

THE ABYSS at Łódź: in the context of ‘agitation films’

The purpose of this report is to add to Andrzej Dębski's contribution on the screening of *THE ABYSS* (*AFGRUNDEN*) in Warsawⁱ and to describe how this long feature film was presented in Łódź in late 1910 and early 1911. Based on adverts and news published in the major local daily *Rozwój* I will show the programming practice of the local exhibitor, and I will provide some background information which may help to understand how Asta Nielsen's debut film might have been received by the local audience. In Łódź, *THE ABYSS* was presented with the title *OTCHŁAŃ* as a film of the series of so-called ‘agitation pictures’, which means sensational dramas most commonly identified with the ‘white slaves’ series.

Preliminary remarks

In the years before the First World War, the Polish territories were internal colonies of sorts of Russia, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Unlike Finland, at that time, Congress Poland (the traditional name for the region) did not have any autonomy within the Russian Empire but was fully integrated into its legal and economic system. However, as regards the cinema industry, Congress Poland was a Russian regional sub-market which was exceptional to a degree because it was a distinct cultural region as well as the westernmost territory of the Tsarist Russian Empire. Regional distribution agencies, cinema chains, and production companies evolved. *THE ABYSS* was distributed as a *monopolfilm* by the Warsaw-based Sfinks company which had purchased exclusive distribution rights for the region. According to some sources, it was the success of *THE ABYSS* that became the crucial moment in the development of the company.ⁱⁱ Thus, shortly after its foundation in 1909, Sfinks occupied a hegemonic position on the local market, integrating distribution, production, and exhibition endeavors, and operating as a local business partner to other Russian and foreign companies. As elsewhere, also in Congress Poland, cinema was established as a distinct entertainment industry when a wave of permanent exhibition venues opened in 1907 and 1908. Numerous *kinematografy* and *iluzjony* burgeoned in Warsaw, the informal capital (inhabited by ca. 800.000 people), and in other big cities. The second major city in the region, Łódź, was an important industrial center counting ca. 450.000 inhabitants. In early 1911 there were about twelve cinemas in Łódź, most of them situated around the most representative part of the main street. Among the most prominent were

The-Bio-Express and the Odeon: both opened in 1908 in buildings designed specifically to present films. It was the latter, where *THE ABYSS* was presented. At the end of 1910, along with the 'white slaves' series, *THE ABYSS* changed the public visibility of cinema and marked the introduction of the long feature film format.

THE WHITE SLAVE and other 'agitation films'

In my view, 'agitation films' are the key context to understand the reception of *THE ABYSS* in Łódź and the entire Congress Poland. The first film programmed and advertised as a long feature was the Danish film *THE WHITE SLAVE* (*DEN HVIDE SLAVEHANDEL*). Screenings started in the beginning of October 1910. No other film before had been so widely commented on by the local press of Łódź. An unprecedented 'promotional campaign' situated the film as a "page from the history of human trafficking", that is within the context of an urgent social problem. *THE WHITE SLAVE* was presented as a film made under the auspices of the London Society for the Protection of Women. Films of this kind were named "agitation pictures" which "show the social status of a woman and her fall".ⁱⁱⁱ On the eve of the premiere, on 3 October 1910, the Odeon cinema organized an official screening for the authorities and the press. As a consequence, *Rozwój*, an influential local daily, published for the first time in its history an extensive text on cinema in general along with the entire plot summary (including the ending spoiler). Since Łódź was a major industrial center inhabited largely by the working class, *Rozwój* linked the film to the life conditions of the proletariat. The newspaper described *THE WHITE SLAVE* as a story of "young inexperienced girls who, lured by grand announcements, fall into the trap of swindlers, kidnapping them under the guise of a good job to the house of debauchery". The picture gained recommendation of the newspaper: "Given the many cases of inexperienced girls being taken overseas, this instructive picture could be a warning to factory workers, servants, etc., who often fall victim to nefarious traffickers."^{iv} The audience could watch *THE WHITE SLAVE* in the Odeon cinema for a week, playing from Tuesday, 4 October, until Tuesday, 11 October. It was an unprecedented case since normally the programme changed twice a week. In order to present the new feature the daily screenings were divided into two programmes. In the afternoon, the regular short film programme was presented to general audiences, and from 8 pm onward only adults were admitted to view *THE WHITE SLAVE* (on Sunday, 9 October, already from 2:30 pm, and in the following week from 7 pm). *THE WHITE SLAVE* must have been very popular because the Odeon management later decided to move screenings to the Belle Vue cinema. On Friday, 14 October, an announcement appeared in

Rozwój that due to the fact that the film was “instrumental in raising awareness among the working class, so much exposed to the temptations of traffickers”,^v screenings would be held on Saturday and Sunday, at a reduced price, in the Belle Vue which had been renamed Moulin Rouge by a new owner who presented THE WHITE SLAVE from 2 to 7 November.

THE ABYSS in Łódź

One of the most important factors that made THE WHITE SLAVE so successful is that it cleverly combined promoting the film as a socially conscious work with sensational content that attracted wide audiences. THE ABYSS, presented shortly after the THE WHITE SLAVE, appears to be an attempt to discount this interest raised by the previous film. THE ABYSS was promoted as another agitation film which promised *piquant* content under the guise of education. The subtitle of THE ABYSS, “The History of the Fall of a Woman”, was strongly associated with THE WHITE SLAVE. In the beginning of December, *Rozwój* announced:

THE ABYSS. The Danish Society for the Preservation of Morals, in an attempt to promote its ideas, decided to present those events in the cinema which lead to humiliation and abuse of a woman’s honor. One of these pictures will be shown starting the following Tuesday in the “Odeon” cinema. The show, consisting of three parts, depicts the fall of a young, intelligent girl under the influence of debauchery. The picture, with performances from splendid stage actors, is highly impressive. The “Odeon” theater purchased the license for this picture for a large amount of money, and the film cannot be screened in any other cinema in Łódź.^{vi}

Rozwój informs readers that the film was distributed as a *monopolfilm*. Asta Nielsen and Urban Gad were not considered to be an attraction: neither the quoted text nor any of the advertisements mentioned their names. Rather, in the vein of previous promotions of French *films d’art*, the performance of dramatic theatre actors was emphasized. However, the most striking fact is that the main message was the social meaning of the picture and its legitimization by the supposed authority of “The Danish Society for the Preservation of Morals”. Advertisements also highlight the global popularity of the film: the Odeon cinema invited to “screenings of a world-famous picture”.^{vii} It seems rather plausible to claim that it was not the moral importance but Asta Nielsen’s raunchy ‘gaucho dance’ that attracted viewers to the cinema. The close examination of the programming data in the local press shows the unprecedented popularity of THE ABYSS. Similarly as in the case of THE WHITE SLAVE, each day two different programmes were shown: in the afternoon, the traditional short film programme was presented, while evening shows screened THE ABYSS at two-hour intervals, for adults only.

Tickets for a specific day and hour were available in pre-sale between 11 am and 1 pm. During the first three weekdays the screenings started at 6:30 pm. On Saturday the first screening started earlier, at 4:30 pm, on Sunday at 3:30 pm, and the last one at 10:30 pm. For the next weekdays until Friday it was 7:30. The demand may have been slowly answered since on the second weekend the cinema announced that the screenings were to be held according to the week-day schedule starting from 8 pm. On the last two days of screenings (19 and 20 December), the evening programme started as late as 9:30 pm. By that time at least 64 screenings for adults only had been held,^{viii} and thus 22.400 tickets could have been sold at maximum (the auditorium had 350 seats). As a response to “popular demand” THE ABYSS returned to the Odeon for ten days in February 1911: from 14 February until the end of the month, at 10:30 pm., one musically accompanied screening was held respectively. This time a concert trio was hired to add prestige. In total, in December 1910 and in February 1911, by a rough estimate, the ‘gaucho dance’ could have been watched even by 35 000 Łódź residents.

Just as in Łódź, in Warsaw THE ABYSS was also presented in the context of ‘agitation films’. There, the advertisement even claimed that it was another picture from the ‘white slaves’ series. Sfinks presented THE ABYSS in her own cinema between 30 November and 20 December. According to Andrzej Dębski's estimate, at least 85 screenings were held. Later, from 21 December until probably the end of the month, screenings continued at the Moulin Rouge cinema.^{ix} In Łódź, THE ABYSS was shown from 7 December onward, for fourteen days. This means that at least two copies of THE ABYSS were distributed in Congress Poland.

Competition and succession

Other cinemas made an attempt to take advantage of the popularity of THE ABYSS and lured the audience with programmes that seemingly offered similar films. On Saturday, 10 December, three days after the Odeon had started to screen THE ABYSS, The-Bio-Express cinema announced screenings with a title quite similar to the subtitle of THE ABYSS: “Great sensation. The story of the fall of a young woman. The only authentic picture from the New York Society for the Protection of Women. We are cautioning against fake titles.”^x The advertising strategy of The-Bio-Express was aggressive: the advertisement claimed exclusive rights, and indirectly accused the Odeon of unauthorized plagiarism. But, apparently, this was a different film since it was presented as an extra added to the main programme which would indicate a much shorter film. It is also worth noting that, similarly to THE WHITE SLAVE and THE ABYSS, this film was presented in the context of ‘agitation films’, and with an attribution to an institution that could

attach symbolic capital to the film. However, in this case it was claimed that the film was released under the auspices of the Society for the Protection of Women, this time not based in London or Denmark, but in New York. Similar incidents took place in Warsaw where advertisements of the cinema Illusion challenged the exclusive rights of cinema Sfinks.^{xi} We can assume that, like in Warsaw, the intervention by the Odeon cinema in Łódź must have been immediate and ferocious. One week later, The-Bio-Express made an attempt to attract the audience with actualities rather than fiction, and presented “a great sporting sensation”: WIELKA SENSACYA SPORTOWA: WOLNA WALKA AMERYKAŃSKA POMIEDZY INDUSEM A POLAKIEM W PAŁACU KRYSZTAŁOWYM W LONDYNIE (Wrestling between a Hindoo and a Pole in the Crystal Palace in London).^{xii}

In the following months of 1911, the Odeon and The-Bio-Express cinemas screened other films which were advertised as ‘agitation films’. In January, The-Bio-Express offered ŻYCIE ROZPUSTNICY (Life of a Female Debaucher); in February, the Odeon advertised MASSÖSENS OFFER (TO SAVE A SON, ZWEIERLEI LIEBE) with Oda Nielsen as OFIARA PÓŁŚWIATKA (Victim of the Underworld) with the subtitle Upadek mężczyzny (The Fall of a Man); and in March The-Bio-Express presented a “sequel” of THE WHITE SLAVE entitled NOTATNIK EDYTY (Edith’s Notebook, which is DEN HVIDE SLAVEHANDELS SIDSTE OFFER, IN THE HANDS OF IMPOSTORS). The return of THE ABYSS to the Odeon in February shows not only the popularity of this particular film but also of the entire ‘genre’.

Conclusion

THE ABYSS was exhibited for the first time in Łódź in December 1910 and it was marketed in the context of the popularity of sensational dramas locally called ‘agitation films’ and initiated with screenings of THE WHITE SLAVE. Since in the case of THE ABYSS exhibitors continued new programming practices and communication strategies which had been initiated with THE WHITE SLAVE, it can be surmised that it was rather the entire series of ‘agitation films’ that changed the public visibility of cinema and contributed to the construction of programmes dominated by feature-length films. Later, the popularity of Asta Nielsen as a star was initiated by the introduction of the first Asta Nielsen series in the following year.

Notes

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i Andrzej Dębski: "AFGRUNDEN in Warsaw and Asta Nielsen's Popularity in Polish territories." In: Martin Loiperdinger, Uli Jung (eds): *Importing Asta Nielsen: The International Film Star in the Making 1910 -1914*. KINtop Studies in Early Cinema, vol. 2. New Barnet: John Libbey, 2013, 77-85.

ii Kazimierz Augustowski: "Aleksander Hertz Jako Działacz Niepodległościowy." In: *Wiadomości Filmowe*, no. 11 (1938): 1-2.

iii *Rozwój*, 14 January 1911.

iv *Rozwój*, 10 October 1910

v *Rozwój*, 14 October 1910.

vi *Rozwój*, 3 December 1910.

vii *Rozwój*, 7 December 1910.

viii See *Rozwój*, 7 December 1910: 5; 8 December 1910: 5; 9 December 1910: 5; 10 December 1910: 7; 11 December 1910: 8; 12 December 1910: 5; 13 December 1910: 5; 14 December 1910: 4; 15 December 1910: 4; 16 December 1910: 4; 17 December 1910: 4; 18 December 1910: 4; 19 December 1910: 2; 20 December 1910: 2.

ix See Dębski, AFGRUNDEN in Warsaw, 79-83.

x *Rozwój*, 10 December 1910.

xi See Dębski, AFGRUNDEN in Warsaw, 80-82.

xii *Rozwój*, 17 December 1910.