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The Cinematic Image of Ancient Egypt. *Pharaoh* by Jerzy Kawalerowicz

The first attempt to translate Bolesław Prus's novel *Pharaoh* (*Faraon*) to the screen occurred in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when a team of authors began to prepare a screenplay. One of the authors involved was Jerzy Kawalerowicz.¹ Ten years after the initial attempts to write a screenplay, and following the international success of his film *Mother Joan of the Angels* (*Matka Joanna od Aniołów*),² Kawalerowicz made an independent attempt at adapting *Pharaoh* for the screen. The script, written by the director together with Tadeusz Konwicki,³ was approved on 24 November 1961.⁴

The idea of filming in the desert areas of the Soviet Union was adopted after abandoning an outdoor shoot in Egypt due to the high costs. After much consideration, an area in Uzbekistan's Kyzylkum Desert, 35 kilometres from Bukhara, was chosen. The 'aesthetic' form of the desert, which corresponded to the film's visual and colour concepts, was crucial to this decision, as were

1 Jerzy Kawalerowicz (1922–2007) was one of the most outstanding Polish film directors, creating films such as *Night Train* (*Pociąg*, 1959), *Pharaoh* (*Faraon*, 1965), *Death of a President* (*Śmierć prezydenta*, 1977) and *The Inn* (*Austeria*, 1982). For many years, he served as the artistic director of the Kadr Film Group, which produced the most important films of the Polish Film School.

2 The film was awarded the Special Jury Prize at the 1961 Cannes Film Festival.

3 Tadeusz Konwicki (1926–2015) was a Polish writer, screenwriter and film director.

4 Minutes of the Screenplay Evaluation Committee, 24 November 1961, Filmoteka Narodowa – Instytut Audiowizualny, ref. no. A-214/166.

organisational factors related to filming there: how to accommodate the crew, obtain the materials necessary to build the huge sets, and guarantee the presence of a large number of extras. The film's producers received help from the Soviet production company Mosfilm, which provided extras – in the form of several thousand soldiers – and also helped with the construction work. The heads of Polish cinematography earmarked substantial financial resources for the making of the film.

Set construction began in the Kyzylkum Desert in the spring of 1964, with shooting commencing at the end of June and lasting until the end of October. Studio shooting was completed in the Polish city of Łódź in February 1965, and some scenes were shot in Egypt at the end of March and the beginning of April of that year. The film was shot on Kodak colour film stock using the CinemaScope technique, which allowed 2.66:1 aspect ratio projection.

The official premiere of *Pharaoh* took place in Warsaw on 11 March 1966, and a shorter director's cut of the film was presented at the Cannes Film Festival in May. The press reported extensively on the subsequent stages of the film's production. After the film was released, *Pharaoh* enjoyed a very high level of interest from audiences and critics, with more than 200 reviews and articles about the film being published. By 1967, however, it had virtually disappeared from view.

In Poland, *Pharaoh* was all but forgotten by critics and film scholars for several decades. It is worth noting, however, that it was the first Polish film commissioned by American director Martin Scorsese for his personal collection in 1991, a copy of which still remains on 35 mm film. Scholarly analyses of *Pharaoh* did not appear until the twenty-first century. In 2012, a shorter version of *Pharaoh* was digitally restored, recapturing the work's original brilliance, which is largely related to its formal qualities.

Ancient Egypt: A Reality that Exists

An analysis of the cinematic elements of *Pharaoh* addresses questions about how ancient Egypt is presented in Kawalerowicz's work and reveals the craftsmanship with which this world-building was achieved. The world he constructed included massive battle scenes involving thousands of extras, the solitude of Ramses XIII, the immensity of the palace and temple decorations built in the desert, and the glimmering splendour of the jewellery and ornaments. These elements are brought together in a convincing artistic unity (Image 1).

Pharaoh does not attempt to recreate a world that no longer exists; the makers of the film, supported by the expertise of Egyptologist Kazimierz Michałowski,⁵ believed that the world of ancient Egypt still existed and was accessible to modern man in a preserved state, as uncovered by archaeologists. According to Jerzy Wójcik:⁶

Something had been obscured from us. It is not known how long this process took. Now it was unveiled, it was given to us, it was seen anew. It was not a world that had passed away. It was a world that still existed, although it bore the experience of the presence of time. And so, we wanted to show it in our film.

We started to work with the fewest elements. Unlike the creators of *Cleopatra*, who provided as many elements as possible in an attempt to show the richness of the world on screen, we tried to show the epoch and its complexity with the minimum elements in order to form an image of human beings existing thanks to their own efforts, giving a representation of their hands, their faces. What was reproduced no longer exists, but really existed.

We spoke of the essence by showing the essentials. *Pharaoh* was a realisation of reduction, moderation and austerity. It was, as it were, a refined understanding of Egyptian culture, opening up a field that enabled the viewer's imagination to work, constructing its own world with the help of the elements shown. (Wójcik 2017: 68–70)

One of the most difficult tasks that Kawalerowicz faced was to show the world of ancient Egypt in motion. He depicted bodies in movement, their expressions of feelings and emotions, by drawing on existing iconography.

The craftsmanship of the sets, props and costumes creates an impression of precision and cinematic beauty, while the formal solutions adopted in *Pharaoh*, which were so crucial to building the cinematic world presented, testify to the filmmakers' deep understanding of ancient Egyptian religion and culture and their ability to adapt certain ideas to film aesthetics.

5 Kazimierz Michałowski (1901–1981) was a Polish archaeologist and Egyptologist famous for his excavations in Faras in present-day Sudan, where a set of monumental early Christian paintings was discovered.

6 Jerzy Wójcik (1930–2019) was a cinematographer, screenwriter, film director and educator, and one of the most outstanding Polish filmmakers. A famous cinematographer of the Polish Film School, he was a co-creator of the most outstanding Polish films of the 1950s and 1960s. As well as serving as the cinematographer for films such as *Eroica* (1957), *Ashes and Diamonds* (*Popiół i diament*, 1958), *Nobody is Calling* (*Nikt nie wota*, 1960), *Pharaoh* (1965) and *The Deluge* (*Potop*, 1974), he also directed *The Complaint* (*Skarga*, 1991) and *The Gateway of Europe* (*Wrota Europy*, 1999).

Light is one means by which the filmmakers presented their knowledge of ancient Egypt in cinematic aesthetics. They used a 'time-independent' light in most of the scenes that did not seem to refer to a specific time, which was a reference to the sun cult of ancient Egypt. This light creates the central axis present throughout the film's composition, which is a direct reference to the processional axis of the Egyptian temple. It is also linked very closely to the concept of 'involved scenography', which is emphasised through the use of shots framed by a subjective camera.

The shared aim of the director, set designer and cinematographer, based on a deep collaboration at every stage of shooting, was to transport viewers 'inside' the screen, giving them the impression of participating in the spectacle.

During the preparation for the film, an event occurred that impacted the formal aesthetics of *Pharaoh*, as described by Wójcik:

During one of my reconnaissance trips to Egypt, I witnessed the discovery in the Valley of the Kings of a sculpture that was thousands of years old. Kazimierz Michałowski was not present at the time; the sculpture was unearthed in my presence by the professor's colleagues. The discovery of this statue made a huge impression on me. Here was something that had been covered up but could be uncovered; what had been concealed was being revealed after thousands of years. The statue was being unearthed and, at the same time, it was being uncovered by light. That which is uncovered receives light; it is revealed by light. (Wójcik 2017: 68)

Michałowski, the film's consultant, aided the director and cinematographer in shaping the presentation of ancient Egypt on screen in terms of its historical reality, as well as the visible changes that impacted its architecture and landscape. They approached the screen as a way to show the 'unveiled world' of ancient Egypt, which is accessible to modern man through ruins or fragments discovered during archaeological explorations. These remnants of the ancient Egyptian past bear witness to its tangible and intangible culture, bringing to light the history of humankind preserved through knowledge and skills, and accessible through crafted artefacts.

The extremely careful documentation undertaken prior to the making of *Pharaoh* aimed to shape the film's cinematic world with deep, empirical knowledge of ancient Egypt. There was no room in *Pharaoh* for cinematic fantasies in the style of *Cleopatra*, which had been made in 1963.

In *Pharaoh*, the construction of the cinematic world of ancient Egypt was based on the principle of *pars pro toto*, or the faithful reproduction of surviving fragments

that served as a substitute for the cultural richness of the ancient civilisation, its endurance, as well as its transformation. At the same time, that which was absent and unspoken heightened the mystery of the ancient world.

The collaborators' approach to and understanding of ancient Egypt had a fundamental influence on the cinematographic solutions adopted concerning the way time and space were depicted, the representation of the era's seemingly timeless nature, and the depiction of changes occurring over time. Such broad cinematic concerns also had a bearing on, among other things, the way in which light and colour were presented, as well as the representation of the human body, which referenced artistic iconography and the world as depicted by the artists of the time in sculptures, paintings and drawings (Kawalerowicz 1966: 3).

Scenography

Kawalerowicz did not intend to make a historical film, emphasising in his interviews that *Pharaoh* was to be a 'non-historical' work (Katarasiński 1964: 5). The filmmakers nonetheless made every effort to faithfully recreate the architecture and material culture of ancient Egypt, referencing famous excavations and archaeological discoveries. According to Michał Mróz, "They did not try to invent a fantastic world. They portrayed what had been uncovered – excavated from the ground – in movement and using artistic filmic means" (Mróz 2016: 101).

Documentation collected for the film focused on the period of the New Kingdom of Dynasties XVIII to XX.⁷ According to Egyptologists, it was a heyday of political, military, economic and cultural power. The 12-volume work by eminent Egyptologist Carl Richard Lepsius, *Denkmaeler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien* (Lepsius 1849), provided one of the key primary sources on ancient Egypt for the film crew. Lepsius collected material for it in the period 1842–1845, during a Prussian expedition to Egypt. Numerous images depicting, among other things, topographical maps, architecture, reliefs, paintings, sculptures and ceramics form an especially significant part of his collection. The many trips to museums in Warsaw, Cairo and Karnak by the creators of *Pharaoh* also provided important information about ancient Egypt.

In the summer of 1962, cinematographer Wójcik and Kawalerowicz went on a long documentary trip to Morocco, Egypt, the Karakum Desert region in Turkmenistan and the Uzbek Kyzylkum Desert. The aim of the expedition was

7 The period in ancient Egypt lasting from 1570 to 1070 BC.

to verify the technical needs for the production and to assess the aesthetic qualities of the various landscapes (*W Egipcie faraonów*, 1965). Set designer Jerzy Skrzepiński⁸ also conducted on-site research in Egypt, as he recorded: “There, on the spot, I could touch the relief inscriptions on the columns and walls of the temples; there I saw the tombs of the pharaohs in the Valley of the Kings, the material texture and structure of the material from which the temples were built” (Skrzepiński 1966: 8).

Costume designer Barbara Ptak collected material samples for the costumes:

Most of the material samples were in the London museum. We managed to obtain them, and we transferred the original materials to our factories in Łódź. It was beautiful, wonderful wool, mostly camel wool. The finest material of the time. How did our tailors process all this? I don’t know, but they were able to reproduce the brand. Probably no one knows, but the materials for the army were almost one hundred per cent the same as in those days. (Ptak 2017: 291)

The museums also looked at the ways in which jewellery or fabrics were put together. Indeed, when sewing costumes, no seams or needles, which were unknown in ancient Egypt, could be used, as this would have been picked up by the camera immediately. (Ptak 2017: 290)

When casting the main roles, the director looked for physical features that corresponded to the standards of beauty valued during the reign of Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten). At that time, slender physiques and head shapes were considered beautiful. For the role of priests, who shaved their heads in this period, the director sought actors with aesthetically pleasing skulls.

For Kawalerowicz, Egyptian reliefs provided a valuable source from which he could recreate, among other concepts, the way ancient Egyptians moved, or at least the way Egyptians represented movement. The director relied on static representations to try to recreate the movements and gestures depicted in reliefs. The reconstruction of this iconography also provided useful guidance on working with the actors. In addition, Kawalerowicz studied the issue of bodily movements by observing contemporary people who lived in tropical climates (Machwitz 1965: 8).

Shooting in the Kyzylkum Desert was no ordinary filmmaking venture: it was a true cinematographic expedition (Mróz 2016: 116). Preparing a film set in the remote desert near Bukhara in the then Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic required the transportation of many diverse materials and massive technical organisation. According to the press, this process included the transportation

8 Jerzy Skrzepiński (1923–2017) was a Polish film set designer and painter.

of trucks, buses, gassers, tankers supplying water, two watering trucks, two bulldozers, field kitchens, petrol and oil tankers, a 25-metre crane, an AN-2 aircraft and power generators (Peltz 1964a: 10–11). Props prepared in Poland had to be transported by train (Grubert 1966: 8).⁹

An important aspect of the production's operations concerned managing the high temperatures. The camera operators' air-conditioned car was painted white to reflect light, while refrigerators were installed on site to store the film stock. Rolls of exposed film were sent by air to a laboratory in Łódź. The workstations of production divisions were built in wooden dugouts, where wardrobe, the props room and makeup were set up (Czermiński 1964: 7).

Massive structures, including the Pharaoh's palace and Ptah's sanctuary, were erected in the Kyzylkum Desert. When choosing their location, the creators had to consider both the stability of the foundations and the angle of the sunlight, so that the structures, props and artworks of the set would endure the course of the shooting. The shadows cast by decorative elements could not obscure the images on the designed reliefs. The construction site was decided upon after consultation with astronomers, who, based on the forecast of the alignment of the sun, determined the best location of props in relation to cardinal points and suggested times during which the ideal effects of light and shadow could be anticipated (Oleksiewicz 1966: 11).

Skrzepiński encountered great difficulties in his search for a prototype for the Pharaoh's palace. Only the foundations and the remains of window and door frames of ancient Egyptian palaces are extant. The palace's scenography ultimately drew upon a relief depicting the palace of a pharaoh from Dynasty XVIII, which was found in tomb number six belonging to the northern group of tombs at El Amarna. Monuments preserved in the temple complexes at Luxor and Karnak provided models for the decoration of Ptah's sanctuary (Mróz 2016: 124–126).

Events taking place on the Nile River were the only outdoor scenes fully realised in Poland, with Lake Kirsajty near Giżycko standing in for the Nile. To adapt the Polish landscape to an Egyptian one, the creators took several resourceful measures: they filled the reservoir with artificial water lilies and built a floating island with palm trees; many kilograms of dry paint were poured into the water to suggest the effect of suspended desert sand; and reeds were painted brown to give the impression of having been scorched by the sun.

Two scenes were shot in Egypt, featuring characteristic monuments of ancient Egypt located in Luxor, such as Medinet Habu, the Ramesseum, the Valley

⁹ Twenty-seven wagons of finished props travelled a route totalling 24,000 kilometres.

of the Kings, Karnak and the pyramid of Cheops in Giza, which provided background landscapes in the film (Herman 1965: 9).

The labyrinth leading to the vault was constructed in a film studio in Łódź using large plaster blocks that resembled large stones. By moving and repositioning the walls, the set designers enhanced the impression of wandering through intricate winding corridors.

The makers of *Pharaoh* succeeded in capturing the ‘spirit of the age’ of the pharaohs, linking the film work with an imaginary Egyptian world shaped by modern excavations and ancient artefacts. According to Mróz, “In Jerzy Kawalerowicz’s film, the image goes beyond the notion of a film work and touches upon a fragment of a civilisation that once existed. It becomes a kind of gateway in time and space. The world of the image becomes the image of the world” (Mróz 2016: 155).

Light in *Pharaoh*

Light is one of the most important elements of *Pharaoh*’s cinematic world. Its primary source is the clear, bright, open-air sky. It is always daytime in *Pharaoh*, with no scenes taking place at night and no sunrise or sunset shown. As Kawalerowicz said, it was to be a film without the slightest hint of clouds (Zelnik 1966: 4), and not only because Egyptian art did not depict clouds.

The authorial philosophy of light that distinguishes Wójcik’s approach to cinematography informs a more specific understanding of how light operates in *Pharaoh*. His approach also found expression in his subsequent projects, as well as in earlier films such as *Ashes and Diamonds* and *Mother Joan of the Angels*. The use of light in *Pharaoh* originates in a deeply personal experience of the light of the desert and the observation of its mystery, as evoked by the path of sunlight in the temple at Karnak. Wójcik described this light in his book *The Labyrinth of Light (Labirynt światła)*:

It all happened suddenly. The sudden dawn that rises over the desert is like the sun thrown out with tremendous power into great brightness. It becomes this way suddenly, in the space of a few minutes. This energy is like an acceleration of everything I see and a constant variation in what forms the light.

It became clear to me how *Pharaoh* needed to be photographed. Nothing was an obstacle for me, everything was helpful to me. I was helped by the heat of the sun and the colour of the sand. I was helped by everything that was in the sky, above the horizon. It wasn’t a problem of colour, azure or blue, but just the notion

of clarity, which was close to me. I knew it had to be a big statement related to the presence of light, the controlling light. This became clear, and all of the technical problems were merely the result of this kind of reasoning. Jerzy Kawalerowicz interpreted it all brilliantly and adopted it as his own. It was also his great presence.

This work was really a great university for me. Understanding light was also related to my earlier experience, although it was actually only about rays of light.

During the first documentation [trip], when we were in Karnak, I suddenly saw that the rays of the setting sun determined the whole compositional structure of the place. The light of the sun ran through all of the gates, through all of the architectural arrangements, through the doors and the colonnades; it entered through the temple and formed its actual axis. At the very end of the temple, the rays of light fell on the sacrificial altar. The rays descend from the altar as the sun sets. This altar, like all altars, is very modest. It is a rectangular block, a pure form reduced to something very simple, close to the concept of a table.

It was a great shock to me. I realised that I was witnessing some great order that was once conceived when building pyramids and architectural systems. So, I put flowers on the altar. (Wójcik 2006: 58)

Archetypal Light

In the latitudes where the desert shots for *Pharaoh* were filmed, the sky above the horizon loses its blue colour, becoming “glowing white” (Wójcik 1966: 10), a cloudless source of light. This ‘great order’ of light – associated with the sun and the symbolic scarabs that open the film (Zorn 2006: 24), referencing the birth of life and the duration of the world, and embodied in the ancient Egyptian cult of the Sun God Re, the supreme god in the Egyptian pantheon – was inscribed in *Pharaoh* through the consistent presence of a neutral control light. This intense light was “rich in space, in presence in all directions” (Wójcik 2017: 66). A harmonic division of the frame was maintained during the outdoor shots. The sky occupied a third of the frame, with the remainder of the frame being occupied by the ground.

Wójcik used the following terms to characterise the essence of light as expressed in the film: “light present behind us and in front of us”, “light that is the same as before”, “light that is light itself”, “light that is omnipresent”, “light rich in presence”, “light that is completely independent of time” (Wójcik 2017: 66–68).

In *Pharaoh*, light is shown transcending time, evoked by a filmed effect emphasising the brightness of the sky to show the character of an archetypal light, to imagine

light as a universal human experience. The film conveys a cinematographic statement on the essence of light that was unknown to world cinema before *Pharaoh*.

Why Did the Sand Have to Be Grey?

The grey of the desert sand figured in opposition to the depiction of light in *Pharaoh*. The neutral colour of the sand determined the selection of the Kyzylkum Desert as the primary outdoor shooting location for the film, according to Wójcik:

Most of the light in *Pharaoh* had the character of controlling light; it was real and authentically light, the concept of light itself. We had to find the opposite of this presence of light. It was the neutral notion of sand. This understanding of it was realised through neutral greys. An arrangement of greys and light itself was present. We were looking for a neutral desert: the sand in the Kyzylkum Desert was grey. It was about finding an element that corresponded with the understanding of the light present in the film. (Wójcik 2017: 66)

The grey sand, as opposed to yellow sand, emphasised the colouring of a world scorched by the sun. Grey emblematised eternal qualities while simultaneously being a sign of the changes brought by the passage of time (Image 2). Skrzepiński recalled that, during his first stay in Egypt, he was struck by its lack of coloured buildings:

Egypt was grey. It wasn't until I entered the Temple of Hatshepsut, which Professor Michałowski had recommended to me, and the tombs of the pharaohs in the Valley of the Kings that I saw colours. For me, the colours were hidden underground. I saw colours such as yellows, reds, greens and sepia. Everything was very vivid, warm, as if taken from one big palette. In addition, I was fascinated by the light itself.

In Uzbekistan, the sun is completely different to other places I have visited. It seems to shine through, as if a person were a glass figure through which the rays pass. Three factors have always been important to me in a film: light – texture – colour.

Another thing that was important to me was the space: it was huge, as if hanging in that light, in a grey desert landscape. Then I realised that it had a kind of depth that was everything. Cinematographer Jerzy Wójcik had exactly the same feeling. We were in agreement that here was another world opening up in front of us. (Skrzepiński 2017: 94)

The pervasiveness of light, which referred to the realm of the invisible, coupled with the greyness of the sand, which testified to the transience of humankind