

# Construction – Reproduction

Graphics, photography and film in Polish Constructivism \*

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An interest in photography and film accompanied the Polish avant-garde from the beginning of its existence. It can be found, among others, in the passion for photography of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy), a member of the Formists, and in the poems of the Futurists, for example of Tytus Czyżewski and Bruno Jasiński:

*I bathe the plate in golden water  
I copy it on bromo-paper  
and develop your spectral face*<sup>1</sup>

*Cars. Platforms. Cabs.  
A rolling filmstrip  
Grumbling across the stretch of dried asphalt*<sup>2</sup>.

In the Futurist manifesto *Primitivists to the Nations of the World and to Poland*, Anatol Stern and Aleksander Wat called on poets to disseminate their books by using *the gramophone and the cinema*<sup>3</sup>.

The Constructivists were no exception. Władysław Strzemiński even argued that photomontage was a Polish invention and that the title of the inventor should be given to Mieczysław Szczuka<sup>4</sup>. He was wrong, apparently forgetting about much earlier German and Russian achievements (he only mentioned Man Ray). More importantly, however, Strzemiński's text proves how much weight was attached to photography as an artistic medium in the Polish Constructivist milieu.

Photography can be art – argued Strzemiński elsewhere – if it does not imitate painting, and deals only with “the relationship of the interlinked forms”: *Just as naturalism was a disease in nineteenth century painting, so too is the painterly photograph a plague, since it renounces the most important of its tools – sharpness of vision and mechanical perfection*<sup>5</sup>.

In the same review, Strzemiński summarized the most important achievements of contemporary photography:

1) PHOTOGRAPHY FROM NATURE ordinary and in negative (+ and – photograph). Several photographs on a single plate, X-ray images, microphotography.

2) PHOTOMONTAGE – the simultaneity of phenomena/effects – the form resulting from Futurism and Dadaism (Grosz, Heartfield, Szczuka, Lissicki).

\* This text was first published in Italian in the catalogue: *Constructivismo in Polonia*, ed. S. Parlagreco, Torino 2005.

3) PHOTOPLASTICISM – photography without a camera, directly on photosensitive paper, whose effect relies on the use of light and darkness. Photoplasticism accommodates a variety of genres – from abstract shots to those having some contact with nature (Man Ray).

4) Combing photography with painting, creating a sharp contrast between the objective texture of photography and the subjective texture of painting (Max Ernst).

5) Combining photography with printing, often used in advertising <sup>6</sup>.

Strzemiński mentions Witold Kajruksztis as the pioneer of contemporary Polish photography <sup>7</sup>. Yet it is Szczuka's photomontages that are the greatest achievement in this field. First of them appeared in "Blok" magazine, where their author also published the following manifesto:

PHOTOMONTAGE = poetry in its most condensed form

PHOTOMONTAGE = POETRYPLASTICISM

PHOTOMONTAGE produces the effect of interpenetration of the various phenomena taking place in the universe

PHOTOMONTAGE – objectivity of forms

CINEMA – multiplicity of phenomena occurring in time

PHOTOMONTAGE – simultaneous multiplicity of phenomena

PHOTOMONTAGE – interpenetration of two-and three-dimensionality

PHOTOMONTAGE – expands the potential of our methods: it allows the utilization of phenomena which are unavailable to the human eye – but which the sensitive photographic plate can capture

PHOTOMONTAGE – a modern epic <sup>8</sup>

Undoubtedly, Szczuka's works contain features that testify to his personal exploration of the nature of the photomontage. They do not form, as for example the contemporary compositions by Paul Citroën, a "wallpaper" uniformly filled with photographic motifs. They do not create a new, symbolic or paradoxical reality, as the works of the Surrealists do. They are not intentionally anarchist in form like Dada collages.

Closest to Szczuka's photomontages are some of the realizations of the Russian Constructivists: Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Gustav Klutis, Lyubova Popova. They do not seem, however, to have had a direct influence on the Polish artist, since even Strzemiński failed to mention them, although he knew the Russian avant-garde at first hand. These associations are thus unlikely to be the result of the influence of any specific works, but arise from convergent theoretical premises, such as the economy of means and a belief in the redundancy of traditional artistic techniques. *Photography and cinema*, wrote Szczuka in the first issue of "Blok", *are unrivalled in accuracy, speed and cheapness in comparison to the artist's work* <sup>9</sup>.

Szczuka's early photomontages (e.g. the cover of Anatol Stern's and Bruno Jasiński's poems *Earth to the Left* <sup>10</sup> or *The Photomontage* in the second issue of "Blok" <sup>11</sup>) stand out, even when compared to related works in Russia, through their lack of any suggestion of space. The third dimension is present only in so far as it is visible in parts of the used photographs. The individual elements of these compositions are, however, spaced out as if on one plane, and comply with the logic of

forms rather than the anecdote. This does not mean, of course, that these elements are semantically insignificant. The frequent motifs of machines and iron structures, sometimes of workers too, in Szczuka's works are in full compliance with his social and aesthetical beliefs: his belief in the superiority of the principles of engineering over the genius of creativity and in the working people's role in shaping the new reality.

Szczuka was in fact aware that the use of recognizable pieces of photographs, particularly of people, unavoidably creates the germ of an anecdote. Discussing examples of "purely constructional issues", he wrote (with the typically telegraphic language of constructivist manifestos): (...) *composition with a starting point no longer of building the textural painterly contrasts or the texture of materials – but building contrasts between objects and living things – as a consequence the inevitable literary quality* <sup>12</sup>.

The "literary quality" of Szczuka's photomontages increased as they became more and more political. His earlier works mainly expressed a fascination with the mechanization of production that the artist and his colleagues naively thought was to bring workers better wages, by cheapening the cost of production <sup>13</sup>, whereas his later photomontages and related prints from the second half of the 1920s were increasingly fighting for specific issues, such as the release of political prisoners <sup>14</sup> or the improvement of working conditions in bakeries <sup>15</sup>. This change in the artist's work is linked to his deepening knowledge of Marxism, taking place around 1926 <sup>16</sup>.

Szczuka's most important achievement during this period was to design graphic illustrations for the poem *Europe* by Anatol Stern <sup>17</sup>. The published illustrations (except for the title page designed by Teresa Żarnower) are not photomontages in the literal sense, but a combination of typographical characters and traced out fragments of photographs, yet they grew from the spirit of collage, for they juxtapose elements taken from different contexts. Images are arranged in a kind of film running independently along the poem, sometimes accentuating, sometimes counterpointing it. The whole thing is complemented by its unconventional typographical layout: strong red backgrounds and black and red borders surrounding parts of the text.

The photomontages closest to Szczuka's poetics were created by Teresa Żarnower, his life-long companion and closest associate. Examples include her political posters and the (aforementioned) cover for *Europa*. Some of the graphic designs by Szczuka and Żarnower have very similar lettering and identical components, raising the suspicion that they were in fact their collective work <sup>18</sup>. Yet the most important and poignant series of photomontages, created by the artist when she lived as an expatriate in New York, were for the book *Defense of Warszawa* <sup>19</sup>.

At the turn of the 1920s, photomontage became a popular illustrative technique and started to appear regularly in the pages of magazines and on book covers, which were not necessarily left-wing. These illustrations were often created by artists associated with the wider circles of Polish Constructivism, such as Henryk Stażewski, Bogdan Lachert, Kazimierz Podsadecki or Mieczysław Berman. While the first two worked with photomontage only sporadically, Podsadecki and Berman devoted themselves to it with great assiduity.

Podsadecki is the author of probably the most frequently reproduced Polish photomontage, *City – Mill of Life*, designed for the cover of the weekly magazine

“Na szerokim świecie” (“In the Wide World”) <sup>20</sup>, which expressed a fascination with the big city and skyscrapers that was typical for the 1920s avant-garde. Podsadecki published many similar compositions in the magazines “Światowid” and “Na szerokim świecie”, where he was art director, and which belonged to the group IKC (“Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny” / “Illustrated Daily Courier”). These works show similarities with the photomontages of artists associated with the Bauhaus, especially the cycle by Otto Umbehr (Umbo) for the advertising campaign for Walter Ruttmann’s film *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (the cycle is usually wrongly attributed to Ruttmann himself).

In addition to the illustrations made for the press, Podsadecki also produced a series of satirical photomontages, presented during *Żywe dzienniki* (*Live News*) – quasi-film nights, where the projection of films was replaced with slides showing the artist’s works and cabaret scenes by the members of the Studio of Polish Avant-Garde Film, an association which he co-founded. These compositions, however, were already far removed from the formal discipline of Szczuka’s Constructivism. The same is true for most of the photomontages by another member of SPAF, Janusz Maria Brzeski, whose cycle *Narodziny robota* (*Birth of a Robot*), leaning towards Surrealism (and the prose of Karel Čapek), is one of the most outstanding Polish achievements in this field.

The only Polish artist who devoted himself entirely to photomontage was Mieczysław Berman, who together with Anatol Stern co-authored Szczuka’s monograph <sup>21</sup>. Unfortunately, the earliest, decidedly Constructivist works by the artist have not survived and can only be judged on the basis of reconstructions Berman made after the war. We have to agree with Stanisław Czekalski that their dating to the late 1920s raises many doubts. The first published works appeared in the following decade, and the sporadic statements by the author rather confirm the supposition that he was not using photomontage earlier than this <sup>22</sup>. We are also concerned with the meticulous appearance of these reconstructions, their perfection of composition, not to mention the obvious elements of a later period, such as a portrait of an elderly Charlie Chaplin or New York skyscrapers non-existent before 1939. Photomontage was an ad hoc form of art. Its attraction consisted, among other things, in the fact that it could be created quickly and from what was at hand. Inspiration mostly came from the press and from life. Berman’s reconstructions look like carefully made variations, or even fantasies, on the subject of the originals, if these ever existed (at least in such numbers) <sup>23</sup>.

This does not, however, change the fact that Berman was the most important Polish photomontage artist after Szczuka. His early works, published in magazines during the years 1930-1931, already revealed a pro-Soviet and propagandist character (*Bezrobocie /Unemployment/, 1930*), and at times seemed inspired by the works of Gustav Klutis (such as the cover of the book by Melchior Wańkiewicz, *Opiersona rewolucja /The Fully Fledged Revolution/, in 1934* <sup>24</sup>) and other Soviet graphic artists. Soon afterwards, however, they began to gravitate towards the political satire of John Heartfield, an artist with whom Berman shared a deep friendship after the war <sup>25</sup>.

Photomontages more or less inspired by Constructivism were also created by other well-known artists, including the set designer Władysław Daszewski, the painter Aleksander Rafałowski, the writer and filmmaker Stefan Themerson, the

painter and typographer Janusz Maria Brzeski, or the photographer and architect (later turned psychologist) Mieczysław Choynowski. A second division consisted of at least a dozen artists, among whom the most notable were Jan Poliński and Włodzimierz Łukasik.

This group of works was obviously dominated by urban and industrial subjects: high buildings, steel bridges and other structures, factories, motor vehicles. From the beginning of the 1930s, however, elements of political satire began to increasingly appear, cultivated by both left- and right-wing supporters. *America*, an excellent photomontage by Choynowski in the socialist-oriented “Wiadomości Literackie” (“Literary News”) <sup>26</sup>, shows a cluster of skyscrapers from which a pair of cuffed hands emerges, reaching towards the Statue of Liberty visible in the upper right corner. In Poliński’s work, *Tzw. Życie gospodarcze* (*The So-called Economic Life*), which appeared in the right-wing nationalist organ “Prosto z mostu” (“Point-Blank”) <sup>27</sup>, the figure of a begging woman with a child stands out against the background of a stereotypical factory, car and crowd.

The process of the photomontage’s politicization was accompanied by criticism of its “formalist” variant. Formalism, testifying to *the reduction of matters of art to the format of simple laboratory methods*, became the subject of attacks by Władysław Daszewski <sup>28</sup>, among others, who also incidentally took over Żarnower’s position of graphic editor in the magazine “Dźwignia” (“The Lever”), founded by Szczuka.

Independently, photomontage of Surrealist rather than Constructivist origin began to develop. Its most outstanding exponents were Aleksander Krzywobłocki, Margit Sielska, Jerzy Janisch and Henryk Streng (Marek Włodarski) <sup>29</sup>, associated with the Lvov group “Artes”; the graphic partnership Lewitt and Him <sup>30</sup>; the Warsaw satirist Zenon Wasilewski, who worked for “Szpilki” (“Pins”) as a graphic artist; and once again Stefan Themerson.

Constructivist graphics was subject to essentially the same rules as photomontage: economy of means and usefulness of form. It could be the illustration of almost scientific visual deliberations, the object of typographical experiments or used in advertising. But it has almost completely disappeared in its pure form, the engraving. The latter was regarded as a relic of the previous era, of the bourgeois taste.

The principles of Constructivist graphic design in advertising (these can also be applied to its other usages) were formulated best in the prospectus of Biuro Reklama-Mechano (Bureau Advertising-Mechano) set up (supposedly as a joke) by Henryk Berlewi (art director), Aleksander Wat and Stanisław Brucz (texts): *The conventionality of the graphic system, the banality of texts, the outdated, tedious to the modern eye aesthetic decorations, no longer attract attention from the reader, the spectator, the passer-by. So we are advancing a new slogan: MECHANICAL ADVERTISING. Advertising must be based on the same principles as those dominating modern industrial production* <sup>31</sup>.

The prospectus, one of the most important Polish functional prints, was itself an example of such advertising. The text was positioned both vertically and horizontally and individual sentences or single words (sometimes even fragments of words) differed in font size in order to underline their meanings and to impose on

the reader a method of reading. Abstract geometric shapes – circles, squares, rectangles – served to strengthen the expression of the text, sometimes framing it, sometimes next to it. “R.-M.” (*mechanical advertising*) *invigorates the literary text of advertisement with shortcuts, sharp focus and momentum by using the latest developments of modern literature, creating a mechanical style of advertising text*<sup>32</sup> – declares one of the pages of the prospectus, whose layout resembles Berlewi’s painted compositions from the period.

The concept of mechanical advertising grew directly from Berlewi’s theory of *Mechano-Faktura*, contained in his manifesto of the same title<sup>33</sup>. In it the artist argued that the rejection of figurative elements and the order make it possible *to recognize the artist’s intention (...) as well as the precision that helps everyone to organize the impressions received from a work of art*<sup>34</sup>.

Berlewi explains how perception of the mechano-factual image should take place in practice in his article on Polish functional design published in “*Neue Grafik*” in 1961<sup>35</sup>. Discussing his work, *Mechano-facture; Dynamic contrasts* (1924), the artist wrote: *The reading of this two-part graphic layout should start with the thin line in the lower right corner. It widens as it moves upwards; it strengthens and passes „crescendo” into a wide stripe. When a viewer (or listener) reaches the peak of this rise, as if played on a xylophone, he begins to descend, led by a row of five squares. Then he should move horizontally, from the smallest to the largest black circle. From that place, the eye moves to the right in accordance with a succession of graded black stripes. The circles form a finale*<sup>36</sup>. The eye of the reader of a mechanical advertisement should not follow the traditional line-based layout of text, but the dynamics of typographical forms. The whole composition should work like a machine: precisely, accurately and purposely.

The theory of *Mechano-Faktura* was created with painting in mind, but was also perfectly suitable for graphics, as it intended to use non-individualised, mechanical forms, which could be reproduced using templates or ready dies.

Similar geometric forms, often created with typographical elements available at the printer, were used in graphic compositions by Teresa Żarnower, whom Berlewi consistently and unjustly deprecated in his statements<sup>37</sup>. Works by her reproduced in “*Blok*” are, however, characterized by a leaning towards symmetry (albeit always slightly disturbed) and enclosure in a rectangular frame. In the previously cited *Three examples of purely structural issues*<sup>38</sup>, Żarnower’s untitled work was described as follows: *2. a static composition: symmetrical (applied in this example) SURFACE LAYOUT. A structure of verticals and horizontals.*

The above description is also appropriate to other compositions by Żarnower, for example, one published on the title page of the fifth issue of “*Blok*”<sup>39</sup>. Berlewi wrote years later about the latter that its *symmetrical form provides a breath of simplicity*, in which we can discern the influence of Neo-Plasticism<sup>40</sup>. But there are also works by the artist, such as *Kompozycja typograficzna (Typographical Composition)* in the same issue of “*Blok*”, or *Konstrukcja filmowa (Film Construction)*<sup>41</sup>, which are an attempt to enhance the scheme by the use of ellipses and convergent lines (in the first example) and wavy lines and wedges (in the second example). *Film Construction* shows similarities with Szczuka’s *5 Moments of an Abstract Film* (which will be discussed later), included in the first issue of “*Blok*”<sup>42</sup>.

Żarnower's typographical compositions, even if inspired by Neo-Plasticism, are nevertheless easily recognizable as her own, and constitute an interesting group of works that refer to the most elementary forms, taken, in accordance with the demands of Constructivism, from ready-made models, both mechanical and industrial.

Also noteworthy are abstract compositions by some artists consisting exclusively of letters and close to concrete poetry. These types of works were made, among others, by Edmund Miller<sup>43</sup>, Strzemiński<sup>44</sup>, and Szczuka<sup>45</sup>, and later also by Strzemiński's pupil Samuel Szczekacz (Samuel Zur). Many of these experiments were adopted by functional typography and found creative use in the graphic designs by Strzemiński or Podsadecki. Strzemiński's covers for Tadeusz Peiper's<sup>46</sup> or Julian Przybos'<sup>47</sup> books – probably the most outstanding realizations in Polish artistic books – show, moreover, that functionalism did not have to lead to excessive discipline.

A separate phenomenon in Polish Constructivist graphics are the heliographics, created from 1928 onwards by Karol Hiller and closely related to his abstract paintings of the same period, sometimes compared to Willi Baumeister's or Vladimir Tatlin's<sup>48</sup> work. Heliographics were photographic compositions made without a camera, where the negative was replaced by hand-made celluloid plate covered with white tempera and then painted, scratched and rinsed until the desired effect was achieved. Some of the works from the mid-1930s (e.g. item no. 6 in the Essen exhibition catalogue<sup>49</sup>) anticipate Art Informel, especially Wols. Others create fantastic openwork structures suspended in space (e.g. item 4, *ibid.*<sup>50</sup>) and others still are close to the Suprematism of Malevich and Lissitzky (e.g., item 8, *ibid.*<sup>51</sup>).

In his statement article of 1934, Hiller wrote that by being subject to the laws of chemical processes, the artist gets closer to the phenomena observed in science and recorded with the help of photomicrography. He also expressed the belief that by adapting the methods used in the laboratory to those of artistic creation, the field of graphic exploration expands and is freed from the ballast of traditional techniques, such as oil painting, which are a barrier between art and nature<sup>52</sup>.

Hiller's conviction that form should be organically linked with the material used resonates with distant echoes of theory of Unism expounded by Strzemiński, with whom the creator of heliographics would soon quarrel and part<sup>53</sup>. But of course at the core of heliographics, above all, lies the Constructivist belief that art ought to be close to technique, and the latter should grow from knowledge of the laws of nature.

Stefan Themerson was also the author of outstanding photograms (photographs without camera). Experiments with exposing photographic paper covered with various objects led him (and his wife Franciszka, a painter) to filmmaking. The first of their films, *Apteka (Pharmacy)*, made in 1930, was created by animating glass objects, placed on tracing paper and filmed from below. Another film *Europa*, made during the years 1931-1932, was closely related to the achievements of Polish Constructivism, as it was in fact inspired by Anatol Stern's poem of the same title, graphically illustrated by Szczuka.

The Themersons, however, did not reuse Szczuka's drawings in their film, using instead, along with other materials, Themerson's photomontages, some of which were fortunately preserved, unlike the film. A fragment of the script of *Europa*, re-

constructed years later by its authors, reveals to us how they were used: (...) *panorama following photomontages – a series of the artist's photomontages – penetration, revealing by means of light, etc., including a montage of a sky-scraper; cut by scissors from top, still by still (...)* <sup>54</sup>.

*Europa*, together with *Beton (Concrete)* by Janusz Maria Brzeski, *Or* by Jalu Kurek, and *Zwarcie (Short Circuit)* by the Themersons, belongs to the few completed Polish films that to a greater or lesser degree refer to Constructivism. Unfortunately most Constructivist film projects were abandoned at the stage of drafts and ideas.

The Constructivists' early interest in cinema is evidenced by Kryński's and Żarnower's statements in *Katalog Wystawy Nowej Sztuki (New Art Exhibition Catalogue)* <sup>55</sup>. Both had called for making more use of film, in addition to other modern means, as a discipline in touch with the spirit of the times. The Vilnius exhibition was *nota bene* held in the lobby of the cinema "Corso", which is also significant.

Of the artists participating in the exhibition, the closest to actually making a film was probably Szczuka. In the inaugural issue of "Blok", he posted a drawing *5 Moments of an Abstract Film* <sup>56</sup>, which should be considered the first Polish abstract film study. It recorded what looks like five phases (they are not clearly delineated) of the film, whose ratio of duration probably corresponds to the ratio of length of the five sections of the straight line (time axis) at the bottom of the composition. It is difficult to say how these "moments" are spaced in time and if there is a sequence of "action" at all. A closer analysis of the drawing, however, shows a similarity between several elements in different phases, suggesting their movement and transformation <sup>57</sup>.

A little later, Szczuka returned to a similar problem in "Blok" with the drawing *A Few Essential Elements of an Abstract Film* <sup>58</sup>. It is a kind of graphic catalogue of the available forms and methods of such a film, presented as a fragment of imaginary film footage. Next to it these are listed: *Movement as change in place: the coming and going, but not changing, of geometrical forms. The dynamics of forms: reduction or enlargement of forms, transformation of forms, the disintegration or construction of forms. Intensity of colour. Vividness or dimness of appearance, direction (directions) of movement (movements), and the inter-penetration of shapes. Tempo. Harmony – disharmony. Pauses* <sup>59</sup>.

In 1927, Szczuka had begun to seriously prepare for the making of a film. From this project, most likely entitled *Zabił, zabiłeś, zabilem (He Killed, You Killed, I Killed)*, only two drawing-frames (quite unusual, because they are square) remain. They are marked with the numbers "15" and "16" but they seem quite far apart. We can only guess that the large irregular black spot in the first drawing is transformed, through reduction and slight rotation in the counter-clockwise direction, into a small shape reminiscent of an upside down letter "J".

Written words are a new element in relation to the aforementioned works: "you killed" appears twice (frame 15) as does a large "I" (frame 16). The use of words and typographical characters as the main dynamic elements of the screen composition was a proposal comparable probably only to assigning an autonomous function to inscriptions in *Mechanical Ballet* by Fernand Léger, *Anaemic Cinema* by Marcel Duchamp, and in some of Dziga Vertov's films. Unfortunately, this is more or less all we can say about this unrealized project. But we can speculate, taking



into the account the radicalization of Szczuka's views, and his involvement in communist propaganda, that the film *He Killed, You Killed, I Killed* was to carry a political message.

*Film Construction* by Teresa Żarnower, bearing the date 1923 and published in "Blok"<sup>60</sup>, remains the most enigmatic Polish Constructivist film concept. Is it a kind of a still frame of an imaginary abstract film, or a work only related to cinema by the use of dynamic elements such as the almost op-art wavy lines and narrow wedges, arranged in a manner strongly suggesting movement? This will probably remain an unanswered question.

Henryk Berlewi acknowledged years later the cinematic origins of his own work, especially the influence of abstract films by Viking Eggeling<sup>61</sup>. The startling interview which the artist gave in 1958 in the weekly magazine "Film" shows that his *mechano-factura* was a substitute for film: *My entire theory of mechano-facture then (...) in reality demanded animation, motion, a film. Explanation of this theory is only possible with the help of film. The fundamental nature of mechano-facture depends on the build up of certain rhythms and on the systematic differentiation of texture [facture]. In "mechano-facture constructions" I am trying to include the element of time – obviously it would be best done by film*<sup>62</sup>.

Little is known about Karol Hiller's film project. *Long before the release of "Metropolis"* – reported the well-known critic Karol Ford<sup>63</sup> – *the renowned and respected painter Karol Hiller wrote the script "And When the Earth Cools Down..."*, in which he raises almost identical issues, resolving them differently from *Thea von Harbou*<sup>64</sup>. Unfortunately neither the script nor the stage designs made for it were preserved (compared to the decoration in *Aelita* by Yakov Protazanov, co-authored with Aleksandra Exter).

In the 1930s, however, at least three more films were made (apart from the previously discussed *Europa*) which to some extent were a continuation of Constructivist ideas. The first one is *Or*, or *Obliczenia rytmiczne (Rhythmic Calculations)*, made by the poet Jalu Kurek in 1932. The author wrote the following about the film: "*Or*" – *is an abbreviation of the rather lengthy title "Rhythmic Calculations". The film is short (220 meters – 8 minutes) and illustrates the random visual coincidence of images and an expression of directional tensions. The images were organized in a certain order, the result of artistic thought, and were taken off at a pace that is the result of formal calculations*<sup>65</sup>. "Directional tensions", "formal calculations" – this of course is the language of Constructivist manifestos.

The film has not survived in its complete form but fortunately numerous fragments are preserved (duplicates of shots, rushes, etc.), and on the basis of this (and also on Kurek's own account<sup>66</sup>) and other reports, one can quite accurately form an opinion about its form<sup>67</sup>. The film footage used in *Or* can be arranged in three groups: 1. Inscriptions (*The inscription/subtitle as such does not exist in "Or", because in its previous function it constitutes an element external to film, which should be avoided. Whereas there are in "Or" inscriptions incorporated into the whole picture, as an element equal and harmonizing with the background, with which it blends and in which it moves*<sup>68</sup>. 2. Animated diagrams, such as the diagrams of the solar system and the heart. 3. Photographs "from life" (including those with actors).

The first group formed a kind of poetic message, stating that everything in the universe happens rhythmically and cyclically: *the universe is spinning in a constant*

*rhythm, fluid and circular, or human life lies in the rhythm of the heart, measuring the work of the blood, etc. The second set the pulsating rhythm of the montage. The third contained a trace of a simple and uncomplicated action* <sup>69</sup> – a meeting between a man and a woman in the park. The continuity of the remnants of the story was broken, however, and together with the rest of the material they were made into a casual, though sometimes also metaphorical (as in the final scene, where the protagonists, heading in opposite directions along the avenue, were shown together with the image of a knot untying itself), flow of associated images. Moreover, in accordance with Kurek's view on the presence of faces on screen (*a theatre prop, commonly parasitizing on our emotions* <sup>70</sup>), the whole event was primarily photographed in close-ups of legs. There were, moreover, legs unconnected with the park tryst, for example, of people sitting indoors, climbing stairs, etc. (*The film can be called a lyrical transposition of girls' legs in motion; this motif is the dominant rhythm in "Or"* <sup>71</sup>). In the film, *there was no human face as a separate plan in order to document that it is possible to show action, movement, tempo and drama on screen without needing the expression of a human face i.e. an acting facial expression*) <sup>72</sup>.

Kurek – the most fervent follower of Italian Futurism in Poland and Marinetti's translator – must have borrowed the idea of a film which exclusively featured legs from Marcel Fabre and his *Amor pedestre* of 1914. But some elements of the text and graphics, such as a board with the inscription running diagonally *expression of directional tensions* and three arrows, were strongly marked by Constructivism. This undoubtedly eclectic picture helped, however, along with the Themersons' work, disseminate the idea of Western film avant-garde in Poland.

Two films by Janusz Maria Brzeski were another attempt to put the theory of this avant-garde into practice. The first one, *Przekroje* (*Sections*), made in 1931, was a montage of *various bits of film* <sup>73</sup>, and thus a cinematic collage. According to the journalist from "As" ("Ace") magazine, it was *probably the first attempt at a content-free film in Poland* <sup>74</sup>. The premiere of *Przekroje* was held during the Exhibition of Modernist Photography at the Industrial Museum in Krakow, organized by Brzeski and Podsadecki, which displayed, among others, works by Hans Richter, László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray. Unfortunately, this is more or less everything we know about this lost film.

More can be said about the second film, entitled *Beton* (*Concrete*, 1933). It opened with a photomontage in the spirit of Constructivism, showing a jacket resting on an invisible man, and the head of a lady with an old-fashioned hairstyle, incorporated in an abstract arrangement of geometric elements. After that an inscription/subtitle appeared: *The world has learned to look at modern panoramas and believe in their safe charms. Concrete stands are full of spectators. Humanity is looking upward and forgets about the street level, from which it was raised to the gods* <sup>75</sup>.

The first part of the film was probably (the work is lost) a documentary sequence, presenting a multiplicity of faces of a big city. *Wandering with a camera through the suburbs, the old city, right up to the modern high-rise concrete buildings – [Brzeski] wanted against this backdrop to show a man who raises the walls of the city, who works on its splendour, and who dies doing this work* <sup>76</sup>. The transition from the old town to the "concrete" area was done *via the railway line, whose identification in the play of geometric figures gave the critic a real pleasure* <sup>77</sup>.

It is worth recalling here that the famous film *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, by Walter Ruttmann, which indisputably influenced Brzeski, also opened with a half-minute abstract sequence of rhythmically intersecting geometric forms, developing into a variation on the theme of a speeding train, ending with its arrival at the station.

Somewhere high up on the construction site, the camera spotted a bricklayer at work (incidentally played by Kazimierz Podsadecki). *The proud, powerful silhouette of the worker looks impressive on top of the building* – enthused the previously quoted critic<sup>78</sup>. The film, however, was not, as one might think a paean to work in the Soviet style, for the whole story ended tragically. When a pair of hands (*which were not of concrete*<sup>79</sup>) stretched towards the hero from below: *He bent forward. He tumbled down. Blood on the concrete*<sup>80</sup>.

Despite the rapid montage of some scenes and the images from the constructing site, the bricks, the machines, *Concrete* expressed a characteristic change in views on industrialization, which was slowly taking place in the Polish artistic circles of the late 1920s and 1930s. After a period of admiration for iron structures, chimneys, motor vehicles – there came a reflection that they do not automatically create a paradise on earth. One of the first signs of this disillusion was the poem *Europe* by Anatol Stern. The new spirit of catastrophism was expressed in the excellent cycle of photomontages by Brzeski, *Birth of a Robot* (1934), made after *Concrete*.

In the author's commentary to the cycle, Brzeski wrote: *THE MACHINE WILL KILL INDIVIDUALITY (...) The work of these men, who have not yet been replaced by a machine, was organized on the model of machines. (...) Individuality is superfluous. (...) MAN IS A SLAVE TO THE MACHINE (...). If you go to any large factory (...) you will understand that man is a miserable slave of today's very modern caste of machine rulers, who are already close to the decision: death to man who awoke our power...*<sup>81</sup>

These words, sounding almost like a death knell for Polish Constructivism, were spoken by someone who had only recently cried to his fellow filmmakers that topics “lie about in the street” and gave such examples as: “Smoke”, “Coal”, “Machine”, and “Kerosene”<sup>82</sup>.

Graphics made of typographical elements, photomontage, film, and especially film collage, seemed an ideal means for the implementation of Constructivist ideas. They were mostly made from ready-made elements, prefabricated ones, and just as machine-made objects, were suitable for reproduction. Precisely in these fields one of the basic postulates of Constructivism was most fully realized: turning to new materials. As Andrzej Turowski rightly pointed out, despite the Constructivists constantly calling for the use of new components and substances, in practice they were little used<sup>83</sup>. Thus, even more significant is what was created in the artistic fields discussed here.

It is also interesting to track down the evolution that happened in these areas within a short period of time. From *building contrasts between objects and living things*, in which literary character was just an inevitable consequence of Szczuka's early photomontages, to his hand-drawn illustrations with a map of Europe and the inscription “SOS” (in the 1929 edition of Stern's poem); from the purely abstract, extremely disciplined geometric compositions by Żarnower, to her election poster

with a huge fist smashing a prison; from the purely montage-like film *Sections* by Brzeski, to his dystopian and anti-industrial *Birth of a Robot*.

This transformation was not such a betrayal of earlier ideals as one might think. For, as Żarnower wrote in the *New Art Exhibition Catalogue: (...) the means of art are associations of forms, which in every historical period take new shapes (...)*<sup>84</sup>. The Polish Constructivists lived in a specific period of rapidly changing historical context. After a short period of euphoria following the regaining of independence, which favoured the creation of utopias, came the time to adapt to daily reality, which was far from ideal, and to opt for one of the many conflicting political views. The majority chose the left-wing option; some, like Szczuka, Żarnower or Berman – the extreme left-wing.

The writer Deborah Vogel interestingly and provocatively summed up the dilemmas of new art (using the example of photomontage): *Using random material found in illustrated magazines and among reproductions is not enough. These newspaper clippings are tacky and they “cheapen”<sup>85</sup>; they are too easy to please in their naive situational naturalism. The belief that we can capture “authentic life” this way is wrong. We must risk the opinion that facts become authentic only from a perspective, and thus after a certain interpretation of raw material*<sup>86</sup>.

Today of course, we see in this *naive situational naturalism*, and in the naive belief that through art we can rebuild the world, the special charm of the Constructivist utopia.

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<sup>1</sup> T. Czyżewski, *Mediumiczno-magnetyczna fotografia poety Brunona Jasińskiego (zdjęta przy świetle gilotynowym)*, in: H. Zaworska, *Antologia polskiego futuryzmu i Nowej Sztuki*, Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich 1978, p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> B. Jasiński, *Przejechali – Kinematograf*, English translation available at: <http://pressboardpress.com/2012/08/06/they-ran-him-over-by-bruno-jasienski-translated-by-mila-jaroniec/> (accessed: 30.11.2013).

<sup>3</sup> A. Stern, A. Wat, *Primitivists to the Nations of the World and to Poland*, in: *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. M. A. Cows, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 2001, pp. 100-101.

<sup>4</sup> W. Strzemiński, *Fotomontaż wynalazkiem polskim („Europa” Szczuki i A. Sterna)*, in: idem, *Pisma*, Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich 1975, pp. 123-124.

<sup>5</sup> W. Strzemiński, review of *Foto-Auge* by Tschichold and Roh, in: idem, *Pisma*, op. cit., p. 128.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> M. Szczuka, *Fotomontaż*, “Blok” 1924, no. 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> M. Szczuka, *Odczuwa się w całokształcie życia*, “Blok” 1924, no. 1.

<sup>10</sup> A. Stern, B. Jasiński, *Ziemia na lewo*, Warszawa 1924.

<sup>11</sup> M. Szczuka, *Montaż fotograficzny*, “Blok” 1924, no. 2.

<sup>12</sup> M. Szczuka, *Trzy przykłady zagadnień czysto konstrukcyjnych*, “Blok” 1924, no. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Strzemiński, for example, wrote after some time: *It seemed that the development of productive forces in conjunction with the rising tide of the economic situation automatically generates the most perfect resulting political systems, liberating mankind from the bondage of history* (idem, *Aspekty rzeczywistości*, “Forma” 1936, no. 5).

<sup>14</sup> Covers of the one-off issues: *Amnesty for Political Prisoners* and *We demand Amnesty for Political Prisoners* (both: Kraków and Warszawa 1926).

<sup>15</sup> A canvassing label reproduced in “Dźwignia” (“The Lever”) (1927, no. 2-3) as part of

- Szczuka's photomontage *Nowa sztuka – sztuka utylitarna* (*New Art – utilitarian art*).
- <sup>16</sup> A. Stawar, *Szkice literackie*, Warszawa 1957, pp. 618-623.
- <sup>17</sup> A. Stern, *Europa*, Warszawa 1929 (facsimile edition in English: A. Stern *Europa*, Gaberbocchus Press, London 1962). S. Czekański (*Awangarda i mit racjonalizacji. Fotomontaż polski okresu dwudziestolecia międzywojennego*, Poznań 2000, p. 85, note 70), on the basis of Stern's memories dates Szczuka's illustrations to 1926. Unfortunately Stern's testimony should be approached with extreme caution.
- <sup>18</sup> A poster by T. Żarnower *13. Jedność Robotniczo-Chłopska* (*Workers and Peasants Unity*) and Szczuka's book cover to *Amnestia dla więźniów politycznych* (*Amnesty for Political Prisoners*) (op. cit.).
- <sup>19</sup> *Obrona Warszawy. Lud polski w obronie stolicy* (September 1939), New York 1942.
- <sup>20</sup> "Na szerokim świecie" 1929, no. 27.
- <sup>21</sup> A. Stern, M. Berman, *Mieczysław Szczuka*, Warszawa 1965.
- <sup>22</sup> M. Berman, *Czapka Frygijska*, in: *Księga wspomnień 1919-1939*, Warszawa 1960, p. 87.
- <sup>23</sup> I have had many occasions to talk to Berman during the years 1973-1975 (just before he died), when I wrote my master's thesis about his friend, Zenon Wasilewski. During these meetings Berman proved to have an excellent memory. Backdating his own works could not therefore be the result of forgetfulness.
- <sup>24</sup> M. Wańkowicz, *Opierzona rewolucja*, Warszawa 1934.
- <sup>25</sup> It is worth mentioning that Berman's pro-Soviet attitude gradually evolved into Trotskyism, probably from the time of his book cover design for *History of the Russian Revolution* by Trotsky (Warszawa 1932), which eventually led to his ejection from the Communist group Phrygian Cap.
- <sup>26</sup> "Wiadomości Literackie" 1932, no. 3.
- <sup>27</sup> "Prosto z mostu" 1935, no. 5. The same Poliński is the author of the explicitly anti-Semitic photomontage *Ubój rytualny* (*Ritual Slaughter*) ("Prosto z mostu" 1936, no. 9). The example of the two photomontages discussed above shows how easily the radical Left met the populist extreme Right.
- <sup>28</sup> W. Daszewski, *Na marginesie wystawy „Warszawskiej Grupy Plastyków”*, "Oblicze dnia" 1936, no. 11.
- <sup>29</sup> The best-known photomontage by Włodarski (*Untitled*, 1927, Museum of Art in Łódź) strongly resembles, however, Rodchenko's works.
- <sup>30</sup> Jan Lewitt and Jerzy (George) Him.
- <sup>31</sup> *Prospekt Biura Reklama-Mechano*, Warszawa 1924.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.
- <sup>33</sup> H. Berlewi, *Mechano-Faktura*, Warszawa 1924.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.
- <sup>35</sup> H. Berlewi, *Funktionelle Grafik der zwanziger Jahre in Polen*, an offprint from: "Neue Grafik" 1961, no. 9.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.
- <sup>37</sup> H. Berlewi, *Nieco o dawnej awangardzie. Kilka uwag z powodu artykułu pana A. Wata o "Blok"*, "Życie Literackie" 1957, no. 27, p. 5.
- <sup>38</sup> M. Szczuka, *Trzy przykłady...* op. cit.
- <sup>39</sup> "Blok" 1924, no. 5.
- <sup>40</sup> H. Berlewi, *Funktionelle Grafik...* op. cit., p. 17.
- <sup>41</sup> "Blok" 1924, no. 8-9.
- <sup>42</sup> M. Szczuka, *Pięć momentów filmu abstrakcyjnego*, "Blok" 1925, no. 1.
- <sup>43</sup> E. Miller, untitled typographical composition, "Blok" 1924, no. 2. Earlier on (December 1921), Miller showed some lettering posters on display in the Polish Arts Club at the "Polonia" hotel in Warszawa. Perhaps this work tells us something about these posters, which unfortunately did not survive.
- <sup>44</sup> W. Strzemiński, untitled typographical composition, "Blok" 1924, no. 2.
- <sup>45</sup> M. Szczuka, *Typografia*, "Blok" 1924, no. 3-4.
- <sup>46</sup> T. Peiper, *Szósta! Szósta!* Kraków 1926.
- <sup>47</sup> E.g. J. Przyboś, *Śruby*, Kraków 1925; idem, *Z ponad*, Kraków 1930.
- <sup>48</sup> J. Ładnowska, *Karol Hiller*, in: *Constructivism in Poland, 1923-1936: Blok, Praesens, a. r.*, ed. R. Stanisławski, Essen 1973, p. 125.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 169.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 168.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 169.
- <sup>52</sup> K. Hiller, *Heliografika jako nowy rodzaj techniki graficznej*, "Forma" 1934, no. 2.
- <sup>53</sup> After a conflict with Strzemiński in 1936, Hiller left the editorial staff of "Forma", where he had held the position of the first editor.
- <sup>54</sup> S. Themerson, [a recreation of the screen play for *Europa*], in: *Film as Film. Formal Experiment in Film, 1910-1975*, Hayward Gallery, London 1979, p. 89.
- <sup>55</sup> *Katalog Nowej Sztuki*, Wilno 1923.
- <sup>56</sup> M. Szczuka, *Pięć momentów filmu abstrakcyjnego*, "Blok" 1924, no. 1.
- <sup>57</sup> I have developed this argument in the book *Awangarda wobec kina. Film w kręgu polskiej awangardy artystycznej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego*, Warszawa 1996, pp. 36, 37.

- <sup>58</sup> M. Szczuka, *Parę zasadniczych elementów filmu abstrakcyjnego*, "Blok" 1924, no. 8-9 (English translation in: *Film as Film...* op. cit., p. 88).
- <sup>59</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>60</sup> See note 44.
- <sup>61</sup> As early as 1922 Berlewi had published an article *Viking Eggeling i jego abstrakcyjno-dynamiczny film* ("Albatros" 1922, September, pp. 17-18; the text was written in Polish, but was published in the Yiddish translation). Reprinted in: M. Giżycki, *Walka o film artystyczny w międzywojennej Polsce*, Warszawa 1989, pp. 117-120.
- <sup>62</sup> BSM, *Henryk Berlewi*, wywiad, "Film" 1958, no. 33, p. 10.
- <sup>63</sup> Later known in France as Charles Ford.
- <sup>64</sup> K. Ford, *Poezja ekranu*, "Kino dla wszystkich" 1928, no. 61, p. 7. This refers of course to the film *Metropolis* (1927) by Fritz Lang, with the screenplay by him and Thea von Harbou.
- <sup>65</sup> J. Kurek, *Objaśniam "Or"*, "Linia" 1935, no. 5, p. 118.
- <sup>66</sup> I had my conversation with Kurek on 11.02.1983.
- <sup>67</sup> In 1985, Ignacy Szczepański reconstructed the film on the basis of the script by Marcin Giżycki and included it in his documentary film *Jalu Kurek* (1985). This reconstructed version was later shown separately during numerous reviews of the Polish avant-garde cinema.
- <sup>68</sup> J. Kurek, op. cit.
- <sup>69</sup> In the article *Kino – zwycięstwo naszych oczu. Rzecz o estetyce filmu* ("Głos Narodu" 22.03.1926, p. 2), Kurek wrote: *Film is optical poetry. (...) External action (so-called "content") is irrelevant in film. The essence of film is images, or rather the relationship, rhythm and succession of images. If there is a content-like action, story-based – it must be simple and uncomplicated.*
- <sup>70</sup> J. Kurek, *Objaśniam "Or"*, op. cit.
- <sup>71</sup> J. Kurek, *Nogi dziewczęce (Polska awangarda filmowa)*, "Światowid" 1933, no. 26, p. 20.
- <sup>72</sup> J. Kurek, *Objaśniam "Or"*, op. cit.
- <sup>73</sup> A. J., *Film szuka nowych dróg*, "As" 1937, p. 14.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>75</sup> A. L., „*Beton*”, *Nowy film krótkometrażowy*, "Światowid" 1933, no. 50, p. 16.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>77</sup> Z. Grotowski, *...ale ludzie nie są z betonu*, "Awangarda" 1934, no. 15, p. 5.
- <sup>78</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>79</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>81</sup> J. M. Brzeski, *Narodziny robota*, "Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny", 1.01.1934, supplement "Kurier Literacko-Naukowy", p. XIV.
- <sup>82</sup> J. M. Brzeski, *Miasta – które czekają na swych reżyserów*, "Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny", 29.11.1932, supplement "Kurier Filmowy", no. 48.
- <sup>83</sup> A. Turowski, *Konstruktivism polski*, Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk – Łódź 1981, p. 120, note 11.
- <sup>84</sup> T. Żarnower, *Chęć zbadania niezbadanego...* in: *Katalog Wystawy Nowej Sztuki...* op. cit., p. 22.
- <sup>85</sup> In Polish: "tanizują". This term is a neologism created by the cited author. It comes, we can guess, from the adjective "tani" ("cheap") and means "cheapening" (meaning "vulgarizing", "reducing the value").
- <sup>86</sup> D. Vogel, *Genealogia fotomontażu i jego możliwości*, "Sygnały" 1934, no. 12-13.