie?', p. 308).
- <sup>52</sup> Kunstmann, 'O związkach między ekspresjonizmem polskim i niemieckim', pp. 252–53.
- <sup>53</sup> Scheunemann, 'Activating the Differences', p. 25.
- <sup>54</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History Of The German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 67.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- <sup>57</sup> Maria Makela, "'A Clear and Simple Style": Tradition and Typology in New Objectivity', *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, 28 (2002), 38–51 (p. 51).
- <sup>58</sup> McCormick, 'Private Anxieties/Public Projections', p. 12.
- <sup>59</sup> Makela, 'A Clear and Simple Style', p. 39.
- <sup>60</sup> McCormick, 'Private Anxieties/Public Projections', p. 4.
- <sup>61</sup> Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization*, p. 11.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- <sup>63</sup> Many reviewers saw in *Mocny człowiek* a long-awaited true Polish art film, see Ika., 'Z teatrów świetlnych: Casino-Apollo, "Mocny człowiek"', *Robotnik*, 282 (1929), p. 5. Excerpts from most enthusiastic reviews from the Warsaw press were reprinted in an issue of the magazine *Kino dla Wszystkich*, 99 (1929), p. 21.
- <sup>64</sup> See Tadeusz Lubelski, 'Nasze kino klasyczne. Krzywe zwierciadło polskiej mentalności (1930–1939)', in *Historia kina polskiego. Twórcy, filmy, konteksty* (Chorzów: Videograf II, 2009), p. 90.