

# Between Nostalgia and Melancholy

Video performance *From My Window*  
by Józef Robakowski – an attempt at reconstruction  
and analysis

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During the years 1978-1999, from his flat on the ninth floor of 19 Adam Mickiewicz Street in Łódź, Józef Robakowski recorded the view from his window. The apartment building is 20 stories high, and stands in the city centre alongside several other such towers, forming a skyscraper complex called “The Manhattan of Łódź”. In his flat – a vantage point – the artist, together with Małgorzata Potocka, founded the Exchange Gallery (of artistic thought) <sup>1</sup>, where up until today he still collects artefacts exchanged (by the method of “something for something”) with artists worldwide. Robakowski began filming from his apartment using a 16mm camera, which he then replaced with a video camera. In 1999, using the material recorded over the period of twenty-one years, he made a 19 minute *video/film* <sup>2</sup> called *From My Window*. The film, enhanced by a personal commentary, records the daily activities in the concrete public square adjacent to his block, mostly showing residents of the skyscraper and selected events of interest to the narrator. At the beginning of the film a “voice” is introduced as Józef Robakowski. In this manner, the artist recorded changes occurring over many years in the fragment of space defined by not only the window, but also by himself – a man with a camera.

It is unclear how Robakowski’s film should be classified. It is at least partly defined by the context in which it operates, as it is shown in art galleries as part of exhibitions and artistic events. Meanwhile, a similarly made picture by Krzysztof Kieślowski *Talking Heads* (1980) is usually screened on television in recurring cycles of major Polish documentary films. It seems that circulation – external to the works themselves – performatively assigns these films to specific categories. But what makes the film *From My Window* more suitable for screening in contemporary art galleries, rather than within TV series such as *Time for a Documentary*? Can it be called a documentary film?

Mirosław Przylipiak refers to the formula of André Bazin, according to whom *a documentary film gives pictures a logical structure of a discourse, and the discourse provides credibility and photographic evidence* <sup>3</sup>. After analysing Krzysztof Kieślowski’s text on the subject, Przylipiak adds that the discursive organisation of the medium cannot solely rely on the rearrangement and composition, but *on such an arrangement, which can fulfil discursive functions, to be a voice in the discussion, a statement* <sup>4</sup>. The film *From My Window*, despite its evident structure, cannot be included in these categories, because it does not incite the viewer to take

position. Following this trail, and considering the film as an intentional statement, we come to the question of its author.

Since the 1960s, Józef Robakowski has co-founded a number of avant-garde artistic groups: Oko (Eye), Zero-61 (later Zero-69), STKF Pętla (Loop), Krąg (Circle), Kultura Zrzuty, the international Infermental, and the famous Workshop of the Film Form, established in 1970 in Łódź Film School (with such members as Wojciech Bruszewski, Paweł Kwiek, Andrzej Różycki, Zbigniew Rybczyński, Ryszard Waśko)<sup>5</sup>. The group's manifesto states: *The Workshop explores and has ambitions to extend the possibilities of audiovisual arts, on the basis of current trends in contemporary art*<sup>6</sup>. It was there, that the first set of films (*of experimental, non-commercial nature*) shown at (...) numerous reviews in Poland was produced<sup>7</sup>. *The origin of the Workshop's thought processes come (...) from a reflection on the experiences of conceptual art, with its self-searching attitude in relation to its language*<sup>8</sup>. Robakowski is one of the artists who pioneered video art in Poland<sup>9</sup>. Because the film *From My Window* has, in Robakowski's view, *the nature of an ongoing physical phenomenon – as it interferes with the imagined reality*<sup>10</sup>, it can be perceived as an experimental video performance<sup>11</sup>.

The situation of an artist enjoying looking at people, who are unaware of his gaze, is like the position of an observer-analyst. The height and angle of vision make Robakowski similar to a scientist conducting an experiment on creatures shut up in a maze, in order to satisfy his curiosity. The film may be prompted by the need to rise above the social stage, looking at it not from the frontal and participatory perspective, but from the critic's box. This film might also be inspired by the desire to record and illustrate changes in the video sphere of a particular place at a specific time. But the most interesting and experimental aspect of the whole process, whose end result is the film *From My Window*, is the internal split between the nature of the activities used to create the footage, and its ultimate use.

The extremely long period of filming, during which the author had different plans and needs according to which the film was produced, and the final consistency of the footage finished at a specific point in time, make the film *From My Window* appear as two different works of art. One is the audiovisual picture screened in art galleries, with its various content and meanings, whilst the other can be read retrospectively. In the latter perspective, the film is the only remaining evidence of an experimental performance lasting twenty-one years. I will try to reconstruct the conceptual situation of this correlation, which is Robakowski's performance, genetically incorporated in the form of the *From My Window* film.

The performer, looking out of the apartment window in the skyscraper is frequently stripped of power over his own gaze, which is established through mediation between the fixed frame and the observer's dynamic conscience. It seems this position affects the specific, fragmentary view of the world that results from the individual montage. In the full shot, moving objects appear and disappear in the static environment of "what's behind the window". The fragmentary nature of this reality creates tension between what the viewer knows, and what he suspects on the basis of probability, as well as what he has invented about it. The window acts as a medium, which, if allowed to possess a gaze, can create a particular narrative. This gaze may lead to our inclusion in the thought processes of a recording and objective apparatus. But before the camera man is caught up in this game of

looks, he must approach the window, and what attracts him in the first place is the sound.

Ewa Rewers commented on the relation to the urban reality analysed by Henri Lefebvre in his essay *Vue de la fenêtre: Through the window (...) and into the room bursts an aggressive, polyrhythmic, and simultaneous reduced to the present time symphony of voices and signs manifesting the city, and its routine and social organization. Urban rhythms disrupt without invitation the inner rhythms of the experiencing body, forming with it an undivided, disturbing whole (...)*<sup>12</sup>. The window glass mediates between these spaces, filtering strange sounds to the human body, attracting his attention and his eye, which together project the individual's reality as arranged by him towards the outside world. The structure of man's relationship with the window – like any other – is created by *the collaboration of all the senses: sight, hearing, touch, etc., the diverse, but integrated sensorium*<sup>13</sup>.

Capturing on film the relationship between the outside world and the whole array of senses of a man and his camera is one of the main themes of Robakowski's video production<sup>14</sup>. Probably because no film is able to accurately reproduce the body's reactions to unexpected and provoked stimuli, the artist sometimes calls his recordings *video performance*. He thus uncovers its aspect of happening in time – as an action, in which the camera serves not only as a recording machine, but also as a deeply symbolic prop.

Józef Robakowski also made video art using a 16mm camera. When considering this classification type, the way the equipment is used is more important than its technical parameters. The camcorder allows for a rapid, mobile and long recording, akin to jotting down new ideas in a notebook. According to everyday social reality, its use is of a personal, even intimate, nature, which of course does not preclude a more or less specific viewer. It recalls a quick sketch, unlike the film camera, which is turned on mostly after a team was completed, whose recording is made specifically for an audience. Video enables individual experiments with reality, with the very fabric of the film, with the gaze, which when it materialises, strengthens the position of the viewer. It is as if the space beyond the frame of the recorded image is not first and foremost an extension of a view of the world, of which we can see excerpts on the screen, but of the human body holding the camera. As a prop, it is a mask of ourselves, which we can apply to our eternally unsure and mobile faces – a weapon that strengthens the power of subjectivity. From this symbolic angle, the most interesting and significant gesture made by Józef Robakowski during his performance, years later used in the film *From my Window*, was the very act of putting the video camera to the window pane.

Writing about the film *Rear Window* by Alfred Hitchcock, Slavoj Žižek compared Jeff, played by James Stewart, to the observer who sits in the central tower of Jeremy Bentham's inverted Panopticon. Whilst people who ignore his gaze are free from the power of *all-pervasive eye*<sup>15</sup>, it is in fact the onlooker *who is terrorized, constantly looking out of the window, anxious not to miss some crucial detail*<sup>16</sup>. Precisely in this situation, in which the pedestrians do not even know that the observer is at the window on the ninth floor, the grip of outside reality becomes even more compelling. Looking at people becomes addictive, even though one is totally ignored by them. It was in fact in a situation of this kind that Józef Robakowski increased his strength, placing the video camera against the window.

This was not just a gesture of resistance, but a declaration of war – a performative act of opposition against an authority. The apparatus that had been used as a prop to reinforce subjectivity and to create the previously described “window installation” was no longer just a registering machine, but on the contrary – a projecting one.

In an interview, the artist recalled: *In the 1940s, my aunt owned a cinema in Gdynia; I had a private box there; projection room workers gave me some tape cuttings, and I constructed makeshift projectors. You could say that I grew up in the cinema* <sup>17</sup>. The young Robakowski was fascinated by movie projectors. In 1974, at the International Experimental Film Festival, in the Belgian town of Knokke-Heist, already a mature artist, he projected a film in which he cut out different size holes in the tape, letting in the light. During the show, the artist stood in front of the cinema screen, holding a mirror, thus transferring the dazzling images to the audience, who in return responded with camera flashes <sup>18</sup>. In this game of multiplied flashes and ray bursts, light served as a vehicle for the artist’s creative expression being projected onto the audience, who were included in his work of art, and portrayed on his own terms, as if directed. Art, including film making, is for Robakowski not so much the recording of reality, as projecting and changing it. In his struggle against the compelling need to gaze at people from the window, the performer uses a video camera in the same way. By applying his lens to the glass pane, he has joined together two transmitters – the camera and the window – forming them in his own hands. As the subject holding the camera, he controls them and can freely project his own vision, and include the observed people, who have caught his eye. At the moment of pointing his camcorder at them, he gives them life.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, through creating a world of men out of the concrete square, the filmmaker projects his own, often secret, characteristics, feelings and desires <sup>19</sup>. At the moment of contact between the camera and the window, he stages his own personality, and by recording his own “self” projected onto reality, he recorded a trace of his own self. It is no accident that Józef Robakowski began filming from his flat in the same year that he founded the Exchange Gallery. By filming people from his gallery window, he drew them into his web of looks, and made them part of the exhibition. The photographic material gathered for the film *From My Window* is a twenty-one year long collection of images which should be interpreted *in terms of representation, and this, according to Michał Paweł Markowski, can only be described as representing something in its absence, or “instead of” it* <sup>20</sup>. But if the people from Robakowski’s collection are predominantly a projection of his own self, then the subjectivity of the author, which should be strengthened by the power of the camcorder, paradoxically begins to melt, weaken and disappear.

*In rearranging the collection (...) the pleasure of manipulating objects (...) displaces the previous experience of uncertainty and loss (...). In both cases – the enjoyment and the act of collecting – the object becomes an instrument of security and a barrier, beyond which anxiety disappears* <sup>21</sup>. In the case of the specific collection of images and people which is later incorporated into the film *From My Window*, the process of its creation is simultaneously a security device for the maker and the source of the experience of uncertainty, loss and fear from which it has to protect him. This long-term experiment by Robakowski relies on a complex phenomenon of creative melancholy. The artist explores the inevitability of the passage

of time, which over many years become visible in the form of changes in the space outside his window. At the time of capturing the pictures, their outcome is uncertain. Paradoxically, this theoretical “infinity” only increases the imprisonment within a moment of time. Embarking on such an endless project, one is constantly further and further from its beginning, as the initial recording disappears under a pile of subsequent tapes depicting the passage of time. Each new cartridge and tape brings this “open-ended” project closer to its inevitable conclusion. That which is alive is arrested in the form of a standstill, replayable image by the camera. What was captured on film is forever dying. The essence of recording is loss. The rhythmic switching on and off of the camera over the years, recording the rhythm of continuous pacing to and fro, recalls the tragic, horrifying, and absurd punishment of Sisyphus, who endlessly traversed the same path. The essence of melancholy exists precisely in cycles of such obsessive repetition, linked to our inability to accept the losses that result from our very existence in time<sup>22</sup>.

Robakowski’s projections from the window of his apartment-gallery record random passers-by as “quotations”. *A quotation*, according to Marek Bieńczyk, *is a sign of living in between, as in one of the basic states of melancholy, which [Søren] Kierkegaard calls the alternative – living in the gap between the despair of not being others and the inability to be oneself. It also involves an implicit denial of self, which can only be restored with the oblique work of borrowing*<sup>23</sup>. In the visual arts, the mechanical recording of a man’s image draws his likeness into the narrative of your own meaningful, subjective gaze. Robakowski’s recording relies entirely on such borrowings. This melancholic quoting, collecting and repeating *always hides a spurting wound*<sup>24</sup> – the wound being life, which most of the time is dying. This painful flaw might take the form of city sounds, about which I wrote – the changing rhythms heard through the window. This noise is the real, chaotic rhythm of life, a rushing stream which – continuing Henri Bergson’s metaphor – always leads to the mouth of the river, and submergence in oblivion. If we conceive the subject to be the man trapped in an apartment, then the melancholic wound is the open window. *Time is the big window of the world, and windows are small streams of time which flow in and out of the world. A man standing in front of a window is facing time*<sup>25</sup>. Facing the future is extremely difficult for the melancholic person, who cannot come to terms with loss, and when walking, takes more steps backward than forward. I believe that the reason for applying the camcorder to the window, was to stop time and try to take control. The film *From My Window* was stripped of sound. This act of muting the rhythms penetrating through the window evokes the sterilisation of a laboratory. This melancholic laboratory serves as the lone scientist’s study, in which he examines his own malignant wound, records its changes, tries different medications, and is equally frightened and fascinated by it. Robakowski observes “life” from his window in the same way as the “life” of a festering wound is observed in a laboratory. The words “to look at” and “dressing” (as in “dressing the wound”) in the Polish language share a common root („patrzeć” and „opatrunek”)<sup>26</sup>.

These are just a few of the possible reconstructions and interpretations of this play of attitudes, needs and meanings, that emerge on a symbolic level as a result of the artist’s arrangement of the long-term interactions between the body, consciousness and media forms, within a specific time and place. This performance

provided Robakowski with tapes, which he assembled in 1999 to form the film *From My Window*. This film is surprisingly different in nature compared with the artist's original melancholic gesture, repeated over a period of twenty-one years. Rather, this is nostalgic work, which focuses on displaying the "life" of the square, and in particular its fauna – the people whom the maker of the film knows. Each individual is briefly described by the narrator – Robakowski – sometimes very laconically: name – occupation – floor on which he lives, at other times more personally, when he recounts his own relationship with the person, or some of their common history. This is a way of showcasing the architectural, aesthetic, political and social changes that affect a fragment of the urban landscape, shaping (and coming from) the people involved. Over the years, Józef Robakowski has a consistent attitude towards all of them – he "likes" them. He likes them as a whole, as a relatively homogeneous part of his memory.

The narrator reacts to the images as they crop up, like a witness participating in these events, but occasionally he reveals excess knowledge of the future, thus exposing his authorial position. Already, in the first words of the introduction, he reveals that this story told in 1999 is retrospective. Robakowski's film depicts a tale created according to the principle defined by Siegfried Kracauer, as a "found thread" emerging from reality. In his reflections on the nature of documentary, the author of *Theory of Film* believes that *some structures belong to reality itself; it is enough to record this reality on film, in order to automatically capture its structure*<sup>27</sup>. *From My Window* displays the history of the concrete square in four phases of its planning and use, which simultaneously reflect the various processes of socio-political transformation in Poland.

At the beginning of the film, in 1978, the square is part of a larger space lined with concrete slabs, which separates the artist's block from Mickiewicz Street. It was probably put to use in this form after the completion of the entire estate. The character of this undeveloped space changes, depending on its current function and use. Robakowski's approach recalls the anthropological method, as postulated by Florian Znaniecki, of researching objects and cultural facts by taking into account their humanistic coefficient, and revealing the given phenomenon within a dense network of individual activities and experiences, which provide it with a variety of meanings<sup>28</sup>. The square is simultaneously a place where people stroll, and a toilet area for their dogs. It is both a children's playground, and a car park; it is a sports arena for the racer, and where Catholics take their Sunday walk to church; the daily way to and from work for the residents of the block and the caretaker's workplace. For Robakowski, however, it is the scene of all of these activities. Perhaps the square's lack of clear function was the reason for its transformation in 1983 – *based on Colonel Michalski's decision* – into a city car park. From that point on, the area, crowded with coaches from across Poland, which stopped on account of the nearby grocery store, ceased to be a space of free expression, which had been perceived by the authorities under martial law as potentially dangerous. Seven years later, after the fall of communism in 1991, the square was still a parking space, but of a different kind – a private car park for the estate's residents. For Robakowski, it became a place where one displayed newly-acquired luxury goods such as expensive cars, whilst people walking their dogs had to move onto a narrow pavement. With time, every exhibition space ceases to be a place of expression. In 1999, the



*From My Window*, dir. Józef Robakowski (1999)

area was definitively developed according to the spirit of capitalism – construction of a five-star foreign hotel began, and was erected in this spot. Thus ended the life of the concrete square, absorbed by history.

In the film, time was constructed in a linear fashion. The square had its beginnings (the undeveloped phase), its life (or rather its struggle for life), and its end. A structure developed from the reality, shaped at the moment of each conscious turning on of the camera in the hands of the editor, and in the mind of the film's spectator, who "pieces together" each shot. Slavoj Žižek wrote: *the experience of a linear "organic" flow of events is an illusion (albeit a necessary one) that masks the fact that it is the ending that "retroactively" confers the consistency of an organic whole on the preceding events. What is masked is the radical contingency of the enchainment of narration, the fact that, at every point, things might have turned out otherwise*<sup>29</sup>. The resulting thread is developed rather than found in the material of reality. The chaotically variable sound attracting us to the window is the vibration of real life – a mixture of rhythm and coincidence, which escapes the structural organisation of the conscious self, the latter ultimately always being based on the structure of language. Precisely because, according to Ewa Rewers, *the rhythm of the city is not identical to the rhythm of language*<sup>30</sup>, in order to give his cinematic material a linear order and a logical sequence of events, Józef Robakowski muted the sounds of the busy street, often left just outside of the frame. In the end, he adds a verbal narrative to this silent material, re-identifying the rhythm of the city with the rhythm of language, essentially "an intervention on reality"<sup>31</sup>.

This interrupting voice structures events: it decides what is important at that time, predicts what will happen in future, and focuses the viewer's attention on a particular thread. This is a key operation in the process of creating a logical, diegetic reality, inscribed in the model of cause and effect. The narrator's distance in time, which allows them to find a 'thread', harmonizes with distance created by the photo format used, with these photos often not of the best quality, and taken from the ninth floor using a 16mm camera or a video camera. The narrator adopts a position greater than that of an ordinary witness of events, thereby creating an impression of distance, not just in the structural and temporal sense, but also quantitatively. This perspective may be that of a nostalgic collective memory.

According to Svetlana Boym, in Eastern Europe, as a result of the ever-recurring political transformations that involve breaking with the past of social groups and entire nations, *nostalgia became a defence mechanism against the accelerated rhythm of change and the economic shock therapy*<sup>32</sup>, as well as an expression of *yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world*<sup>33</sup>. *Nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory*<sup>34</sup>, and just as the position of the narrator in *From My Window*, it *relies on temporal and spatial distance (...)*<sup>35</sup>. According to Lynn Spigel, it is in fact nostalgia which is one of the reasons that history is reduced to a linear sequence of events<sup>36</sup>.

The creation of a common heritage for a group is based on emotional memories associated with specific recollections. Nostalgia is like a drawer full of items from one's past which are equally important to a larger group, established precisely because of this shared empathy. It is *a small piece of indivisible space, a scrap of life impossible to explain, an experience of living together in a particular country, in*



*a particular culture and system, in a specific historical moment (...), the sympathetic territory of a community created by a group of people*<sup>37</sup>. In the film *From My Window*, the narrator says that there is nothing left to film after 1991. However, as the voice was added eight years later, it is not that there was nothing to film, but rather nothing to remember. At some point the narrator declares that he does not remember anything from the 1990s, except one big blizzard. At the same time, the stories of the communist era, which are much more numerous, illustrate certain characters and experiences from the collective and nostalgic memory of the period. The first figure in the film is Jan Nargut, the owner of a black dog called Negro – an inhabitant of mass imagination. Following the change of regime, and the death of Negro, he has a new, equally black, dog, but now more “politically correct” and known as Azorek. Additionally, at the beginning of the film, a typical character appears – *an ordinary Jasio, as found in any other block of flats, who for a few pennies will help the residents*. There is also the secretive Mr. Z. – *supplier of illegal meat to his neighbours*; a rally driver pictured in his large Fiat, who shows off his driving skills on the fresh snow; the wife of the artist himself, who starts queuing at a store but gives up, and is spied upon by a mysterious camouflaged car belonging to the Authorities. Moreover, also included are: the May Day street parades, which particularly interested the artist in 1999; the collective return of the state employees, always at 4.30 pm; and the director of a meat packing plant, forced into early retirement for fraud.

Robakowski’s work in its final form is marked by a rupture, a rift between nostalgia and melancholy. Both of these evocative psychological states, associated with experiencing time, and often used as narrative strategies, construct specific situations and visions of reality based not only on different, but in many cases on exactly opposing, foundations. When filming the footage, the artist was immersed in reality, elements of which only years later became objects of nostalgia. When making the recording, he could not predict the ending of the film; the longing for the square only came after its loss, as a result of the distance required for nostalgia to develop. The real action in time – Robakowski’s performance – is akin to a melancholic interest in loss, the gaping hole formed between the “self” and time (or the video camera and window), an obsessive staring at and experimenting with it. Melancholy is an individual’s yearning following an unconscious and inexpressible loss, related to our temporal existence, and inscribed in the fundamental trauma of the beginning and end. Nostalgia, on the other hand, is the collective memory of concrete, material experiences which unify a group, relived at a temporal and often also spatial distance. Nostalgia is the creation of a superficial narrative that cloaks time, typical, easily recognizable and almost decorative, filling the gaping void of melancholy with memories. It is the contextualisation of the non-contextual, an absorption of traumatic contexts. Melancholy is the festering wound – nostalgia is its dressing.

The silent picture *From My Window* is a depressing tale of individual evanescence, the immortalisation of twenty-one years of nothingness that is already non-existent. The voice-over in the film tells a detached, ironic story consisting of a number of experiences drawn from the mythology of the late communist and early Third Polish Republic. The subject of these stories differs: individual and enclosed in its own world, and open and drawing on the collective imagination. What position does the viewer hold in the face of such an internally divided work?



*From My Window*, dir. Józef Robakowski (1999)

The works of Robakowski are firmly underpinned by the theoretical texts he writes. Theories, especially manifestos, are an integral part of the oeuvre of Robakowski – the conceptualist, performer and avant-garde artist. In conversation with Bogusław Zmudziński, he once said:

B. Z.: (...) *through medias you want to access reality, and also to submit to its influence, but there are times when subjectivity takes over, and pure creation comes to surface...*

J. R.: *These are moments I call “misappropriations”; they offer a great opportunity to art. It is often useful to perform such 180-degrees volte-faces, to enter into something fixed and accepted, in order to later perform yet another intervention. I love it, it feels great.*

– *Am I right to think that the commentary to your film “From My Window”, which as you said, is a fairy tale, pure fiction, is an example of such an U-turn, a creative interpretation imposed on reality?*

– *Yes, it is exactly such an operation. These creative ideas are opportunities to reach deeper into this relation, this structure. I am open to what reality brings, but at the same time I'm ready for mischief, which I do to it in return. This is a sort of game, a play between the subjective and the objective* <sup>38</sup>.

This statement allows us to juxtapose the film *From My Window* with the famous manifesto by Robakowski, *I manipulate!* in 1988, which contains the following: *I firmly declare that throughout the life of my art I feed on manipulation, which is used to confuse the clear personal image. I am convinced that the artist is a kind of treacherous fraud, a social ulcer, whose vitality is in fact based on manipulation for his own benefit, as an expression of self-defence from annihilation, i.e. public acceptance and appreciation* <sup>39</sup>.

Even the viewer who is not acquainted with this manifesto may be suspicious of stories in the film. The large numbers of freely quoted facts from several decades ago, as well as unusual names used such as Wood, Rye, Important, Fresh, Puff, Starling, Fish, may raise doubts as to their authenticity. Robakowski does not let the recorded people introduce themselves (in contrast to Krzysztof Kieślowski in *Talking Heads*) – he does it for them, and states who they are for him. Clearly, it is he who gives meaning and drama to the cinematic material. The inferior quality of the



*From My Window*, dir. Józef Robakowski (1999)

recording, the camera angle and the distance deprive the captured people of their faces, take away their individuality, and make them ideal material for manipulation. The same man recorded in different situations may be introduced by the voice as several different people, and this very man, were he to watch the film, might not be aware of this. Moreover, the filmmaker himself makes clear to the viewer his own omnipotence and the potential at all times for manipulation, when at the start of the film he mentions a passer-by – firstly focusing the audience’s attention on him – to announce after a short while that he does not know him and is not interested. In 1999, Robakowski made his most radical cut of the twenty-one years: he used the accumulated material as an illustration for a story he had invented.

This is the most performative end to the long-standing video performance. I think that with this performative act he has established a concrete reality, using the whole length of the film, together with the history of its making. He created a world of lies, theft and manipulation – this space containing the sole truth of reality. Manipulation is the main strategy of consciousness, perception and memory, man’s way of communicating with reality. Applying fiction to recorded events is a way of controlling the world.

The human mind and its subjectivity are identifiable in the crack that is always visible in Robakowski’s work. This is an area of the eternal in-between, the infinite “and” – an enumeration, instead of “or” – a decisive choice. An existence between “me” and “not-me”, between living in time and its end, between life and death, between nostalgia and melancholy. Subjectivity is the fluid spot between the two pieces of glass – the video camera lens and the window. By applying one to the other, Robakowski is looking at this “dot” as a scientist at a microscopic preparation – the tissue trapped between two glass slides, not belonging to either of them, foreign, but creating a relationship between the two by the mere fact of its existence. The history of all the action and material for the film *From My Window* is a replication and analysis of the human mind and the human condition set in time. It follows Robakowski’s call that in art *he deals with the study of his own consciousness, revealing it through mechanical records* <sup>40</sup>. The video performance created between 1978 and 1999 is an analysis of this perception of living in time and in relation to history, as well as of the contradictions and associated processes and recesses of memory.

Robakowski's superimposition of the completed nostalgic film over the material created during his melancholic performance, repeats the human mind's process of retroactive ordering of the past into a sequence of events more realistic than reality. In the memoir which is *From My Window*, he reveals three types of memory, characterised by Ewa Rewers as political, intellectual and popular. *The first one is primarily engaged in assigning importance to events treated instrumentally, in establishing their short-lived hierarchies, and subordinating them to cultural canons. (...) The intellectual memory, on the contrary, is based on a dynamic model of rationality and self-reflection, and does not like simple solutions. Often, it shies away from single meanings, and, betraying an intolerable tendency to deep thinking, never considers events as ready and finished. (...) Popular memory, on the contrary, is willing to duplicate someone else's patterns; mimicking others (...), it brings us closer to a habit*<sup>41</sup>. The political memory in the film is the state-owned official memory, the layers of the urban palimpsest, and the main object of the "found" thread in the film – the institutional transformations of the square. The intellectual memory is the self-reflection of the performer standing with his camera by the window, never closed, trying to capture the structure of reality in all its complex relationships. The popular memory, on the other hand, is the nostalgic narrative created in 1999, drawing on the spectrum of cultural clichés and favouring oblivion rather than reflection. The act of revealing their associations, hierarchies, consequences and oppositions, reconstructs the process of building a vision of the past, as created by the various systems of these three inseparable kinds of memory. It is the fundamental heterogeneity of this structure, replicated by *From My Window*, which causes problems with its classification – the hyper document – as a story created exclusively in the mind of the director, rearranging the "non-fiction" film material<sup>42</sup>, and at the same time as a conceptual and experimental film (again "and", instead of "or"). The work based on manipulation, on the theft of human identity and its liberal use – on "quoting" within the created reality – the simultaneous *projection towards the Other, and the Theft, in the Promethean sense of the term*<sup>43</sup>, is a strictly realistic creation. *Realism – wrote [Roland] Barthes – "is not so much copying reality, as copying (the depicted) copy of reality". Looking at the world – says Barthes – immediately we "frame" it, creating its representation. Watching the image, we create a representation of a representation, which reality escapes. Thus realism is not "copying" reality, but parodying it, building fiction on first degree fiction, which is our looking*<sup>44</sup>. Józef Robakowski not only reveals this hoax of mediations, but forces the viewer to make his own interpretation of its individual layers. Both by writing the manifesto *I Manipulate!*, and by suggesting manipulation in the content and form of the film, the artist creates in the viewer a distancing filter – he gives him glasses with which to read reality as something created by ourselves whilst reading others. As a viewer, I do not know at which point the filmmaker tells or shows a lie. I do not even know whether he does it at all, because within his lies, he can use true facts; when stating that he manipulates, what he says, is true. My general perception of the film is underpinned by this lack of confidence in the author.

Robakowski forces us to adopt a stance similar to the semiology of Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* – a penetrating analysis of *the functioning of social clichés in popular culture*<sup>45</sup>. The author of *From My Window* said that in his video art *he meant to exclude people from political and social manipulation. (...) This is just as*

*relevant in a capitalist society as the press, television or cinema are suggestive instruments that simply dictate human behaviour, thinking and functioning. How to respond to this? How to react to this kind of manipulation? By a deep awareness that this manipulation exists. The artist works in a somewhat different way, by persuading people of his own existence. This is also a form of manipulation, except that it has a different meaning and a different aim. It has to make people aware that they are being manipulated*<sup>46</sup>.

At one point, immediately after the political transformation, when the narrator talks about the renaming of the street on which his house stands, from Adam Mickiewicz to Józef Piłsudski, all of a sudden and for a couple of seconds, we see the only shot that does not show the view from the window – but a painted portrait of Józef Piłsudski. The thoughtful face of the Marshal belongs to a mythical reality, according to Barthes' understanding. This crisscrossing of time (the window) and myth (the portrait), is the result of yet another one of consciousness' mechanisms, but the eyes that stare primarily straight at the audience for two seconds demand interpretation. This change is a manipulation within myths – signs with an ideological added extra. The change of the street's name, inscribed onto the floating map of the world of signs, has no logic in the broader context of systemic transformations. There is only the emptiness of chaos – a lack, inherent in the very essence of the sign – a lack of significant connection with what is being marked. Robakowski draws our attention to the mechanisms of ideological manipulation, while at the same time indicating its detachment from the real world.

This surprise which comes from outside the film's reality is akin to suddenly entering a short but dark tunnel during a train journey on a sunny day – *it breaks the links in the chain of cause and effect*<sup>47</sup>. It is like finding oneself in the space "in between", which not so much darkens the sight, but opens our eyes wide to the all-encompassing, black, blank emptiness disguised in each look.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Robakowski, *Żywa galeria*, Łódź 1995-1997, <http://www.robakowski.net/> (accessed: 23.05.2010).

<sup>2</sup> This term was used in the film's credits.

<sup>3</sup> M. Przyłipiak, *Film dokumentalny jako gatunek retoryczny*, „Kwartalnik Filmowy” 1998, no. 23, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> J. Robakowski, *Żywa galeria*, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> J. Robakowski, *Moje multimedialne peregrynacje... + 5 obrazów i kilka autodygresji*, in: *Odwaga patrzenia. Eseje o fotografii*, Łódź 2006, <http://www.robakowski.net/> (accessed: 23.05.2010).

<sup>7</sup> J. Robakowski, *Żywa galeria*, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> A. Kępińska, *Nowa sztuka. Sztuka polska w latach 1945-1978*, Warszawa 1981, pp. 247-249.

<sup>9</sup> M. Wasilewski, *Sztuka nieobecna*, Poznań 1999, p. 54.

<sup>10</sup> J. Robakowski, *Video Art – szansa podejścia rzeczywistości*, in: *Video Art*, Lublin 1976, <http://www.robakowski.net/> (accessed: 23.05.2010).

<sup>11</sup> This term is sometimes used by the artist when referring to his films; compare: J. Robakowski, *Sztuka do bólu...* <http://www.robakowski.net/> (accessed: 23.05.2010).

<sup>12</sup> E. Rewers, *Post-polis. Wstęp do filozofii nowoczesnego miasta*, Kraków 2005, pp. 66-67.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> B. Kowalska, *Z rozważań o nowej roli ciała w sztuce*, in: Yearbook “Rzeźba Polska” 1992-1993, vol. 6: *Ciało i sztuczność*, Wydawnictwo Centrum Rzeźby Polskiej w Orońsku, Orońsko 1997, p. 28.

- <sup>15</sup> S. Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge 1991, p. 92.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>17</sup> J. Robakowski, *Odautorskie szczypanie rzeczywistości*, in conversation with Marta Skłodowska, "Gazeta Wyborcza Łódź" 26.02.2007, <http://www.teatry.art.pl/!rozmowy/osrz.htm> (accessed: 23.05.2010).
- <sup>18</sup> J. Robakowski, *Instalacje*, Łódź 1998, <http://www.robakowski.net/> (accessed: 23.05.2010).
- <sup>19</sup> J. Laplanche, J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, transl. D. Nicholson-Smith, London 1998, pp. 352-354.
- <sup>20</sup> M. P. Markowski, *Perekreacja*, in: G. Percec, *Gabinet kolekcjonera*, transl. M. P. Markowski, Warszawa 2003, pp. 158-159.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 158.
- <sup>22</sup> Compare, among others: B. Banasiak, *Słońce ekstazy, noc melancholii. Rzecz o Raymondzie Rousselu*, Łódź – Wrocław 2007, pp. 76-78; M. Bieńczyk, *Melancholia. O tych, co nigdy nie odnajdą straty*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 39-40 and particularly pp. 55-61.
- <sup>23</sup> M. Bieńczyk, op. cit., p. 32.
- <sup>24</sup> M. P. Markowski, op. cit., p. 175.
- <sup>25</sup> S. Symotiuik, *Filozofia i genius loci*, Warszawa 1997, p. 56, cited by E. Rewers, *Post-polis...* op. cit., p. 62.
- <sup>26</sup> I. Malmor, *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego*, Warszawa – Bielsko-Biała 2010, p. 316.
- <sup>27</sup> M. Przyłipiak, op. cit., p. 17.
- <sup>28</sup> F. Znaniecki, *Socjologia wychowania*, Warszawa 1973, p. 28.
- <sup>29</sup> S. Žižek, op. cit., p. 69.
- <sup>30</sup> E. Rewers, op. cit., p. 58.
- <sup>31</sup> *Thermograms – Operation on Reality*, is the title of Robakowski's text, in which the artist describes the strange, quasi-photographic objects he calls "thermograms". Compare: J. Robakowski, *Termogramy – operacja na rzeczywistości*, 1999, <http://www.robakowski.net/> (accessed: 23.05.2010).
- <sup>32</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York 2001, p. 64.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. XIV.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p. XVI.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p. 70.
- <sup>36</sup> L. Spiegel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*, Durham – London 2001, p. 372.
- <sup>37</sup> D. Ugrešić, *The Confiscation of Memory*, in: eadem, *The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays*, transl. C. Hawkesworth, University Park 1998, here quoted after the Polish edition: *Konfiskata pamięci*, transl. D. J. Ćirić, in: *Nostalgia. Eseje o tęsknocie za komunizmem*, Wołowiec 2002, pp. 245-246.
- <sup>38</sup> J. Robakowski, *Kino jest dla mnie najpiękniejszą z instalacji*, in conversation with Bogusław Zmudziński, <http://www.robakowski.net/> (accessed: 23.05.2010).
- <sup>39</sup> J. Robakowski, *Manipuluje!* Warszawa 1988, <http://www.robakowski.net/> (accessed: 23.05.2010).
- <sup>40</sup> J. Robakowski, *Stan świadomości*, Łódź 1976, cited by J. Busza, *Iluminacje Robakowskiego*, in: *Wobec fotografii*, Warszawa 1983, <http://www.robakowski.net/> (accessed: 23.05.2010).
- <sup>41</sup> E. Rewers, op. cit., p. 182.
- <sup>42</sup> M. Przyłipiak, op. cit., p. 7.
- <sup>43</sup> G. Percec, *Gabinet kolekcjonera*, transl. M. P. Markowski, cited by M. P. Markowski, *Perekreacja*, op. cit., p. 173.
- <sup>44</sup> M. P. Markowski, op. cit., p. 151.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibidem, p. 85.
- <sup>46</sup> M. Wasilewski, op. cit., p. 65.
- <sup>47</sup> G. Królikiewicz, *Przestrzeń filmowa poza kadrem*, "Kino" 1972, no. 11, p. 27.