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# Venice in Films

## *Wenecja* by Jan Jakub Kolski (2010)

*Do we choose the places of our illuminations  
or are we chosen by the places?*

Dariusz Czaja

### SUMMARY

The topic of the article is the image of Venice in *Wenecja*, a Polish feature film directed by Jan Jakub Kolski from 2010. The imaginary image of this city was inspired by "Sezon w Wenecji" (from the volume titled *Jedźmy, wracajmy...*, Krakow 1993 or *Jedźmy, wracajmy i inne opowiadania*, Warsaw 2000), a literary text by Włodzimierz Odojewski (1930–2016).

The article undertakes to analyse the image of Venice in the film by the author of *Historia kina w Popielawach* as a testimony of understanding its role in a particular historical space and time, of both the plot of the film and the projected reception.

### Keywords

city and film, Venice, Jan Jakub Kolski

Some say that "the city is the natural environment of the film medium."<sup>1</sup> Urbanised space has for years been associated with speed, dynamics, movement as well as technological and industrial development. And that is all film art is about.<sup>2</sup> As Teresa Rutkowska wrote in *Kwartalnik Filmowy* devoted entirely to the topic of the "presence" of big cities in films, "As an art ontologically linked to technology and civilisation situating the human being in the centre, the film has annexed the city along with all the mythologies created by literature since the 19th century. It has also enriched and developed such mythologies."<sup>3</sup> This is evidenced by films in which cities, such as Warsaw,<sup>4</sup> Berlin,<sup>5</sup> St. Petersburg<sup>6</sup> or Paris<sup>7</sup> have become the subject of cinematographic peregrinations. Sometimes it even seems that the mythology of such cities as New York,<sup>8</sup> Los Angeles<sup>9</sup> or Atlantic City<sup>10</sup> was created for the purposes of the film. The myth of the city, however, was often "over-shadowed" by some infernal or catastrophic visions. The city was seen less often as an "urbanised paradise." However, it is undeniable that the city has inspired many researchers. That is why it is worth looking again at this topos, this time on a concrete example: the city of Venice and a less obvious film,<sup>11</sup> namely *Wenecja* directed by Jan Jakub Kolski (2010), a Polish produc-

<sup>1</sup> Teresa Rutkowska, "Od Redakcji," *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no. 28 (1999) (*Miasto w filmie*): 4.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Peter Martyn, "'Miejskość' a urbanistyka: mit kontra rzeczywistość? Kilka uwag dotyczących terminologii, przeszłości i tożsamości, prób planowania oraz kwestii dalszych losów miasta," *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no. 28 (1999): 6–25.

<sup>3</sup> Rutkowska, *Od Redakcji*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ewa Mazierska, "Miasto, jak każde - Warszawa w *Girl guide* i *Kilerze* Juliusza Machulskiego," *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no. 28 (1999): 189–202.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Anna Wasieczko, "O scenografii w *Metropolis* Fritza Langa," *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no. 28 (1999): 54–76. Cf. a monographic book about the film city of Berlin written by Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, *Berlin: filmowy obraz miasta* (Krakow: Rabid, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jurij Cywjan, "W sprawie pochodzenia niektórych motywów Petersburga Andrieja Bielego," *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no. 28 (1999): 26–34.

<sup>7</sup> Agnieszka Taborska, "Paryż, czyli w pogoni za tajemnicą. Filmowe fantazje surrealistów," *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no. 28 (1999): 77–93.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Patricia Kruth, "Kolor Nowego Jorku - miejsca i przestrzenie w filmach Martina Scorsese i Woody'ego Allena," *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no. 28 (1999): 117–128.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Maria Helena Costa, "Czarne kino Los Angeles," *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no. 28 (1999): 93–107.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Konrad Klejsa, "Przypadki utraconych tożsamości. O *Atlantic City* Louisa Malle'a," *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no. 28 (1999): 129–147.

<sup>11</sup> The most frequently indicated foreign films (but evaluated very differently by critics), whose plot is set in Venice, include (selection): *Death in Venice* (1971), directed by Luchino Visconti; *Summertime* (1955), directed by David Lean; *Don't Look Now* (1973), directed by Nicolas Roeg; *A Little Romance* (1979), directed by George Roy Hill; *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), an adventure film directed by Steven Spielberg; *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), a musical directed by Woody Allen; *The Wings of the Dove* (1997), directed by Iain Softley; *Dangerous Beauty* (1998), directed by Marshall Herskovitz; *The Italian Job* (2003), directed by Felix Gary Gray; *Casanova* (2005, cf. also its earlier versions) directed by Lasse Hallström; *Casino Royal* (2006), a James Bond film directed by Martin Campbell; *Shark in Venice* (2008), directed by Danny Lerner; *Eine Liebe in Venedig* (2009), directed by Klaus Wirbitzky; *The Tourist* (2010), a blockbuster directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck and many others.

Cf. Also e.g. articles (selection) on films whose plot is set in Venice: "Zobaczyć Wenecję i...," *Kino*, September 1997, 50; "Płyn, barko moja...," *Video Club*, no. 7–8 (1996): 18–19.

tion on the topic of Venice.<sup>12</sup> For this purpose, it is necessary to take a “lonely peregrination” through the “tamed” space and find a different key to this unusual “city on the water,”<sup>13</sup> which is at the same time a reflection-mirror of the sky-cosmos; a city of the elements and the senses; a city of fiction and narcissism, but also of inspiration.

In Polish cinematography, Venice as a film city is primarily a city of artists and art. In the second place it also becomes:

a) “a place-name,”<sup>14</sup> which establishes it in the first place, making it a city of hope and imagination as in the film *Wenecja* (2010) by Jan Jakub Kolski;<sup>15</sup>

b) “a place of journey” and the choice between theatre (secular “game”) and theology (religious “game”), which Wojciech Has described in an insightful way in his last film titled *The Tribulations of Balthazar Kober* [Niezwykła podróż Baltazara Kobera] (1988);<sup>16</sup>

c) “a place of love and death,” which was most clearly recalled in Polish cinematography by Lech Majewski in *Ogród rozkoszy ziemskich* [The Garden of Earthly Delights] (2002).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> An interesting example of a forgotten film about Venice is a French-Italian feature film titled *Rouge Venise* directed by Etienne Perier in 1988, in which Wojciech Pszoniak, a Polish actor, performed as Vivaldi. The story is set in the eponymous city in 1735, which was at that time the cultural and entertainment centre of Europe. Antonio Vivaldi, a musician, Carlo Goldoni, an attorney and a playwright (starring Vincent Spano), and Jean-Baptiste Tiepolo, a painter (starring Massimo Daporto) live in the Venice of that epoch. It is a film mainly about artists, art, with a criminal thread (the murder of Princesse Hortense), but the city provides an undoubtedly picturesque background.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Brodsky, “Znak wodny”, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, *Zeszyty Literackie*, no. 39 (1992): 5–54 and Joseph Brodsky, *Znak wodny*, trans. Stanisław Barańczak (Kraków: Znak, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. other less well-known films, which sometimes only refer to Venice in their titles in a non-literal (or even misleading) way, e.g. documentary films: *Stacja Walily-Wenecja* directed by Helena Włodarczyk (2004); *Żnin-Paryż-Wenecja, czyli sceny z życia prowincji* directed by Piotr Bikont and Stanisław Manturzewski (1992–1993).

It is worth bearing in mind the first of these documents, *Stacja Walily-Wenecja* (2004), because of the film’s protagonist, namely Leon Tarasewicz, a painter born in Walily in Podlasie. The artist claims that the boundaries of art are not defined, because it is art that indicates them. Therefore, for Tarasewicz, as well as for many others, Venice can be everywhere, being at the same time synonymous with the “world of art, galleries, academy.”

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Natasza Korczarowska-Różycka, *Ojczyzny prywatne: mitologia przestrzeni prywatności w twórczości Tadeusza Konwickiego, Jana Jakuba Kolskiego, Andrzeja Kondratiuka* (Kraków: Rabid, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Iwona Grodz, “Komu się śni? Między rzeczywistością a fikcją,” in Iwona Grodz, *Zasyfrowane w obrazie. Filmy Wojciecha Hasa*, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria, 2008, 199–280.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Jacek Nowakowski, “W poszukiwaniu rajy – Metafizyka i Ogród rozkoszy ziemskich,” in Jacek Nowakowski, *W stronę rajy. O literackiej i filmowej twórczości Lecha Majewskiego* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2012), 199–218. This subject was also discussed by Magdalena Lebecka, *Lech Majewski* (Warsaw: Więź, 2010).

Cf. also Lech Majewski, “Okradanie śmierci.” An interview conducted by Grażyna Arata, *Kino*, March 2004; Feliks Netz, “Nowy, wybitny film Lecha Majewskiego,” *Śląsk*, no. 5 (2004); Jan Pniewski, “Zaklinanie czasu,” *Przegląd Powszechny*, February 6, 2004; Jan Olszewski, “Zegnaj, ogrodzie,” *Kino*, March 2004; Tadeusz Sobolewski, “Wenecja na cyfrze,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, December 12, 2004.

Venice in the first variant will be subject to further consideration; thus, at this point it is worth mentioning only the other two alternatives.<sup>18</sup> The final film of Wojciech Has, *The Tribulations of Balthazar Kober*, was created on the basis of a novel by Frédéric Tristan, a contemporary French writer and traveller as well as the winner of the Prix Goncourt in 1983.<sup>19</sup> His novel titled *Les Tribulations héroïques Balthazar Kober* was published in France in 1980. Unfortunately, so far it has not been translated into Polish.<sup>20</sup> Undoubtedly, this could have been one of the reasons why Has's project passed unnoticed in Poland. On a very basic level, the audience did not feel any bond with it.

The novel *Les Tribulations héroïques Balthazar Kober* was considered by many critics as a manifestation of the writer's postmodern inclinations. In Poland, Maria Kornatowska wrote about it in this context, pointing to the intertextual game that the author "serves" the audience. The multitude of allusions, quotations, various references to other literary texts, cultures and rituals also implies a similar inclination of Has.<sup>21</sup> The director took the main plot, the characters and to some extent the mood from the literary original. He transformed the elusive verbal literary matter "in his image and likeness." However, the main difference between the novel and the film was that "the matter of the novel is life in its various aspects, while the matter of the film by Has is death as a form of life."<sup>22</sup> The director's fascination with the passing of time and disappearance took over also in this project. Death in *The Tribulations of Balthazar Kober* is not, however, frightening or unfamiliar. Almost from the first shot (the scene of the Angel Gabriel meeting), the director announces the protagonist's contact with the extraterrestrial world, which is to allow him to tame death. Ultimately, death means meeting his beloved, and hence love and happiness. Loneliness in the face of death is overcome precisely by these feelings and Balthazar's journey to Venice becomes a road to "initiation to death."<sup>23</sup> It is a path shaped like a labyrinth, which is traditionally associated with confusion, closure, initiation, infinity (the spiral) and the land of the dead. The labyrinth is a kind of metaphor for human fate, its repetitiveness. The crossing of the labyrinth has always been a symbol of the path of a human being who is alienated, lost and searching.

The Italian city is also connected with the theme of the masquerade, the wandering troupe of circus artists, scenes depicting the carnival in Venice

<sup>18</sup> The films directed by Has and Majewski have already been discussed in detail in my other scholarly works, which is why I decided this time to focus only on *Wenecja* by Kolski.

Cf. Iwona Grodz, "Oko artysty. Fenomenologia zmysłów w filmie *Młyn i krzyż* Lecha Majewskiego," *TransMissions: Journal of Film and Media Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Mariusz Miodek, "Niezwykła podróż Baltazara Kobera," *Film*, April 1988, 6-7; "Wędrówka do Wenecji." A production report, *Film*, September 1988, 6-7; Maria Kornatowska, "Odczytać tajemną księgę," *Film*, March 1989, 9; "Niezwykła podróż Baltazara Kobera - discussion of the film", *Filmowy Serwis Prasowy*, September-October 1988, 2-5; Tadeusz Sobolewski, "Teatr i teologia," *Kino*, December 1988, 14-16.

<sup>20</sup> We know only part of the book translated for the purposes of the film. The screenplay S-26663 and script S-25520 of *Niezwykła podróż Baltazara Kobera* can be found in the National Film Archive in Warsaw.

<sup>21</sup> Maria Kornatowska, "Odczytać tajemną księgę," *Film*, no. 3 (1989): 9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

or a man dressed up as death, with whom Balthazar and Rosa sail away (the last scene). The appearance of masqueraders is already announced by a black-and-yellow harlequin that Balthazar's little brother is playing with. The Pappagallo clown is wearing precisely the same outfit as the harlequin. Moreover, it is a symbol of duality, of the bond between the living and the dead, of the world as a "circus spectacle that for a moment suspends the rules of the game of everyday reality and uncovers the deepest truths of human existence."<sup>24</sup> Illusion becomes the most powerful force in the film of the author of *Farewells*. The masqueraders also point to the idea of "upside down living," which was most fully reflected in the final film of Has. This is about pictures watched by Balthazar which depict fish catching people, a man hanging upside down or a donkey wearing human attire. They bring to mind the drawings by Jean-Jacques Grandville, one of the precursors of surrealism. The Master explains their meaning in the following way: "Our world can have different faces. Consequently, you have to find the right order of things in yourself."<sup>25</sup> In this way, Venice as the main protagonist's initiation journey becomes a place of illumination.

In the case of the film titled *Ogród rozkoszy ziemskich* (2002) directed by Lech Majewski, who drew inspiration from his own novel titled *Metafizyka* [Metaphysics]<sup>26</sup> and the painting by Hieronymus Bosch,<sup>27</sup> Venice is, above all, a space of love and a paradise (though "contaminated" with disease and imminent death<sup>28</sup>). The Polish director, who has been living in Venice for many years, wrote about the paradox of the unreality of this place: "Venice is unrealistic in spring and autumn, when the air is very crisp, or on damp days, when everything looks magical, or in winter, when humidity turns into snow."<sup>29</sup>

The situation is different in the film. Jacek Nowakowski noted that the symbolism of the painting by Bosch was realised by revealing its presence and actuality in the real world. The place where it was found is Venice, the

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Has, *Niezwykła podróż Baltazara Kobera* – the script, 21.

<sup>26</sup> The literary original describes Venice in the following way: "Water travels and paintings in churches rock me, 'lull,' you said dreamily. – The colors, lights and arcs of Carpaccio and Bellini are a state of grace. The eye moves gently over them, like a boat on the waters of the lagoon. Touched by a warm, soothing hand, I feel bliss. Yes, now I am really in paradise." Cf. Lech Majewski, *Metafizyka* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2002), 53.

<sup>27</sup> Majewski's film was also compared to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and to Luchino Visconti's film based on Mann's novella, indicating the presence of the Apollonian and Dionysian nature in Venice (the motif of corporeality, the chaotic element of water) and asking "whether it is possible to attribute to Venice the unconscious, instinctive, aquatic pursuit of (self)destruction" (Cf. Nowakowski, "W poszukiwaniu rajy – *Metafizyka* i *Ogród rozkoszy ziemskich*," 210).

<sup>28</sup> Magdalena Lebecka noted that: "Unlike Dante, Bosch abandoned the idea of purgatory. He was not interested in penance but in liberation, he dealt not with punishment but with reward for those who, instead of being tormented by waiting, discovered that ascension to paradise was possible and given here and now. He liberated those suffering in the hell of their own soul in the earthly garden of pleasures and established this utopia as the central theme of the triptych." Cf. Magdalena Lebecka, *Lech Majewski* (Warsaw: Więź, 2010, 217).

<sup>29</sup> Lech Majewski, "Ukryte ścieżki weneccjan," in Lech Majewski, *Pejzaż intymny. Rozmowy autobiograficzne o świecie i o sztuce* (Poznań: Rebis, 2017), 175.

city of myth. The author of the monograph titled *W stronę raju* [Towards Heaven] stressed that Majewski “transferred” Bosch to Venice (although *The Garden of Earthly Delights* can be found in Museo del Prado in Madrid<sup>30</sup>), because this place functions as an earthly paradise for all art aficionados and people in love.<sup>31</sup> All in all, Venice in Majewski’s film is a space of freedom and fulfilment.<sup>32</sup> However, it should be remembered, as Aleksandra Achteлик wrote, that: “Venice never allows one to stay long in the sphere of the symbolism of life, it does not allow one to forget that it is a kind of visualisation of *memento mori*. (...) it is a warning (...) a place of memory of the living feeling after the death of the heroine (...) a diary of a love story which is doomed to an imminent end.”<sup>33</sup> This is what happens in Majewski’s film. Bea and Luis are witnesses of the funeral, and eventually it is in this city that the main female character dies. This is why “the city on the water” is for the director, on the one hand, a place of illusion, art, game, disguise, costume, masque, which is synonymous to pretending, but it is also, on the other hand, the paradise here and now, like in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. There is no other Eden.

### Wenecja by Jan Jakub Kolski

Between reality and fiction

*I dream of cinematography so intense that the viewer  
can produce its scent by themselves.*

Jan Jakub Kolski

*Wenecja* by Jan Jakub Kolski (2010)<sup>34</sup> is an adaptation of the short story titled “Sezon w Wenecji” [A Season in Venice] by Włodzimierz Odojewski.<sup>35</sup> Cinematic Venice, however, is not a city in Italy, but just an image of it. It is, in fact, a “Venetian” basement. There is a place that could have become a permanent part of the main character’s biography, but the story of that journey never came true due to the outbreak of the Second World War. The main protagonist, eleven-year-old Marek, dreams of a trip to Venice. His parents,

<sup>30</sup> It is worth remembering that the Doge’s Palace is home to another painting by Bosch, namely *Visions of the Hereafter* (which consists of four parts: *Terrestrial Paradise*, *Ascent of the Blessed*, *Fall of the Damned into Hell*, *Hell*).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Nowakowski, “W poszukiwaniu raju – *Metafizyka i Ogród rozkoszy ziemskich*,” 207.

<sup>32</sup> Nowakowski, “W poszukiwaniu raju – *Metafizyka i Ogród rozkoszy ziemskich*,” 208.

<sup>33</sup> Aleksandra Achteлик, “Drugie oblicze Lecha Majewskiego, czyli o powieści *Metafizyka*,” *Postscriptum*, no. 1-2, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. selected reviews of Jan Jakub Kolski’s *Wenecja*: Andrzej Luter, “Wenecja,” *Kino*, July–August 2010, 86–87; Łukasz Maciejewski, “Wojna ukryta pod wenecką maską,” *Film*, July 2010, 80; Tadeusz Sobolewski, “Ile ciosów wytrzyma iluzja,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 10, 2010, 14; Wojciech Kałużyński, “Weneckie lustra,” *Dziennik. Gazeta Prawna. Kultura*, June 11, 2010, 4; Piotr Krajewski, “Machiny i lotne aluzje,” *Odra*, no. 3 (2011): 102–110; Janusz Wróblewski, “Wenecja,” *Polityka*, June 12, 2010, 54; Małgorzata Sadowska, “Koniec marzeń,” *Przekrój*, June 8, 2010, 23, 51; Barbara Hollender, “Świat skażony przez wojnę,” *Rzeczpospolita*, June 11, 2010, A20.

<sup>35</sup> Jan Jakub Kolski spoke about the adaptation in an interview with Barbara Hollender, “Potyczki z literaturą,” *Rzeczpospolita*, June 11, 2010, A20.

Joanna (starring Magdalena Cielecka) and Roman (Mariusz Bonaszewski) as well as his elder brother Wiktor (Filip Piotrowicz) have already been to Italy, but for Mark it is still an unfulfilled dream. The boy believes that he will soon see this city. He immortalises his dreams in writing, learns by heart the names of all the squares, streets and churches in this city. Eventually, however, he spends the summer at the manor house of Aunt Veronica, his mother's sister. Then the war breaks out and the journey does not take place. But he does not stop thinking about it. One day, torrential rains flood his aunt's house. This event inspires Marek to build an imaginary miniature of Venice in the basement of her house. Together with his teenage friends, he sails in it in a boat which is supposed to resemble a gondola and he holds musical concerts, pretending that they are in St. Mark's Square in Venice. The imaginary city turns out to be a place of oblivion and peace, which allows children and – as it will turn out – also adults to survive the turmoil of the war. Marek's aunts escape to the imaginary "Venice" hidden in the basement in the most difficult moments, hiding their fear and drowning out unwanted thoughts. They even organise a kind of Venetian carnival, swim in a gondola, dance and drink wine. With time, the war even "penetrates" this space. The death of Aunt Veronica, who dies from a stray enemy bullet in a meadow, turns out to be the turning point. This is how the core of the plot is outlined. But what image of Venice emerges from the literary original?

In "Sezon w Wenecji," Odojewski wrote about the idea of Venice which Marek has in the following way:

I think now that perhaps at that time, or not much later, his imagination produced a picture composed of stone laces and, as if woven in silver and red threads of decorations on the plaster, appearing to him to be like colorful miniatures made of porcelain caskets which were kept behind the crystal glass in one of the cabinets by his grandmother, full of canals with gondolas floating over them and arches of bridges climbing over them in the air, from which at night winged lions would fly to St. Mark's Square and where giant horses would gallop or pigeons simply walked during the day, less enchanted than those, but still.<sup>36</sup>

Precisely due to its elaborate, sophisticated, "sensual" language and meandering syntax, Odojewski's prose became inspiration for Jan Jakub Kolski, who decided to adapt the story of this author to the needs of both the big (a feature, full-length film) and small screen (a TV series).

The filmmaker is known primarily for original poetics of his maverick film projects, e.g. *Pograbek*, *Jańcio Wodnik*, *Historia kina w Popielawach* [A Story of a Cinema in Popielawy].<sup>37</sup> He is less often associated with screenings of literary texts. Nevertheless, he is also an author of adaptations, for instance, he made into a film Hanna Krall's short story titled "Ta z Hamburga" [The

<sup>36</sup> Włodzimierz Odojewski, "Sezon w Wenecji," in Włodzimierz Odojewski, *Jedźmy, wracajmy i inne opowiadania* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Twój Styl, 2000), 5–6.

<sup>37</sup> Korczarowska, *Ojczyzny prywatne*.

One from Hamburg] (cf. *Daleko od okna* [Far from the Window] from 2000) and Witold Gombrowicz's novel titled *Pornography* (2008). The more difficult the text, the more obliged the director felt to try to screen it. Due to such an attitude, he brought his "adaptation instruments" to perfection. This was followed by an episodic "encounter" with Dorota Masłowska's text titled *White and Red* (the unfinished 2006 project, this text was finally adapted for the screen by Xawery Żuławski in 2009). Finally, the director rose to the challenge presented by Włodzimierz Odojewski's short story.

Critics wrote that "Sezon w Wenecji" depicts "an upside down world – abnormal on the surface and strange, but the way it should be, underground."<sup>38</sup> This statement is intriguing enough to be an impulse for the creator who loved the land of his ancestors (the so-called creator of small homelands). Nevertheless, Kolski mentioned that Odojewski's story is very short, so it is "a world far from complete."<sup>39</sup> The literary material was enough for fifteen percent of what the viewer can see on the screen. The rest had to be invented from scratch. But this turned out to be an artistic challenge, not a hindrance. Additionally, Odojewski authorised the screenplay.

The motif of "the city on the water" has become an inspiration for many artists, some of whom were mentioned, for instance, by Dariusz Czaja in his article titled "W drodze do Wenecji" [On the Way to Venice].<sup>40</sup> Among them was also Odojewski and his short story with its telling title, in which there is the name of the city as "a personal name or an abbreviated emblem of individuality, meaningful and marking, also thickening the mystery of a single identity" and the term "season."<sup>41</sup> Both of them, according to Dariusz Czaja, belong to the "the mysterious idiomaticity of existence."<sup>42</sup> This is why there is not one Venice for all. But there are many ideas about it. Behind them there are dreams, desires, promises and non-fulfilment, experiences of a different world, sensual, sparkling, an "amalgam" of reality, full of water reflections, fantastic musing, sounds and scents.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Korczarowska, *Ojczyzny prywatne*.

<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the director mentioned that "the Venice created in the basement of the manor house is a world governed by a clearer logic and far more ordered than the external one. Additionally, it is less oppressive. There is overproduction of women and conflicts on the surface and there is also the war going on. In any case, the war is less overwhelming for Marek than the oppression resulting from the deficit of maternal love and the domination of an excessively feminine world in the manor house."

<sup>40</sup> Dariusz Czaja pointed, for example, to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) and its 1971 screen adaptation, directed by Luchino Visconti. He presented the aim of his deliberations in the following way: "Let us now look at three completely different examples of constructing an image of Venice. These are texts whose protagonists are going to Venice, but not in one case do they do not reach it 'physically' in any of the cases. Let us take a look at how the rhetorical mechanism of making imagined visions more concrete born of the imagination work. Let us try, step by step, to reconstruct the architecture of the eye permeated by fascination." Cf. Dariusz Czaja, "W drodze do Wenecji. Podróże imaginacyjne," *Polska Sztuka Ludowa – Konteksty*, vol. 57, no. 1-2, (2003): 162.

<sup>41</sup> Czaja, "W drodze do Wenecji. Podróże imaginacyjne," 161.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> At this point it is worth stressing the importance of scenery in Venice. It is extremely sensual. All elements were carefully selected. The creators were only unable to convey the fragrance, although the intensity of psychological experiences can help the imagination in this. Arthur Reinhart's photographs also provide an unusual visual setting.

The author of *Podróże imaginacyjne* also notices that “Sezon w Wenecji” by Włodzimierz Odojewski is unusual primarily due to the original, purely imaginary vision of this city. He reflects on the subject: “(...) there is no other such poignantly ‘real’ vision of this city, although the thing does not concern its actual designation even for a moment, there is no text in which we would learn so much about Venice without Venice. The issue is not just the writer’s ability to use expressive means of description, the thing is much more mysterious and unexpected.”<sup>44</sup>

The story, and consequently Kolski’s film, opens in 1939. The main protagonist, as it was recalled earlier, is to leave for the long-awaited and promised trip to Venice. It is a special place in his family since everyone visits it. Hence, the magic of “the city on the water” comes from “the darkness of his childhood,” imagination, expectations for the materialisation of the dream which, as time will show, will never come true. In the life of the main character, the onset of the Second World War announces the end of illusions, the necessity of growing up faster and learning about death. The dream trip changes into a journey to the province, to his family, to an old manor house. However, there is some hope in this lack of fulfilment. The basement in the old house suddenly becomes an imaginary Venice. After some time, it transforms into a space of play, pretend, entertainment and an asylum where children and adults alike regain their sense of security. In this sense, as Dariusz Czaja noted, “The world of imaginary, ‘conjured’ Venice becomes in the story [like in the film – J.G.] a form of compensation for the nightmare of the war. Imaginary Venice (...) allows the characters to forget and daydream.”<sup>45</sup> In this way, as Czaja puts it, Odojewski “created (...) an image of the city in line with the mythical model. Like few people before him, he unveiled some of the most ambiguous Venetian masks in a completely novel way.”<sup>46</sup> Therefore, in this story “(...) memory is not an obstacle for the heroes, it does not summon the ghosts of the past. Memory together with imagination constitutes here a creative and productive power (...). Memory functions here like a photographic developer, it ‘un-remembers’ the real, strongly existing reality, creates an illusion, but with an amazingly strong consistency.”<sup>47</sup>

Ultimately, the recipients – both readers and viewers – are left with a kind of understatement. Thrown in the maze of truths and conjectures, they are unable to say clearly why Venice fills the hero with fear as the narrator will unambiguously say: “I have never really been to Venice.”

So many years have passed. I have travelled half the world. So many countries, so many cities, so many different views. But he has never really been to Venice, although many times in its vicinity. Not that he was not attracted or curious. Perhaps only somewhere deep inside he was a little scared. No, he did not really know what. What he did know, however, was

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

that there was a gondola waiting for him, not at all like their giant tub from Aunt Weronika's basement. So he did not want to.<sup>48</sup>

We sense that it is not only about the traumatic memory of childhood, a memory that means non-fulfilment, but about something more. Perhaps about the meeting with the death? About the loss of illusion, because Venice can only be a name, a word, literature, a text, a ghost town, a synonym of disappearance and absence rather than a memory or its palimpsest.<sup>49</sup> It is a truly carnival blend of meanings, truths and deceptions that terrifies.

Finally, it is worth pointing out the changes that Kolski introduced to Odojewski's text. In general, the director takes over the structure of the story, but also makes some modifications to it. As Aleksandra Smyczyńska notes, the title of the film is the first signal of the director's departure from the poetics of faithful imitation of the original:

On one hand, *Wenecja* clearly refers to the title of Odojewski's short story, which harmonises with the attitude of "respect" towards the literary original declared by the director; on the other hand, however, he modifies it quite significantly, transforming the title "Sezon w Wenecji" characterised by temporality into the emblematic 'city name,' which in the Mediterranean culture has become a timeless metaphor or even archetype of persistence in spite of unfavorable circumstances.<sup>50</sup>

Thanks to this, the author of *Pograbek* suggests "destruction of the old order more explicitly and in a broader context."<sup>51</sup> Moreover, in the film it is the boy, not aunt Barbara, who invents a city on the water in the basement of the house.<sup>52</sup> In addition, the director completes the information about what was before 1939.<sup>53</sup> Some characters are not present in the film: cousin Tomek or the grandfather, and this "elimination is not a coincidence,

<sup>48</sup> Odojewski, *Sezon w Wenecji*, 85.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. e.g. Italo Calvino, *Niewidzialne miasta*, trans. Alina Kreisberg (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1975).

<sup>50</sup> Aleksandra Smyczyńska, "Przepis na adaptację Jana Jakuba Kolskiego i jego realizacja w filmie *Wenecja*," *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Cultura*, no. 5 (2013): 58.

The author of this text also recalled that "In fact, the director also drew on two other stories by this writer: *Koń pułkownika* and *Cyrk przyjechał, cyrk odjechał*; furthermore, one of the episodes in *Wenecja* comes from the short story titled *Nie można cię samego zostawić o zmierzchu*" (58).

<sup>51</sup> Smyczyńska, "Przepis na adaptację Jana Jakuba Kolskiego i jego realizacja w filmie *Wenecja*," 58. "Compared to the literary original, Kolski also develops and complicates the picture of social relations during the Second World War. First of all, he exposes the Jewish theme much more strongly than Odojewski." (58) "Kolski explained his interest in the Holocaust with the fact that his grandmother was Jewish, so this blood also flows in his veins" (59).

<sup>52</sup> In addition, Kolski gives a symbolic and archetypal meaning to water, which becomes primarily the boundary between dreams and reality. Cf. Dariusz Czaja, "Wenecja jest kobietą. Rzecz o wyobraźni," *Konteksty*, no. 3-4 (1995): 146-152.

<sup>53</sup> In his book, the director wrote the following: "I felt that there were no events earlier than September 1939. In order to supplement it, I included episodes from the Jesuit Secondary School in Chyrów and the custom taken from there of taking an oath concerning their future lives. Due to this, I could follow that oath to see how the dreams of my and Odojewski's characters came true. There are many additions to the screenplay, but each one comes from the authority of the original world, taken from the author of the stories." Cf. Jan Jakub

because the world of Venice is primarily a female space."<sup>54</sup> A city of women and a place, in which cognition is achieved through merging the theme of Eros and Thanatos. After the filming, Kolski recalled:

I did not have to tame the space of Odojewski. I did not feel the need. The world of his short stories, apparently not mine and very distant, seemed surprisingly close to me. Nothing disturbed me here. Nothing at all. I did not have to say any spells and mark the territory. From the very beginning, I felt at home in those places and among those people.<sup>55</sup>

Nevertheless, in the end, *Wenecja* is rather a variation on Odojewski's prose, with quicker action, an extended motif of water, revealing a difficult relationship with the mother, Marek's loneliness, his parents' marital crisis, lack of harmony between the sisters, a broader temporal and spatial context, and thus with a more universal expression.

Finally, it is worth recalling the words of the author of *Oksana*, who wrote that there are permanent and fleeing things. The former, like imagination, may bring salvation<sup>56</sup> and it seems that Kolski understood this thought of the writer and thanks to that his imagination wove an extraordinary picture about awaking, growing up and remembering.

### Wenecja: "the flower of human genius"

*Venice is a myth, a mirror, an island that children dream of.  
It is also an illusion of what is not there.*

Dariusz Czaja

Venice – "the flower of human genius"<sup>57</sup> – was made to impress from the very beginning and for many reasons: ranging from its location, the circumstances of its founding, its extraordinary past, to its enigmatic future, for which Venice is increasingly being called another Atlantis, a disappearing island. A city from imagination, a woman-city,<sup>58</sup> a death-city,<sup>59</sup> or simply a place – a labyrinth of streets, still hiding many secrets, in which it is not difficult to get lost.<sup>60</sup> Years ago Dariusz Czaja wrote that: "In European

Kolski, *Pamięć podróżna, Fragmentozbiór filmowy* (Łódź: Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Filmowa, Telewizyjna i Teatralna im. L. Schillera w Łodzi, 2010), 55.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Smyczyńska, "Przepis na adaptację Jana Jakuba Kolskiego i jego realizacja w filmie *Wenecja*," 56.

<sup>55</sup> Kolski, 155.

<sup>56</sup> Odojewski, *Sezon w Wenecji*, 72.

<sup>57</sup> This is the way in which Venice was described by the creators of the documentary film titled *Czy technologia uratuje Wenecję?*

<sup>58</sup> Czaja, *Wenecja jest kobietą*, 146–152.

<sup>59</sup> Dariusz Czaja, "Wenecja i śmierć. Konteksty symboliczne," 58–65. [http://cyfrowaetnografia.pl/Content/2209/Stroony%20od%20PSL\\_XLVI\\_nr3-4-12\\_Czaja.pdf](http://cyfrowaetnografia.pl/Content/2209/Stroony%20od%20PSL_XLVI_nr3-4-12_Czaja.pdf) [accessed July 6, 2020].

<sup>60</sup> Aleksandra Achteлик, *Sprawcza moc przechadzki, czyli polski literat we włoskim mieście* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2015, 8). Cf. also Aleksandra Achteлик, *Wenecja mityczna w literaturze XIX i XX wiek* (Katowice: Gnome, 2002).

mythical geography, Venice has always had a unique place. It is a particularly distinguished space, characterised by its distinctive 'overvalue.' Probably none of the European cities has evoked such strong and varied emotions; none has been the object of feelings of fascination and admiration manifested so frequently and eagerly."<sup>61</sup>

There are many "languages" with the use of which it is possible to talk about space. This is evidenced by the literary, artistic, film and theatrical "texts" as well as even musical compositions. Venice is, undoubtedly, a special place. From the point of view of cognition, it is important to put a specific urbanised area into a valorisation network<sup>62</sup> and make it a noteworthy topic, if only due to the fact that the artist and the work of art convey "a testimony of understanding of the role of the city in the concrete historical phase of the development of civilisation."<sup>63</sup> Undoubtedly, it is extremely difficult to "see" this city today in the right scale, not completely through the prism of Romanticism, symbolism or postmodernism. It is an artistry that is difficult to understand. It is universalism, which is necessary. It is understanding that Venice, and the city in general,<sup>64</sup> that is one of the "keys" for understanding civilisational changes, particularly noticeable at the turn of the 20th and 21st century. Film art inspired by the "city on water" can undoubtedly help to achieve this.

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<sup>61</sup> Czaja, "Wenecja i śmierć. Konteksty symboliczne," 58. In additional, the author of the indicated text recalled that: "The phenomenon of Venice is not limited to one linguistic or cultural area, to one literary tradition. (...) Venice is a phenomenon that goes beyond the boundaries of nations and cultures. For the general public, it is a model city, a paradigm city." (58)

<sup>62</sup> Cf. e.g. Wojciech Gutowski, *Mit-Eros-Sacrum. Sytuacje młodopolskie* (Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Homini, 1999).

<sup>63</sup> Gutowski, *Mit-Eros-Sacrum. Sytuacje młodopolskie*.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. "(...) the form has a metaphysical memory and is not just what can be seen. It is a kind of statement showing us different, unique ideas. And because of this, exceptional works are created. The space observed in this way is a starting point for further reflection on a completely new dimension of the city and architecture..." Cf. Remigiusz Konecko, *Miasto i jego ukryty wymiar w sztuce, Images*, vol. XII, no. 21, (2013): 172.

- Czaja, Dariusz. "Wenecja i śmierć Konteksty symboliczne." Accessed June 6, 2020. [http:// cyfrowaetnografia.pl/Content/2209/Strony%20od%20PSL\\_XLVI\\_nr3-4-12\\_Czaja.pdf](http://cyfrowaetnografia.pl/Content/2209/Strony%20od%20PSL_XLVI_nr3-4-12_Czaja.pdf).
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### Filmography

*Wenecja* (a feature film from 2010 and a three-episode series from 2015) directed by Jan Jakub Kolski based on a story titled "Sezon w Wenecji" by Włodzimierz Odojewski. The premiere of the film (June 11, 2010). Photography: Artur Reinhart. Scenography: Joanna Macha. Set decoration: Wiesława Chojkowska. Music: Dariusz Górniok. The cast: Magdalena Cielecka (Joanna, Marek's mother), Marcin Walewski (Marek), Agnieszka Grochowska (Barbara, Marek's aunt), Grażyna Błęcka-Kolska (Weronika, Marek's aunt), Julia Kijowska (Klaudyna, Marek's aunt), Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska (Marek's grandmother), Mariusz Bonaszewski (Marek's father), Filip Piotrowicz (Wiktor, Marek's brother) and others.

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