

## RECENZJA KSIĄŻKI *BOOK REVIEW*

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**Artur Skweres, *McLuhan's Galaxies: Science Fiction Film Aesthetics in Light of Marshall McLuhan's Thought*, Cham: Springer, 2019, pp 110.**

The first association that may come to mind when we juxtapose Marshall McLuhan's media theory and the movies is one of the scenes from *Annie Hall*, a Woody Allen film from the late 1970s. In this scene, the protagonists, played by the film's director and Diane Keaton, are standing in line at the box office next to a man who is excitedly telling his partner about a theory of the Canadian thinker. When Allen interrupts this particularly annoying monologue and accuses him of completely misrepresenting McLuhan's theses, the outraged man announces that he knows what he is talking about because he teaches a course on television, media, and culture at Columbia University in New York. At that moment, quite unexpectedly, of course, the professor from Toronto appears in the cinema hall in person and – with characteristic self-mockery – says to the astonished academic: “I heard what you were saying. You know nothing of my work. You mean my whole fallacy is wrong. How you ever got to teach a course in anything is totally amazing” [*Annie Hall*, youtube.com]. Fortunately, this snappy remark from the Canadian thinker did not stop researchers from all over the world from making more, often very original attempts to interpret and apply his theories.

An example of such an attempt, and in my opinion definitely successful, is the book by Artur Skweres titled *McLuhan's galaxies: Science fiction film aesthetics in light of Marshall McLuhan's thought*, published by Springer in 2019. As the title itself indicates, the book presents correlations between film and the concepts of the eponymous scholar that go far beyond the above-mentioned humorous scene. In the introduction, the author explains that classic science fiction films, such as *Alien*, *Blade Runner*, *Terminator*, *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, or *Avatar*, were treated as case studies to verify the statements formulated by McLuhan. This approach may be considered provocative, bold, or at least surprising, but it has a rational justification. The author himself explains that "the purpose of the monograph is to focus on these few, continuously relevant works to ascertain whether the predictions and intuitions expressed in the films, especially in their aesthetic dimension, correlate with the observations made by the famous Canadian. The reason for the employment of McLuhan's theories in the analysis of science fiction lies in their similarity: they each look at the causes in the present and try to come up with possible results, anticipating their effects in the future" [Skweres 2019: xi].

It is worth noting here that the selection of McLuhan's texts on which Skweres bases his deliberations is as careful as the selection of films, and at the same time, surprisingly not obvious. The bibliography includes only two major publications of McLuhan: *Gutenberg galaxy* and *Understanding media*, the famous interview for *Playboy* from 1969, as well as *Take Today* and *The medium is the massage*, which are almost completely unknown in Poland. On the other hand, the remaining items are niche texts and recordings (radio and TV), difficult to access even for die-hard McLuhanists. Regardless of whether it was a deliberate measure, or it resulted, for example, from the availability of certain materials in library databases, it allowed Skweres to obtain a pleasant "freshness" in his approach to the concepts of the Toronto thinker. I consider this a significant success of the author, especially considering that McLuhan's theory has been present in the popular science discourse for over seven decades and has been presented in countless ways and in various contexts during that time.

Moreover, Skweres notices that despite the considerable interpretative potential of applying the concept of the famous Canadian to the analysis of science fiction films, they have not been discussed in this context in great detail so far. To the best of my knowledge, this statement applies not only to this particular genre, but to movies in general. And I do not only mean the Polish publishing market. Although McLuhan devoted a lot of space to films in his deliberations,

it is difficult to identify an article or monograph that discusses these issues as Skweres does in his book.<sup>1</sup>

Paradoxically, however, the compliment regarding the unconventional selection of McLuhan's literature can also be treated as the most serious objection to this monograph. Due to the subject matter it touches upon, discussing the mutual influence of technology, art, culture, and the related forms of individual and social life, there is clearly no reference to other publications of the title character that refer to aesthetics or artistic creation as such, for example *Through the vanishing point: Space in poetry and painting* or *Counterblast*. There is also a noticeable lack of in-depth analysis of the films in question (from the perspective of film and media studies), which in the context of McLuhan's media theory could have even more remarkable and significant results than the author's focus on metaphors and analysis of individual elements of films (primarily their visual layer and narration). Perhaps this is due to the limited volume of the book, which required the author to select the most important themes. Despite these minor shortcomings, Skweres's book remains a unique publication, especially for McLuhanists, if only because of the innovative use of the Toronto professor's theory. Of course, McLuhan's concepts have appeared before in literature and film research, but so far, they have not been the main topic. What is more, the approaches proposed by their authors concerned primarily how we watch films or how they can affect our psyche and senses, and not how their plot, characters, or set design are constructed.<sup>2</sup>

In *McLuhan's galaxies*, the contact point between McLuhan's theory and film practice is primarily technology and an attempt to describe its impact both on the individual life of a human being and the shaping of contemporary societies. According to the Canadian researcher, the best form of learning about the effects of modern technologies, especially those related to communication, is art, which of course, also includes film. McLuhan never saw art as a means of achieving catharsis or an escape from everyday life. On the other hand, he considered it to be the basic element of the attitude towards reality shaped by new technologies, necessary to understand the place in the world we occupy now and will occupy in the future. In his opinion, every artist, every kind of art, regardless of the place and time of their activity, provides us with the information necessary for this purpose. In this approach, the truth expressed by art is as important as that

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, it should also be mentioned that this otherwise prestigious publishing house sets very high prices for its publications, which may limit their availability to potential readers.

<sup>2</sup> We can find references to McLuhan in works of Polish media and film researchers, among others Krzysztof Loska, Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, and Piotr Zawojski. Arthur Kroker and Paul Grosswiler write about it abroad.

expressed by science, and considerations regarding each type of creativity are not only a critical description of the current state of affairs, but most of all, an attempt to satisfy the need to predict what lies ahead.

According to McLuhan, art is, therefore, a specific extension of consciousness, and its most important function is to provide information about the world around us [Grosswiler 1998: 94]. In *The mechanical bride*, McLuhan claims that art equips us with the tools necessary to analyze both the existing and the coming reality. As a storehouse of values achieved by humanity and antennae of new consciousness, it enables the human psyche to smoothly transition between the new and the old, between the certain and the hypothetical [McLuhan 1951: 87]. Art is an insightful look at the complex state of culture, providing an image of the society we live in and providing a basis for anticipating its dynamics and development. It constitutes a new perception and has the power to direct human society to new relationships and attitudes [McLuhan 1989: 46]. As for film specifically, McLuhan emphasizes that it is a special form of art that requires a combination of many different forms and disciplines. "Film is not really a single medium like song or the written word," he writes in *Understanding media*, "but a collective art form with different individuals directing color, lighting, sound, acting, speaking. The press, radio and TV, and the comics are also art forms dependent upon entire teams and hierarchies of skill in corporate action" [McLuhan 2003: 392].

In my opinion, the Canadian researcher's above-mentioned theses allow us to look at Skweres's book from an interesting perspective. Undoubtedly, it presents considerations about art and specifically art that takes us to an imaginary, though possible, future, which, according to McLuhan, already constitutes the value of this publication. It shows human entanglement in technology, but also the beauty of the human mind, which is capable of creating it. The potential of human creativity is as clearly visible here as the threats resulting from losing control over it. Finally, the monograph itself can be viewed as a kind of work of art, thanks to the composition of the text and the graphics it includes.

The presented volume consists of four chapters (I. Clothes make the man – the relation between the sensual and the sexual in *Blade Runner* (1982); II. *Star Wars* as an aesthetic melting pot; III. *Horror vacui* and the critique of visual society in *Alien* and *Terminator* films; IV. The digital natives and the implosion of humanity in *The Matrix* and *Avatar*), an Introduction, and a Conclusion.

In chapter one, the author discusses the movie *Blade Runner*. A classic science fiction work in which violence, aggression, necrophilia, and the lack of rules are intertwined with the sexuality and sensuality of people and non-humans. In *Blade Runner*'s analysis, Skweres primarily uses the concept of synesthesia promoted by

McLuhan, which in this context refers both to the construction of the plot in the film and the way it is later perceived or experienced by the viewers. According to the Canadian researcher, “Synesthesia is simply totalism in the use of the senses” [McLuhan 1967: 12], which becomes possible thanks to the intense influence of electronic media, allowing the restoration of the natural balance between the senses, proper to pre-literate societies, and thus a multi-sensory perception of reality. The natural, though not always conscious, strive to achieve synesthesia has accompanied man from the moment of the first changes in his perception, caused by the appearance of the alphabet, and in the course of civilization development, later reinforced by print. It especially tormented artists, as members of society who were the most “sensitive” to reality, and who saw in synesthesia the way to experience the world most fully [McLuhan 2003: 420–412].

The second chapter concerns mainly the *Star Wars* film series. According to the author, this chapter presents an alternative approach to the analysis of this series, based on McLuhan’s insights regarding the social impact of modern media. In the visual sphere of *Star Wars*, one can see many features by which the Canadian author characterized the society of the future, developing in a specific way under the influence of electronic media. The analysis presented in this chapter concerns primarily the impact of the ubiquity of electronic media in Western society on the aesthetics of these films, and the use of concepts such as the Force and clones [Skweres 2019: 16–17]. It is a very interesting chapter not only because of the innovative approach to the film franchise or its heroes, but also because it introduces changes in the rules of role-playing due to the support we receive from nature or a culture that is opposed to it (technology). Feminine/masculine, ruler/subject, friend/foe are divisions that are not established once and for all but, on the contrary, change like a pattern in a proverbial kaleidoscope. What also seems interesting is the reference to the processes of individualization and the resulting changes in the functioning of a group or society, about which McLuhan wrote especially in relation to the era of print and – related to it – the domination of the sense of sight. Although individualism allows for the independence of an individual from the opinion prevailing in the group, at the same time, instead of a multidimensional and objective view of reality, it leads to a one-sided and incomplete observation.

In part three, Skweres discusses the visual richness of the *Terminator* and *Alien* movies, which show examples of dangers resulting from irresponsible human actions. As the author recalls, both films, as well as their countless imitations, show the fear of technological progress as something that is subconsciously perceived as a threat that humanity cannot avoid. It turns out that the only way to protect

against modern technology is to use lower-order technology, to which mankind has become accustomed. In this context, McLuhan's statement in *Understanding media*, that generals are always well prepared to fight in the previous war, sounds interesting [McLuhan 2003: 324].

The last chapter describes the *Matrix* and *Avatar* films "[...] in an attempt to highlight many similarities but also differences between them, all of which make them suitable for analysis in terms of McLuhan's theories of the media. One of such aspects is the fact that they deal directly with what the Canadian scholar predicted would be the eventual result of the invention and spreading of the electric media: the collapse of Western expansionism and implosion upon itself, with an additional drive towards finding models in the Eastern culture" [Skweres 2019: 73]. This part fully exposes the threads related to the physical, bodily connection of man with technology, or even a certain "disembodiment" that it enables, although it can hardly be considered the embodiment of McLuhan's global village.

In accordance with the title of the book, Skweres focuses primarily on the aesthetic layer of the presented films, considering it in the context of various concepts of the famous Canadian. But inevitably, this aesthetic thread also often leads to conclusions of an ethical nature, from simple ones, stemming from stereotypical thinking (e.g., when in *Blade Runner* it turns out that the hero, who is beautiful or attractively dressed does not have to be "good" and adhere to the "right" moral principles), to very complex ones relating to deeply rooted archetypes (such as the issue of motherhood and responsibility for one's own offspring in subsequent parts of the *Alien* films)

It is also interesting to reflect on the changes that technology causes in our lives – imperceptibly taking control of it. Modern technologies, as can be seen especially in the *Terminator* or *Matrix* series, undermine the traditional understanding, meaning, and value of basic anthropological concepts such as "life," "death," "time," and "space." Just because something happened in the past does not mean it belongs there and will not happen again. But there are many passages and ideas in this book that are both surprising and fun, such as comparing a lightsaber to a pocket knife or Lord Vader to a television remote control. These insights, however, lead one to reflect as much as those voiced seriously and with concern for the future of our species. The jokes and anecdotes that the author skillfully weaves into scientific analysis resemble the style of McLuhan, who treated humor as the best way to present content that was particularly difficult to understand.

In this context, it is also worth paying attention to the language of the publication itself, which, despite maintaining a clear scientific framework, is light and understandable for readers, regardless of the field they represent. It also resembles the works of the eponymous Canadian scholar, who, at least in principle, wrote his books in such a way that they would be understandable primarily by the public outside the academic world, regardless of their level of education, age, or gender. In Skweres's book, one can find many curiosities that add color to this discussion of movies, including how and why the unusual rain scene in *Blade Runner* was created or why James Cameron deliberately waited several years to produce *Avatar*. The element that additionally connects all the chapters is the accompanying drawings by the author. Their uniform style, regardless of the film in question, and extensive commentaries mean that they can be treated as a separate story, told somewhat outside the frame. The content of the reviewed publication is supplemented by an extensive bibliography, which can also contribute to and form a basis for further reading research.

*McLuhan's galaxies* is a book that shows the enormous potential of applying the Canadian researcher's theory to the analysis of contemporary phenomena of culture and art. Skweres's publication may therefore be of interest not only to film scholars, media scholars, and philologists, but also to sociologists. Although "enclosing" McLuhan's thoughts only within sociology would be a considerable misinterpretation,<sup>3</sup> his concepts constituted and, in my opinion, can still be an interesting starting point for deliberations undertaken by members of this scientific discipline.<sup>4</sup> I think that in this context, the method of researching social reality he proposed may be particularly interesting. In his work, the author was interested in everything that allows us to come closer to a full understanding of culture and its relationships with the functioning of the society in which we live. He skillfully combined poetic vision with observations of the transformations that culture is undergoing, and in this approach, he tried to study the interrelationships of technology, media, and social life [Theall 2001: 15–17]. This position stems from the belief that traditional social sciences, and especially those that have to deal with contemporary culture and new methods of communication, are incapable of coping with the changes taking place in this field. Therefore, McLuhan

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<sup>3</sup> However, the first Polish translation of the aforementioned *The Gutenberg galaxy* was recognized by the Polish Sociological Association as the best translation of a sociological book in 2018 [McLuhan 2017].

<sup>4</sup> More or less favorable references to the views of this scholar can be found in text by Polish and foreign sociologists (for example, in such classics as Antonina Kłoskowska, Tomasz Goban-Klas or Raymond Williams), who are primarily interested in the issues of culture and communication.

perceived a common need for sociological imagination in the world of science, and he responded to it by trying to “work out” this specific sphere of engagement in the structures of communication and technology [Theall 1971: 12–16].

At the same time, questioning the academic style of social science discourse, he tried to create a kind of poetic prose,<sup>5</sup> which was intended to reinterpret history, assess the existing state, and predict future changes in culture. This kind of prophetic activity is not a simple prediction of what will happen and what will not. Rather, it is an original interpretation of the existing state and a forecast of the future, thanks to which McLuhan once again aroused interest in the history of communication, media, and the sources of modern technologies [Kostelanetz 1967: 420]. Moreover, he deliberately made provocative and amusing claims, assuming that introducing a joke convention into a scientific discussion could greatly enliven it and make it more effective. This original approach of the Canadian thinker to the study of culture and society is also clearly visible in the discussed book, not only in the substantive layer but also in the composition of the text, the narration, and, as I have already mentioned, the use of humorous elements.

In conclusion, Skweres emphasizes that the lack of such a review of canonical science fiction films based on McLuhan’s concepts so far has been a kind of neglect, leading to the failure to use their interpretative potential. Therefore, the goal of *McLuhan’s galaxies* was to take the first step in this direction and open up space to ask more questions, and outline new contexts and research. “After all, McLuhan tried to offer guidance about the events occurring in the present (and perhaps warn about the future) based on the past, present and anticipated developments in technology, which is something that lies at the heart of science fiction as a genre” [Skweres 2019: 103].

The book may leave the reader unsatisfied, mainly due to its length, but at the same time, it encourages them to undertake their own research and suggests new directions. It shows that the perspective of media ecology is suitable not only for general statements about society, but it also translates into the analysis of cultural texts and application in the work of scholars who conduct research within its framework. In this publication, media theorists will find new contexts and applications of concepts which – it seems – are already historical. On the other hand, cinema enthusiasts can discover the figure of an extraordinary thinker who, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, initiated a revolution in research on the meaning and influence of media.

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<sup>5</sup> In the introduction to *Laws of media*, Eric McLuhan explicitly calls this approach *poetic science* [M. McLuhan, E. McLuhan 1988: 4].

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