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SPATIAL REALITY  
OR FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS.  
CONCRETE ARCHITECTURE  
IN THE POLISH FEATURE FILM OF THE 1970S

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ARCHITEKTURA  
W POLSKIM FILMIE FABULARNYM  
LAT 70. XX WIEKU

Abstract

The article presents interrelations between Polish concrete architecture and its pictorial representation in the Polish feature films made in the 1970s. For the history of architecture, time becomes, on the one hand, the measurement of the lapse of time, and on the other hand, it helps architecture to lose a certain type of ideological ballast. Free of that ideology, we can newly define the concrete architecture and comment upon it from another perspective.

*Keywords: architecture, concrete, modernism, feature film*

Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiono związki pomiędzy polską architekturą betonową a jej obrazem w polskim filmie fabularnym epoki lat 70. XX wieku. Czas staje się dla historii architektury z jednej strony miarą przemijania z drugiej pozwala na utratę pewnego rodzaju ideologicznego balastu, bez którego można betonową architekturę modernistyczną komentować i definiować na nowo.

*Słowa kluczowe: architektura, beton, modernizm, film fabularny*

### 1. Concrete and Polish architecture

Polish concrete architecture of the second half of the 20th century may be viewed as a starting point for a discussion on the lapse of time. We often do not realise how much the

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borderlines of the definition of the past have shifted in the last several decades towards the times we feel are still close to us. Without a doubt, the 1970s of the 20th<sup>1</sup> century can be perceived as such a turning point. It was a period in the history of the Polish architecture, which abounded in great architectural works constructed with concrete.

Concrete was so widely used then because, in those years, Polish architects had already been fascinated with the works of Le Corbusier [1887–1965] for many years. This fascination was, on the one hand, a starting point for coming up with masterpieces, and on the other hand, an attempt to use concrete to create a modern residential environment, among others based on the large panel technology. The application of concrete for designing architecture for the masses in those times can be explained as being part of the new ideology connected with a society living in a socialist political system<sup>2</sup>.

Manfredo Tafuri [1935–1994] characterised architecture as the structure that is part of an ideology. From the point of view of modernity, each ideology leaves behind tangible imprints, such as the buildings, towns or the pictures. A film image becomes a recording of a moment at the time of its capturing. After many years, contrary to the intention of the authors, it is a recording of the past.

The aforementioned M. Tafuri was of the opinion that the visual communication, including the film, enables us to preserve the signs, buildings and structures in the space of the city without the so-called “false consciousness”. For the history of architecture, time becomes, on the one hand, the measurement of passing, and on the other hand, it helps to lose a certain type of ideological ballast. Modern architecture, in this case, Polish architecture of the second half of the 20th century, was inspired by the European experience and theories. Obviously, accounting for the ideological conception of the country, its erection was rather more theoretical than creative, though not deprived of a particular local attire.

## 2. Concrete and ideology

The entire history of architecture is practically the history of combined propaganda and architecture. The period of the 20th century is in particular marked with inter-dependencies of this type. Italy under the rule of Benito Mussolini or Germany under the rule of Adolf Hitler may serve as typical examples of such a statement. We can also easily find these inter-dependencies between the architecture and ideology in many eastern European countries, both before and after the 2nd World War.

The history of Polish post-war architecture in the Polish People’s Republic was inter-related with the political doctrine of the socialist country. At the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, classical models of social realism were followed<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, in those times, concrete archi-

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<sup>1</sup> This article constitutes part of the studies of the author carried out within the framework of the research project entitled the “*Architecture and the city in Polish feature films of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s*”, stage IV”.

<sup>2</sup> Modern development became an ideal tool of propaganda, underlining the technological and ideological achievements of the new, socialist system. The achievements of a modern country were glorified by the propaganda in the architectural magazines, film chronicle series and the feature films.

<sup>3</sup> The onset of social realism was officially announced by President Bolesław Bierut on 3 July 1949 at the Conference of the Polish United Workers’ Party in Warsaw. In his report entitled “Six year plan

ecture was a utilitarian material dedicated to the implementation of post-war conceptions of the reconstruction of many of the Polish cities. Images of the reconstruction period were preserved, among others, in numerous Polish film chronicles.

After 1956<sup>4</sup>, when the socialist doctrine regime was no longer that strict, the architects returned to modernism for the reason of the modern forms and the ideas propagated by modernism, which were found suitable as a tool of propaganda confirming the superiority of socialism in comparison to capitalism. The 1960s were still the years when the architects had to focus on the reconstruction of many towns in Poland after the destruction of the war. The trends reversed and the social realist attire of the buildings gave way to cubic forms featuring the West European modernism. Many of the buildings and facilities, which were then constructed, such as for example the reconstruction of the Warsaw city centre<sup>5</sup>, namely the complex of the Eastern Wall buildings, the housing estate of ‘Sady Żoliborskie’<sup>6</sup> or the housing estate ‘Za Żelazną bramą’<sup>7</sup> have become the icons of the epoch and the post-war modernism.

As far as Poland is concerned, the 1970s were the period of political changes, which, for a while changed, the field of the impact of the communist system upon the architecture, which could again become part of modern society. Cubic forms in space made the hearts of many Polish architects beat faster. In Poland, modernism as a style was perceived as the embodiment of the vision of modernity. This modernity was in many cases, as already mentioned, recorded on film tape and on films dating back to those times. We must remember that from today’s perspective, the ideology is no longer valid. What was once perceived as the spatial reality to be shown and glorified has now become a record of history.

In my considerations here, I would like, following the ideas of M. Tafurim, to present Polish modern architecture of the 1970s as a series of images enclosed in the frames of the films of the times. The film image is a very interesting research area, which may fall into the category of research over the phenomenon, which was described by M. Tafurim as a concept of analysis of time and architecture.

### 3. Polish feature film in the 1970s

The 1970s constitute another turbulent period in the history of Poland. The reforms introduced at the beginning of the 1960s become partially blocked. A strong group of opponents attempts to stand against the socialist system and to fight for democracy. On the other hand, the next generation of communist activists is elected for governmental positions and

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for the reconstruction of Warsaw” the President outlined the directions of development of numerous spheres of life in Poland, including the architecture. The social realist style in architecture was demonstrated with monumentalism, symmetry and numerous references to classical architecture – the use of pillars, columns and attics in the buildings.

<sup>4</sup> At the Meeting of Polish Architects held from 15 to 17 March 1956 the principles of social realism were rejected and the come back to modern architecture was approved.

<sup>5</sup> The building designed by Zbigniew Karpiński, Jan Klewina, Andrzeja Kaliszewskiego dates back to 1962–1969.

<sup>6</sup> A housing estate designed by Halina Skibniewska, constructed in the period 1958–1973.

<sup>7</sup> A housing estate designed by Andrzej Skopiński, Jacek Czyż and others, constructed in the period 1965–1972.



Ill. 1. View of the characteristic concrete, spiral staircase of the Gdański bridge (constructed in 1959) in “Hydrozagadka” [Hydro Puzzle]. The photograph is published with the consent of the National Film Archive in Warsaw, Photo 1-F-373-89

they open Poland for the so-called 'west'. The Economic situation improves owing to loans from the Western European banks. The Poles become a consumer society and more and more Poles travel to the democratic countries. At the time, Polish films begin to perceive our reality and daily life from a different perspective. Young films directors, in their films, try to raise the questions related to the actual life outside the windows of the large panel buildings and inside them. What attracted film makers to the modern architecture of the 1960s was its space, modularity, the play of blocks in space gets rejected in the 1970s in favour of the diagnosis of the living conditions of the society which occupies that modern space.

Nevertheless, Polish feature films of the 1970s continue to be a medium recording the images of Polish architecture of the times. Apart from the said works classified as the cinema of moral unrest, a group of comedy makers gains popularity. Their films often take place in the concrete blocks of the Polish cities. Modern architecture that from today's perspective is deemed to be our national heritage, then served as an identification mark of a modern city.

Film comedies, as per principle, were not to show or analyse moral dilemmas of the characters but to entertain, yet they have become incredible research material portraying the Polish concrete block architecture of the 1970s. Owing to such films as „Dzięcioł”(1970) [The Woodpecker] or „Nie lubię poniedziałku” (1971) [I don't like Mondays] the images of the landmarks of the times such as for example the housing estate 'Za Żelazną bramą', the complex of the Eastern Wall buildings and many others have been preserved.

#### **4. Concrete architecture in the film entitled „Hydrozagadka” 1970 [Hydro puzzle]**

Modern architecture is a term, which comprises not only the residential buildings but also road structures such as bridges for instance. In the case of „Hydrozagadka” 1970<sup>8</sup>, the Gdański bridge in Warsaw constructed in 1958 was the medium used to present the aesthetics of concrete architecture. The bridge, a landmark in the panorama of the city, has been preserved in the film frames. The arched stairs which join the two levels of the bridge constitute a noticeable architectural and structural component of the bridge. This stylistically beautiful structure was presented in numerous frames of the film.

The structure presented in the film is, on the one hand, a self-supporting, reinforced concrete structure, which, however, serves the utilitarian functions. On the other hand, the light concrete structure of the steps suspended in space reminds us of the sophisticated conceptions for the application of concrete typical of those in Le Corbusier texts. *On the basis of calculations, the engineers use geometric forms so that we can cherish our eyes with geometry and the brain with mathematics; their works translate into great pieces of art.* [2] [p. 78] The applied pure concrete nicely matches metal handrails and balustrades, which in a way form

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<sup>8</sup> The plot of this comedy made by Andrzej Kondratiuk focuses on solving the puzzle of mysterious disappearance of water in Warsaw in heat wave periods. Professor Milczarek and As superhero attempt to solve the mystery.

one uniform structure. The poetics of pure concrete and its certain type of transmutation has been achieved in reality.

The structure of the bridge presented in the film not only shows the beautiful concrete stairs but also atypically shaped structural columns of reinforced concrete with characteristic mushroom-shaped tops, which reminds us of early concrete buildings of August Perret [1874–1954]. The film image, for its stylistics and aesthetics, is a medium, which records a 3D space with all its details. In the case of the facility under the analysis, the industrial nature of the bridge structure was captured and recorded on the film tape. The plain attire of the concrete blocks serves as a supplement to the film plot. The concrete scenery of the bridge was the film space but it, in fact, presented the actually existing architectural facility with features of a civil engineering structure.

### 5. Concrete architecture in the film entitled „Dzięciol” 1970 [Woodpecker]

„Dzięciol” made in 1970<sup>9</sup> is an interesting example of recording the architectural concrete space. In my studies, I would like to focus on the film projection of the housing estate ‘Za Żelazną bramą’. The housing estate in a certain way meets the ideas of a modern city propagated by Le Corbusier in the 1920s and 1930s. High silhouettes of the buildings in the panorama of Warsaw city centre have become a perfect background of the film plot. The main character of this comedy, Stefan Waldek (played by Wiesław Gołas) is a housing estate dweller who works in the Supersam building, now thought to be an ‘iconic’ building of the times<sup>10</sup>. The combination of the character’s workplace and place of residence gives us an opportunity to see how he moves around the concrete space of post-modern Warsaw.

The concrete blocks of the housing estate have been presented in the film image at several levels. In the general view, we have a chance to see the panorama of the housing estate as well as the individual buildings. The fact that the film is a colour film is its added value. This only improves the effect of the freshness of the just completed architectural piece. The viewers have an opportunity to see the original colours of the buildings and the interesting play of light and shadow in the façade made of concrete slabs due to the decorative, slightly protruding balcony details. Frames showing the flat of the main character, a typical of M3 module of a residential unit, in an interesting way supplement the overall presentation. As Le Corbusier once wrote *Everyone quite rightly dreams of a shelter and of safety in his/her flat*, [2], [s. 260].

The film frames also present interesting images of the staircases and common space in front of passenger lifts whose concrete housing contrasts with the cosy wooden interior. Due to the colour of the film, the entire interior of the building becomes a unique recording of space, which in the film image is constantly moving.

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<sup>9</sup> The film plot makes fun of the main character, who in the absence of his wife, decides to have an affair of his lifetime.

<sup>10</sup> Authors of the design Jerzy Hryniewiecki, Ewa and Maciej Krasińscy, the building was commissioned for occupancy in 1962.

## 6. Concrete architecture in the film entitled „Człowiek z m3” 1968 [Man with an apartment]

In „Człowiek z M3”<sup>11</sup> of 1968, concrete architecture was presented on the example of tennis courts of Warsaw sports club – Legia. The facility presented in the film was constructed in the period 1964–1967 and was designed by Tadeusz Rupiński. The tennis courts, designed to accommodate 6 thousand spectators, were provided with a characteristic tribune stand, with a small hotel and changing rooms underneath.

The stylistics of concrete was, on the one hand, used to shape the structure of the facility, and on the other hand, to create its slightly plain attire. The smartly designed concrete stairs, which lead to higher and higher rows of the tribune stands function as an element, which makes the heavy and massive structure, seem lighter.

The main character of the film, Tomasz, an orthopaedist (played by Bogumił Kobiela 1931–1969) spends long hours in the concrete space of the tennis courts – not only playing tennis but also looking for a candidate for his future wife. His walks along the tennis court buildings are recorded by the camera and show the viewers the condition of the facility soon after its commissioning. The designer underlined the geometric forms of the seats at the tennis court tribunes by additional concrete separations dividing the sitting space into additional sectors.

In a way, this static architectural composition due to the application of concrete has gained a new spatial dimension. One may assume that concrete is a highly recommendable or required building material in case of sports facilities. Obviously, the concrete structure of the facility and the subtle details of the external staircases would not have been consciously registered by the viewer but for their spatial quality and the applied material.

This interesting design of a concrete facility would not have been consciously registered should it fail to have a good form supplemented with an intriguing play of light and shadow on the façade as well as on the tribunes. As Le Corbusier once wrote, “*Architecture is a well-designed, fault-free and grand play of blocks in the light.*” The spatial expression of the facility shown in the film would not have been complete should it be devoid of its users. These are the very characters appearing in many film frames who add up to the new spatial expression of the concrete architecture. The transmutation of concrete is expressed in the reality via a spatial and a usable form at the same time.

## 7. Conclusions

The perception of the concrete architecture of the 20th century owes much to Le Corbusier, who maintained that its spread across Europe reflected its modern nature. For many decades in Europe, new concrete buildings were deemed an identity mark of progress and new technologies. From the viewpoint of the history of Polish architecture of the second half of the 20th century, concrete transmutation can serve as an opening point for a discussion on

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<sup>11</sup> Comedy of manners about accommodation problems of a young physician – Tomasz. Tomasz is allocated with an M-3 flat, however, the M-3 flat allocation can be exercised only by married men. Thus, he must get married within 30 days. Tomasz, however, intends to marry a woman if he falls in love with her. The first candidate is stubborn, the second – jealous, the third – too independent and bossy. Only at the very last moment does he manage to find the woman he has dreamt of in one of his patients.

architectural materials as time indicators. The aforementioned notion of M. Tafuri analysing time and architecture allows us to represent this process via activities inherent in the nature of history and time. The lapse of time is a natural phenomenon and alongside this lapse of time, the buildings age and lose their spatial assets. The film image, like a photograph, is a tool registering the lapse of time and also a tool which can preserve an image captured on the film frame or film tape.

Changeability of concrete, used as the architectural material, is a commonly known phenomenon. Once a facility is erected, it serves just as a piece of a spatial puzzle called the city. Nevertheless, the apparent stability of concrete structures is misleading. Time, as a natural element, makes an architectural work change, on the one hand, it exhibits the characteristics of the old times, and on the other hand, it sometimes deteriorates until its total annihilation.

Polish concrete architecture has been only selectively presented here. On the one hand, we would like to present an architectural facility as a complete piece of work, and on the other hand, we ponder on its changeability captured in the film frames. The architects of the early years of modernism were fascinated with movement and changeability in the time perspective. The film image offers the preservation of this type of changeability. It has become a record of a grasped moment but also has allowed for a specific journey in time.

The changeability of building materials such as concrete has allowed the author hereof to track the creative process related to its application and use on the basis of the selected architectural buildings and structures for the purpose of this paper. We must remember that in the times when the aforementioned facilities were erected, the quality of the concrete used as the building material differed. From this viewpoint, the transformation of concrete, which is the title hereof, may be perceived in two different ways. Firstly, it may be viewed as changeability of the material in time due to its natural properties and secondly, as a mental change consisting in the fact that Polish post-war modern heritage is now perceived differently than in the past. Concrete space has become part of the spatial consciousness of a reality closed and preserved in the film image dating back to the 1970s.

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