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## Inspirations, techniques and institutionalality. Animation in Józef Robakowski's experimental oeuvre

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### Abstract

Józef Robakowski's cinematic oeuvre functions mainly as an experimental form of audiovisual art exhibited in gallery spaces. In his avant-garde activities this intermedia artist, associated with the Film Form Workshop, often used techniques of animated film, as is evidenced by the author's textual analysis of the films: *Market* (1970), *Test 1* (1971), *Test II* (1971), *Dynamic Rectangle* (1971), *22x* (1971), *Impulsator* (2000), *Impulsator VI* (2001), *Attention Light!* (2004). The analysis focuses on the techniques used by Robakowski as well as his potential or explicit inspirations. Creating experimental animations, often in the spirit of "pure film", the avant-gardist has been appropriated by other scholarly disciplines such as art history or new media. The aim of this article is to include Józef Robakowski in the discourse of film studies: to demonstrate his stance as an animator over the course of his artistic work to date, but above all to place him in the history of Polish animated film.

### Keywords

Józef Robakowski, Polish animated film, experimental animation, Polish avant-garde, Film Form Workshop, Katarzyna Kobro, Len Lye, Norman McLaren

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In 1934 Stefan Themerson lamented the condition of art cinema in Poland on the pages of the *Dekada* weekly. He accusingly called for screenings of works by Western avant-gardists like René Clair, Luis Buñuel, Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter or Man Ray. He believed that the situation was caused by the domination of popular cinema. "You see, some clever fox

has come up with this curse, still mindlessly believed even by those not interested financially, that a film has to be popular. But an art film cannot be popular, because it requires special culture, preparation and good will from the audience. They don't add all that to the ticket,"<sup>1</sup> Themerson said. This state of affairs led to a lack of funds for the domestic avant-garde. "Stefan Themerson, Poland's most gifted avant-gardist, cannot find the capital to make his films. It's hard to be an uncompromising artist in film!"<sup>2</sup> as someone wrote. Over three decades later, the author's demand was more than met, as he lived to see a time (although outside his homeland) when a group of students (Józef Robakowski, Andrzej Różycki, Zbigniew Rybczyński, Paweł Kwiek and Wojciech Bruszewski) of the Leon Schiller State Film, Television and Theatre School in Łódź, under the pretext of a study group, created the now famous Warsztat Formy Filmowej (Film Form Workshop, 1970–1977). "When it came to new ideas, views and technologies, we had no competition at all possible festivals, sessions and reviews,"<sup>3</sup> said Józef Robakowski. This avant-garde initiative functioned officially within the structure of the school, with funds for implementing its ideas by means of professional equipment. "Members of the FFW displayed an intellectual approach to art; they combined the constructivist cult of technology with science-based artistic methods. They sought to detect important, unique features of film, of material and technological determinants,"<sup>4</sup> explains Alicja Cichowicz. The group's tutor was Jerzy Kotowski, a graduate of the Faculty of Cinematography, who made animated films and taught an optional course in animation. As the authors of the book about Se-Ma-For write about him, "[h]is openness to all that was original and new was confirmed also during his time as lecturer and rector of the School, when he won the students' friendship and trust"<sup>5</sup>. It was in his studio that the Form Workshop operated<sup>6</sup>. "It was an avant-garde outside the prevailing trends and fashions, an opposition to everything that was de rigueur in film at the time. Everyone in the Workshop had their roots in the Faculty

1 S. Themerson, "Kto da nam wreszcie", *Dekada* 1934, no. 31, p. 6.

2 No author given, "Plotki...ploteczki...", *Dekada* 1934, no. 31, p. 6.

3 *Filmówka. Opowieści o Łódzkiej Szkole Filmowej*, eds. K. Krubski M. Miller, Z. Turowska, W. Wiśniewski, Warszawa 1998, p. 213.

4 A. Cichowicz, "Warsztat Formy Filmowej. Wprowadzenie do twórczości grupy", [in:] *Warsztat Formy Filmowej. W kręgu neoawangardy*, eds. M. Bomanowska, A. Cichowicz, Łódź 2017, p. 32.

5 A. Bańkowski, S. Grabowski, *Semafor 1947–1997*, Łódź 1999, p. 88.

6 P. Kardas, J. Robakowski, "Zanimowani: spotkanie z profesorem Józefem Robakowskim", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiMXX3bP7A8>, 11 February 2023 (accessed: 31 July 2023).

of Cinematography,”<sup>7</sup> Zbigniew Rybczyński recalls. Exasperated by the state of domestic cinematography at the time – just like their “mentor” Themerson once was – they often created works in accordance with the idea of absolute cinema, liberated from poetry. As Karol Irzykowski wrote many years ago: “Cinema could emancipate itself from the compulsion to sponge off in one fell swoop, if it ventured into the bumpy terrain of the ‘Pure Movement’”<sup>8</sup>. A variant of absolute film is working directly on film material, that is negative film stock. This is where avant-garde film meets animation techniques. “The conscious use of stop-motion technique in order to create a fictional reality – be it purposeful or pointless – involves adopting the attitude of an animator,”<sup>9</sup> wrote Paweł Sitkiewicz. Who else could make better use of stop-motion photography than trained cinematographers. “I look for a general artistic sensibility in seeing the world in a student of the Cinematography Faculty. I look for the ability to make this way of seeing concrete and transfer it into the language of the image,”<sup>10</sup> emphasized the Dean of the Faculty of Cinematography, Mieczysław Jahoda. The members of the Film Form Workshop, led by Józef Robakowski, did just that. Yet art film, not to mention animated film, still does not function in the mainstream. Despite the fact that the popularity of avant-garde cinema has increased considerably since then, that its availability is greater and a number of studies devoted to it have been published<sup>11</sup>, it continues to remain on the peripheries.

## Objective and methodology

Józef Robakowski's films, as well as those of other avant-gardists, functioned mainly as an experimental audiovisual art form exhibited in galleries. They were not intended for cinema distribution, as extras to the main screening, so they usually, if at all, reached a very small audience. The article is an attempt at historical review of Józef Robakowski's animated oeuvre produced within an institutional framework. This perspective will make it possible to fill a gap in the history of Polish animation by adding to it

7 *Filmówka*, p. 214.

8 K. Irzykowski, *Dziesiąta muza. Zagadnienia estetyczne kina*, Kraków 1924, p. 222.

9 This observation only confirms Józef Robakowski's status as animation artist, yet his name does not appear in publications devoted to the history of Polish animation. P. Sitkiewicz, *Małe wielkie kino*, Gdańsk 2009, p. 179.

10 *Filmówka*, p. 214.

11 E.g. *Z dziejów awangardy filmowej*, ed. A. Helman, Katowice 1976; *Film awangardowy w Polsce i na świecie*, ed. R. W. Kluszczyński, Łódź 1989; M. Giżycki, *Awangarda wobec kina*, Warszawa 1996; *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2010, no. 70; *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2021, no. 115.

Robakowski's output, because studies of his experimental cinema fail to discuss the application of these techniques<sup>12</sup> or describe it very briefly<sup>13</sup>. In Polish culture experimental animated films are associated mostly with the work of Franciszka and Stefan Themerson (*Oko i ucho*, 1945), Jan Lenica and Walerian Borowczyk (*Dom*, 1958), Julian Antonisz (*Jak działa jamniczek*, 1971) or Zbigniew Rybczyński (*Tango*, 1981). Given this state of affairs, the present author's intention is to restore Robakowski's works to the film discourse.

First, I will briefly discuss the figure of Józef Robakowski. I will then analyse, in chronological order, the successive stages in his work, using selected films made by means of animation techniques as examples<sup>14</sup>. The main part of the study focuses on the activity of the Film Form Workshop and films like *Rynek* (1970), *Test I* (1971), *Próba II* (1971), *Prostokąt dynamiczny* (1971) and *22x* (1971). Next, I analyse the period in which Robakowski moved away from animation, but continued to make films within an institutional framework. At the end I refer to the 2000s, when Robakowski returned to filmmaking methods from the 1970s, but this time within museum structures (*Impulsator*, 2000; *Impulsator VI*, 2001; *Uwaga światło!*, 2004). The article focuses on the forms and techniques used by the artist, and on his sources of inspiration. The explication of these titles will be a marginal thread, since the author's intentions are known and have

- 12 For example, A. Kossakowski, the author of the book *Polski film animowany 1945–1974*, Wrocław 1977, does not mention Józef Robakowski. Other publications devoted to animated cinema do not fill that gap either. In *Polski film animowany*, ed. M. Giżycki, B. Zmudziński, Warszawa 2017, Józef Robakowski appears only in the context of Zbigniew Rybczyński, who sympathized with the Film Form Workshop and produced his film *Kwadrat* (1972) there. In: P. Sitkiewicz *Małe wielkie kino*, Gdańsk 2009, the author devotes an entire chapter to experimental films, but makes no mention of Józef Robakowski, as his description ends in 1945. This is also the case in Ł. Ronduda, "Józef Robakowski i Warsztat Formy Filmowej w latach siedemdziesiątych", [in:] *Józef Robakowski. Moje własne kino*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 49–101.
- 13 For example, writing about the "stroke" in Józef Robakowski's oeuvre, Magdalena Howorus-Czajka refers to his student experiment *22x*, (dir. J. Robakowski, 1971) made by directly scratching the surface of opaque film stock. At the same time, she erroneously gives another example, the film *Test* (dir. J. Robakowski, 1971), made by means of a completely different technique, that is by punching holes in celluloid film stock. The author concludes: "As a result of the author's making holes in the film, during the projection an unstoppable stream of light from the projector lens enters the viewer's eye. This stream is for me an equivalent of stroke". M. Howorus-Czajka, "Kreska – gest/czas/przestrzeń. Jarosław Kozłowski, Józef Robakowski, Józef Hałas, Edward Krasiński", *Panoptikum* 2017, no. 17, pp. 223–235.
- 14 I give the titles and dates of the films after the Józef Robakowski Archive, <http://www.robakowski.eu> (accessed: 31 July 2023).

already been examined by art historians. The article is based on a textual analysis as well as available sources like scholarly articles and literature on the subject (Polish and foreign), press releases, interviews with artists and audiovisual material.

## Film School or the zealous 1970s

We know quite a lot about the life and work of Józef Robakowski. As a child Robakowski lived for some time in the building housing the “Warszawa” cinema<sup>15</sup>. It was in that period that he came into contact with Walt Disney classic animated films and later with Soviet cinematography. “The entire inter-war Russian cinema was shown, that is excellent avant-garde films like *Battleship Potemkin*; *Jolly Fellows* – a brilliant comedy, *Lone White Sail* – a film about children, about the transformation of ‘Whites’ into ‘Reds’ in Russia”<sup>16</sup>. At this stage we can observe a certain dichotomy, two planes (of animation and of the avant-garde) on which the artist grew up. He quickly realized that the only form of freedom in the socialist era was creating art. “This was my resolution already when I was a young boy,”<sup>17</sup> he confessed. These plans led him to complete art history and museology studies at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. This enabled him to study at the Faculty of Cinematography of the Łódź Film School. From the 1960s he co-founded important art groups focused on avant-garde endeavours, groups like *Oko* (1960), *STKF Pętla* (1960–1966), *Zero-61* (1961–1969), *Krąg* (1965–1967)<sup>18</sup> or the Film Form Workshop, where he made experimental documentary and animated films. As the avant-gardist explained, “[t]he Film Form Workshop engaged in theory-practice, operations on physical reality. A feature film is to generate successive representations. For us, the role models were Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński, who, in creating Unism, wanted to remove the expressive tension of the Baroque from images”<sup>19</sup>.

The first operation on reality carried out by the avant-gardist was the film *Rynek* (Market Square). It was a joint project with Tadeusz Junk and Ryszard Meissner, but it is Robakowski who functions as the author of the

- 15 J. Robakowski, meeting as part of the Film Beauty of the City of Łódź project, hosted by M. Dondzik, the author's private archive (accessed: 9 August 2023).
- 16 H. U. Obrist, J. Robakowski, “Rozmowa Hansa-Ulricha Obrista z Józefem Robakowskim”, [in:] *Józef Robakowski. Moje własne kino*, Warszawa 2012, p. 13.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 18 See: J. Robakowski, *Teksty interwencyjne 1970–1995*, Galeria Moje Archiwum, Koszalin 1995, p. 1.
- 19 J. Robakowski, A. Gruszczyński, “Całkowicie stracić kontrolę”, [in:] *Studio Eksperyment. Zbiór tekstów. Leksykon*, Warszawa 2013, p. 47.

work. The short animation depicts a trading day at Łódź's Red Market in Rzgowska Street. As the end credit informs us: "The film was made on 25 November 1970, between 7:00 and 16:00 in Łódź, by means of the stop-motion method"<sup>20</sup>. This mechanical record of reality was shot by means of the two frames per five seconds technique. "We didn't know what would happen there. No Wajda would have come up with such a script. We just totally let it run,"<sup>21</sup> Robakowski recalls. The artist manipulated time on reality to create an avant-garde work. Describing *Rynek* as an animation can be equally controversial. However, Robakowski's works do fall within the concept of "expanded cinema". The thesis was also defended by Piotr Kardas during the presentation to Robakowski of the title "Honorary Citizen of Animation – Land of Unlimited Possibilities" at the 7th National Festival of Polish Animation O!pla<sup>22</sup>. As he explained, "My perception of animated film is expanded. I do not think that only stop-motion films are animated films. In fact, if we were to think about it, every film made in the past based on film stock is a stop-motion film"<sup>23</sup>. Although the illusion of recorded motion in *Rynek* does not stem directly from Robakowski's intentions, it can be regarded as animation owing to its stop-motion nature and interference with linear time.

I deliberately refer repeatedly to Robakowski's cinematographic background, because it is quite relevant in the context of animated art. Robakowski often used the material nature of film stock to create non-camera films. The technique consists in creating a film image without a camera by means of directly manipulating the film stock. Painting or scratching it, or making holes in its structure<sup>24</sup>. As a graduate of the Film School, Józef Robakowski had a background in technical image transformation. The awareness of the material nature of film stock is characteristic of cinematographers in Poland<sup>25</sup>. Robakowski's first film made by means of the non-camera technique is *Test 1*. As Łukasz Ronduda writes: "This work,

20 Quote from the film: *Rynek* (dir. Józef Robakowski, Tadeusz Junek, Ryszard Meissner, 1970).

21 P. Kardas, J. Robakowski, "Zanimowani: spotkanie z profesorem Józefem Robakowskim", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiMXX3bP7A8>, 11 February 2023 (accessed: 31 July 2023).

22 The event should be considered as a breakthrough, as it were, because this was the first time that Józef Robakowski was officially referred to as an animator. He was thus recognized as belonging to this group of filmmakers.

23 P. Kardas, J. Robakowski, "Zanimowani".

24 See P. Sitarski, "Różnorodność form kina. Przemysł filmowy. Twórcy", [in:] *Kino bez tajemnic*, eds. E. Nurczyńska-Fidelska, K. Klejsa, T. Kłys, P. Sitarski, Warszawa 2009, p. 33.

25 This can also be observed in the oeuvre of Zbigniew Rybczyński and his Oscar-winning *Tango* (1981).



in the spirit of Strzemiński, analyses the medium of cinema, showing it as a 'light dispositive', but also initiates, in the spirit of Pawłowski and Malewicz, a unique 'physiological-energetic dialogue' between the work and the viewer"<sup>26</sup>. The artist perforated 35-mm film stock with a hole punch. The projector shone lamp light through the holes, and, according to Robakowski, "[t]he meaning of cinema is light. Without light, cinema does not exist. Cinema has power, expression, energy thanks to light"<sup>27</sup>. The sound, on the other hand, is a recording of mechanical scratches. "In another attempt," explained the director, "I deliberately give up recording, ostensible in any case, and make a film without a film camera (*Test*), which consists only in rhythmically controlling the emission of a light stream emitted by the light system of a film projector"<sup>28</sup>. An important figure exploring the non-camera technique was Norman McLaren, who in 1949 wrote a textbook entitled *Cameraless Animation*. In it he provided step-by-step instructions on how to make such a work<sup>29</sup>. Thus, when pointing to potential inspirations in the context of Józef Robakowski's filmography, we should mention McLaren (*Dots*, 1940). He is an artist described by Paweł Sitkiewicz as one of the greatest experimenters in the history of cinema<sup>30</sup>, and by Robakowski himself as "a rather lightweight artist, although totally outstanding"<sup>31</sup>. Regardless of the intentions, the iconic avant-gardist undoubtedly inspired many filmmakers. In the 1960s McLaren visited Poland (Film Miniature Studio) with his work. This meeting was described by the "doyen of Polish animation"<sup>32</sup> Witold Giersz, who admitted to being fascinated by the avant-gardist's techniques. "In 1961 Norman McLaren, a world-renowned experimenter, and pioneer of visual and sound effects in animation, visited our Studio. He drew the frames directly on the film stock, and also scratched out points of different sizes and at varying intervals, which gave them rhythm and a percussive effect"<sup>33</sup>. In 1959 the Żak Film Discussion Club in Gdańsk organized a screening of McLaren's

- 26 Ł. Ronduda, "Uwaga: Światło! Realizacje filmowe i wideo Józefa Robakowskiego z wykorzystaniem światła", *Kultura Współczesna* 2005, no. 4, p. 116.
- 27 K. Gondek, *Animator 2016 / Józef Robakowski*, 13 July 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDipopr4\\_rc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDipopr4_rc) (accessed: 31 July 2023).
- 28 J. Robakowski, "Jeszcze raz o 'czysty film'", *Polska* 1971, no. 10.
- 29 N. McLaren, *Cameraless Animation*, Canada 1958; N. McLaren, "How to Make Animated Movies without Camera", *Fundamental Education: A Quarterly Bulletin* 1949, no. 4.
- 30 P. Sitkiewicz, *Małe wielkie kino*, p. 190.
- 31 P. Kardas, J. Robakowski, „Zanimowani”.
- 32 B. Zmudziński, "1961-1970: Złota dekada", [in:] *Polski film animowany*, eds. M. Giżycki, B. Zmudziński, Warszawa 2008, p. 45.
- 33 J. Prosińska-Giersz, W. Giersz, "Rozmowa z artystą", [in:] *Witold Giersz. Malarz ekranu*, eds. J. Prosińska-Giersz, J. Armata, Warszawa 2012, p. 74.

experimental films as part of a festival. As Robakowski later reminisced, “[h]e came with his films, which was an absolute revelation for us, I have these boxes with all his work”<sup>34</sup>. At the same time, Robakowski denies that he took inspiration from McLaren.

Nevertheless, there are many more solutions of this type – cameraless cinema – in Robakowski’s oeuvre. Another example is *Próba II* (Test II). The method used here is slightly different, as the author explored the links between the visual and audio layers. He separated and presented them alternately, destroying the viewer’s satisfaction resulting from synchronic reception. The colour red interrupts the music like a stop sign. The potential source of inspiration here is Peter Kubelka. As he himself put it, he made works based on metricity and dichotomy (mainly of black and white as well as sound and image)<sup>35</sup>. In the 1960s he made a groundbreaking short film entitled *Arnulf Rainer* (1960), in which black and clear film illustrate white noise. As one scholar studying his oeuvre observes, “Kubelka also foregrounds the way light can be experienced as pure duration if it is contextualized in the way it is in a film like *Arnulf Rainer*. Here the alternation between black, white, and black and white flicker rhythms allows light to be experienced as time”<sup>36</sup>. The film represents an experiment with flickering, another variant of pure cinema, so ardently popularized by Józef Robakowski: “Pure cinema. I promote pure cinema”<sup>37</sup>.

Another experiment is the film *Prostokąt dynamiczny* (Dynamic Rectangle), part of Robakowski’s FFW work. “My colleagues from the Form Workshop also knew that what should be changed was not only the image, but also the sound in our films. We needed to find new stylistic figures based mainly on counterpoint,”<sup>38</sup> Robakowski explained. The resulting animation was created from a composition by Eugeniusz Rudnik, a pioneer of electronic music in Poland, associated with the Polish Radio’s Experimental Studio. As Daniel Muzyczuk writes: “Robakowski translated its pulse into organic fluctuations of a red rectangle: by filming with a mechanism fitted with apertures that could be flattened, stretched, narrowed and expanded”<sup>39</sup>. The

- 34 P. Kardas, J. Robakowski, “Zanimowani”.
- 35 P. Kubelka, “The Theory of Metrical Film”, [in:] *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, New York 1978.
- 36 N. Hamlyn, “Peter Kubelka’s *Arnulf Rainer*”, *Avant-Garde Critical Studies* 2007, no. 23.
- 37 K. Gondek, *Animator 2016 / Józef Robakowski*, 13 July 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDipopr4\\_rc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDipopr4_rc) (accessed: 31 July 2023).
- 38 J. Robakowski, A. Gruszczyński, “Całkowicie stracić kontrolę”, [in:] *Studio Eksperyment. Zbiór tekstów. Leksykon*, Warszawa 2013, p. 43.
- 39 D. Muzyczuk, “Józef Robakowski. Eugeniusz Rudnik *Prostokąt Dynamiczny*”, [in:] *Dźwięki elektrycznego ciała. Eksperymenty w sztuce i muzyce w Europie Wschodniej 1957–1984*, eds. D. Crowley, D. Muzyczuk, Łódź 2012, p. 198.



composer himself remembered his cooperation with Robakowski in the following manner: “This is a remarkable thing. While I was making music, I would hear from these directors specialising in short or experimental forms: ‘How good it would be, if I could first get the music and then could edit a film over it’”<sup>40</sup>. Thus Józef Robakowski received a finished musical composition from Rudnik. “I think,” continued the composer, “it is exciting that, if you have a basis in sound in which time is structured, where there are accents, then the sound is asking to have an image pinned there”<sup>41</sup>. As he was shaping the visual layer manually, Robakowski used enlarger shafts, as a consequence of which the geometric figure moves rhythmically.

The last example of animation in Robakowski's oeuvre from the analysed period is the film *22x*. The avant-gardist appears here as a conceptual director. He conducted a pedagogical experiment by giving 22 male and female students 20 metres of black film each. The students then presented their homework in the form of scratches made directly on the film. *22x* is an “assembling film”. As Łukasz Ronduda argues, “Such a filmmaking method, which limited the interpretation of the filmmaker and his or her impact on the phenomena presented, was to guarantee objectivity. Robakowski settled for the role of initiator and coordinator – a person who only supervised the making of the various parts”<sup>42</sup>. Visually and formally, the film resembles the non-camera work *Free Radicals* (dir. Len Lye, 1958). Robakowski himself is closer to having his placed among the films of the New Zealand avant-gardist rather than those of Norman McLaren. Optically, *Free Radicals* and *22x* are indeed similar. It has to be said, however, that Len Lye paid more attention to the soundtrack. As one scholar has pointed out, “The right music intensified the physicality of the images. Their dialogue in *Free Radicals* is a dynamic example of what he could achieve through this intuitive process”<sup>43</sup>. *22x* was also inspired by Katarzyna Kobro's drawing, which determined its rhythm. “In her conceptual sketches,” Robakowski recalled, “I discovered a very interesting drawing that dealt with chain construction. It's kind of an urban design – a line divided into sections of equal length”<sup>44</sup>. Irrespective of the validity and factuality of the inspirations indicated, they should at least be noted, because a certain affinity or kinship is clearly evident.

40 D. Muzyczuk, E. Rudnik, “How much Rudnik is in Penderecki, and how much Rudnik is in Nordheim? Interview with Eugeniusz Rudnik”, [in:] *Polish Radio Experimental Studio: A Close Look*, eds. M. Moskalewicz, D. Muzyczuk, New York 2013.

41 Ibid.

42 Ł. Ronduda, “Józef Robakowski i Warsztat Formy Filmowej”, p. 73.

43 R. Horrocks, “Len Lye: From Jazz to ‘Sound Construction’”, [in:] *The Long Dream of Waking: New Perspectives on Len Lye*, eds. P. Brobbel, W. Curnow, R. Horrocks, Canterbury University Press, Canterbury 2018.

44 H.U. Obrist, J. Robakowski, *Rozmowa*, p. 30.

## An institutional artist

Another stage to be discussed in Józef Robakowski's creative journey is the making of artistic documentaries on art-related topics. Significantly, despite using animation techniques, the avant-gardist did not make any of them in the Small Film Form Studio. Although – a bit against logic – he did make a documentary, *Kompozycje przestrzenne Katarzyny Kobro* (Katarzyna Kobro's Spatial Compositions, 1971) at Se-Ma-For<sup>45</sup>. Two years later, he made a documentary based on Janina Ojrzyńska's script, *Z medio-magnetycznego atelier Tytusa Czyżewskiego* (From Tytus Czyżewski's Media-Magnetic Atelier, 1973) at the Educational Film Studio in Łódź. In an experimental way Robakowski portrayed the painter during the Formist period. According to the authors of a monograph devoted to the EFS, Józef Robakowski received permission to make the film thanks to Jerzy Kotowski's support<sup>46</sup>. "I consider Tytus Czyżewski," wrote the director in a letter, "to be an outstanding Polish artist, hence my interest in the topic"<sup>47</sup>. His subsequent works made at the Studio are also about art and people who create it. For example, *Żywa Galeria* (Living Gallery, 1975) is a conceptual film made on the basis of a drawing by Katarzyna Kobro. Robakowski gave artists a minute and a half each for self-presentation, so that the film is a record of the first gestures of the invited artists. The form of the documentary is analogous to that of the film *22x*. In the 1980s he made two more documentaries, *Witkacy* (1981) and *Konstrukcja w procesie* (Construction in Process, 1982). Robakowski reminisces, "[t]he films we made were modern, professional, because we were film school graduates, we made them at the Educational Film Studio. The most important works from that period are: *Żywa galeria* – showing the current situation in art and featuring dozens of artists, *Witkacy*, *Krzeseła* (Chairs), Ryszard Waśko's films"<sup>48</sup>. In *Witkacy* Robakowski adopted a slightly different perspective on

45 The film does not appear in monographies devoted to the Small Film Form Studio, like A. Bańkowski, S. Grabowski, *Semafor 1947-1997*, Łódź 1999.

46 See M. Dondzik, K. Jajko, E. Sowiński, *Elementarz Wytwórni Filmów Oświatowych*, Łódź 2018.

47 What needs to be set right, however, is the question of Józef Robakowski's alleged debut at the Educational Film Studio. *Z medio-magnetycznego atelier Tytusa Czyżewskiego* was not the director's debut, as the author of the chapter (Emil Sowiński) claims. Robakowski had earlier made *Kompozycje przestrzenne Katarzyny Kobro*. See: *ibid.*, pp. 191, 195.

48 Anna Michalska's conversation with Józef Robakowski, "Kino własne Józefa Robakowskiego", 7 June 2013, <https://www.sfp.org.pl/2016/wydarzenia,168,15079,0,1,Kino-wlasne-Jozefa-Robakowskiego.html> (accessed: 31 July 2023).

the artist, presenting his photographs. “These were very important works, for they presented avant-garde artists who had not had film biographies yet,”<sup>49</sup> says the director. After making a series of documentaries at the Educational Film Studio, in 2000 Józef Robakowski returned to animation, once again putting experimental ideas into practice.

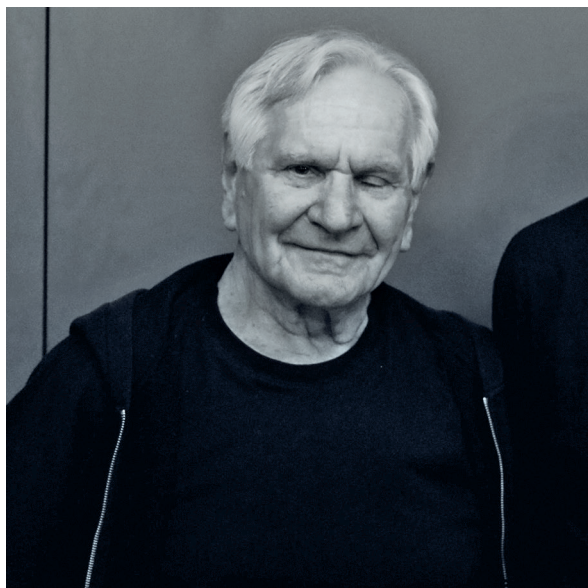


Fig. 1. Józef Robakowski (phot. Anna Krakowiak, © Anna Krakowiak, 2023)

## Place in the history of Polish animation

Józef Robakowski was fascinated by pure cinema described by Karol Irzykowski. After the political transformation he made films for the Art Museum. The works he created were formally based on what he had achieved earlier with the non-camera method. This time, however, he decided to use digital video recording. This is how he made two films with light dispositive, that is *Impulsator* (2000) and *Impulsator VI* (2001). As Łukasz Ronduda writes, “[t]he most radical seems to be *Impulsators*, in which he reflects on the nature of the medium used – video – and, more specifically, reflects on the role of light in defining the specificity of this medium”<sup>50</sup>. The films are made up of a series of light pulsations. *Uwaga światło!* (Attention Light!, 2004) is a film made to a series of visual high-lights subordinated to music. Robakowski retains the convention from

49 Ibid.

50 Ł. Ronduda, “Uwaga: Światło!”, p. 117.

*Test II*, but this time the rhythm and change of colours are defined by Fryderyk Chopin's *Mazurka in F minor*, Op. 68 no. 4. There are a number of such films made with the new medium.

Referring to the above titles has been necessary to highlight the techniques used by the Robakowski, techniques characteristic of animated cinema. The chronological structure of the article has made it possible to observe the successiveness and consistency with which Robakowski kept returning to concepts associated with non-camera film and pure cinema. As the above argument demonstrates, Józef Robakowski should undoubtedly be referred to as animator. In conclusion, it is worth signalling some potential areas in the history of Polish animation in which Robakowski should be discussed. At least three such territories can be found. First of all, we should take into consideration general studies in which Robakowski can be discussed in the context of the "Silver Decade"<sup>51</sup> (1971–1980), because he started creating animations during the communist period. He should be included among other representatives of Polish animation, alongside figures like Zbigniew Rybczyński (who created his works at the Film Form Workshop at the same time) or Piotr Dumala<sup>52</sup>. Above all, however, Robakowski should be discussed in studies of Polish experimental animation, especially non-camera work, in which he was so involved.

*Translation: Anna Kijak*

51 *Polski film animowany*, pp. 60–78.

52 P. Sitkiewicz, *Polska szkoła animacji*, Gdańsk 2011, p. 144.

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