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A critical commentary on Grzegorz Królikiewicz text White Noise.

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Grzegorz Królikiewicz: "Holds in the Climbing Wall"

A successful combination of theoretical and practical activity is not in itself surprising; on the contrary, theoretical awareness verbalized or revealed by an artwork seems to be part and parcel of the visual arts. "Królikiewicz's case," however, merits special attention: as a director of feature and documentary films, theater spectacles, and television shows, as well as an educator, eminent cinema theorist, and interpreter of other directors' work, he treats each of these spheres as a separate field of practices/theories, governed by autonomous rules. It is only when they are fully independent and require distinct competences from the artist – engaging a different register of his sensibility – that these fields may (and do) enter into complex interaction. How to understand these nexuses, how they are formed, and what they result in – both from an individual creative perspective and a more general, philosophical-cultural one – were broadly discussed by Królikiewicz in *Pracuję dla przyszłości* [*I Work for the Future*], the book-length interview conducted by Piotr Kletowski and Piotr Marecki.[1] In the book, Królikiewicz also addressed broader questions, pointing out that those nexuses and interactions also expressed his political and ethical stance; that this was where his place in culture was defined. Królikiewicz is therefore an artist-theorist, who roams vast expanses of culture, and everywhere he stops he leaves an indelible trace that often sparks dispute and controversy. At the same time, he is perceived as a figure "from the margins" – an eccentric, an oddball, perhaps even a lunatic, as some see him.[2] Moreover, he has consistently positioned himself outside the frame, speaking from offscreen for years,[3] constantly seeking new justifications for this position and mode.

Beyond doubt, the most obvious nexus – the most visible and frequently commented on – is that between film practice and

theory. It should arouse interest all the more because it is not a common phenomenon in Polish cinema and visual arts.[4] A characteristic feature of Królikiewicz's approach is that theoretical considerations and their connection with practice have always held for him a significance that is as much existential and ethical as it is social or even "missionary." For their goal was never just to gain artistic self-knowledge about his creative work. From the very beginning, theory, and its nexus with practice, would serve the activation and engagement of the viewer – perhaps even shaping him or her. In this case, we can talk about a pedagogy of seeing practiced by various means.

In order to understand and fully appreciate the originality of such a task, we may choose, by way of experiment, to set aside the polemic around "coherence" between theory and practice. Especially because even extreme interpretations – on the one hand, there is no direct correspondence between practice and theory in Królikiewicz's case[5]; on the other hand, his work is a manifestation and visualization of his theory[6] – can be defended in equal measure. Królikiewicz, somewhat in agreement with his position "on the margins," situated himself not so much "in the middle," but rather "on the side," by stating: "If we compare a gaze to a filmed shot, then writing the theory is comparable to closing your eyes." He went on to explain that he had noted down most of his theoretical reflections while on set, during the frequent and tiresome moments of waiting (for lighting, for decoration), when he would close his eyes "not to look at the mess of life."[7] It is worth following these intuitions and concentrating on arranging Królikiewicz's most important theoretical findings in a certain order and in isolation from his film and television practice. The status of the theory seems particularly interesting if it is considered as something that relates to the more general problem of contemporary practices of seeing and creating the image, for which

Królikiewicz's films and projects are just one possible point of reference.

As a theorist of the image (photographic, film, television, or video), Królikiewicz has concentrated on questions of time and space, relating these categories to the overarching notion of the frame. Importantly, this notion is not understood here in purely formal or technical terms: the frame exists for Królikiewicz only within the experience of watching, and provides a starting point for reflection on the perceptual, intellectual, and emotional bond between the viewer as well as the screen and the image projected or cast on it. Where does this bond come from? Królikiewicz may be said to situate the problem of time and space in the context of reflection on the frame because he wishes to understand and explain the hypnotic power of cinema, television, and video – hypnosis is yet another important term in his dictionary.

Królikiewicz's thinking about film clearly includes threads kindred to Henri Bergson's reflections in *Creative Evolution*. The former's texts *Ekshumacja czasu* [*Exhumation of Time*] and *Ucieczka obrazów* [*The Escape of Images*] associate the apparatus of perception with the cinematographic apparatus; this is because both cases involve the creation of the illusion of movement and continuity.[8] However, Królikiewicz offers a new and rather surprising interpretation of the mechanism that produces this illusion. "The film frame is projected on the screen for 1/48th of a second. During the next period, which again lasts 1/48th of a second, the screen in fact shows darkness."[9] "Black holes," as Królikiewicz calls them, obviously last for such a short time that they are not consciously perceived; nevertheless, in total, they take half of the projection time. "We watch a film for two hours. During that time, for one hour we seem not to know that essentially 'there is no film,' although we are 'watching a film'."[10] The consolidation of "gappy" images into an image of movement occurs in the viewers'

(un)consciousness, and the sole task of theory is to make them aware of their condition, including the creative power of their memory, responsible for establishing the continuity of a stream of frames. In this way, the viewer goes beyond the pure present of subjective perception, which deforms reception due to the activity of the senses. The inevitable activation of memory and consciousness, somewhat forced by the sequence of "black holes," entails secondary objectivization. Królikiewicz calls this phenomenon a "subjective-objective alloy," and argues that the uniqueness of the cinematic experience consists in the fact that the subjective and objective spheres come to mutually catalyze each other and "open within us the possibility of the most profound and dramatic cognition. It is a simultaneity of cognition – of oneself and the world."[11]

Similarly, for the question of space in the image, what matters most is not what is seemingly visible therein. While still a student, Królikiewicz formulated his concept of offscreen space, and likewise in this case the starting point was not so much the perspective of the camera lens (*what I see*), but rather the situation of watching a sequence of images (*what I cannot see*). The film image is always what cannot be seen in it. In Mirosław Przylipiak's words, "What is shown is primarily a leaven. The real sphere of creating ideas begins outside the frame."[12]

It seems that Królikiewicz's proposal – initially oriented toward cinema – can be treated as an attempt to liberate the film image, and the whole cinematographic structure at the same time, from the reign of linear perspective. The director emphasizes that cinema is still dominated by the pyramidic figure; let us add: characteristic of the Renaissance perspective model, with the point of view of the observer inscribed therein. In films, this domination results in an anthropocentric staging and an "apodictic" (as Królikiewicz calls it) narrative model whose principal motto could read: "what finds itself in the frame (in the image) is everything." Królikiewicz proposes a competitive,

"democratic" model – the figure of the sphere. While the camera is situated in the center, the frame is always just a section of the sphere that refers to the whole – no longer visible – rest. The viewer, previously shaped, inscribed in the image, and therefore superfluous, becomes indispensable here in order to complement the essentially incomplete image. The problem of the continuity of images and the idea of offscreen space are Królikiewicz's emblematic concepts. That is because the frame and the viewer are central components of both. This starting point, or even primary situation of *the viewer in relation to the frame* lies at the foundation of the director's theoretical interventions.

But what does theory itself become from Królikiewicz's perspective? It turns out that even here he presents his own meta-proposal, a kind of theory of theory. Theoretical texts are not treated primarily as tools, but rather offer a response to the sense of solitude and creative isolation, and "function like holds in the climbing wall: oh, a hold, someone must have passed through here."[13] Theory is therefore rather a trace, a sign, or perhaps a certain trope, left as much for oneself as for others who follow the same route. Particularly interesting in this context is Królikiewicz's response to Paweł Kwiek's action *Commentary* [*Komentarz*, 1972], carried out as part of the activity of the Workshop of the Film Form (WFF). Kwiek presented a film to "viewers" without using film stock or a screen; he merely delivered a text in a projection hall, thus lending a radically narrative dimension to the cinematographic situation. In turn, Królikiewicz, who also participated in the event, wrote a review of *Commentary*, published in the *Film* monthly, as if it had been a regular film screening. In this way, he followed Kwiek's steps and engaged in an interesting reflection on the essence of the medium himself. We may say that even though Królikiewicz never formally belonged to the WFF, he certainly – albeit in a markedly different way – developed in theory and practice sometimes very similar reflections on the mediation of human perception

through the media. In this area, he devoted the greatest attention to television and video, of which the most interesting and extreme example is undoubtedly the text "White Noise"[14] [Biały szum].

Let us evoke another WFF project – once again, not to trace mutual influences or explicit or hidden borrowings, but to point to the context of common investigations which characterized the Polish avant-garde of the 1970s, oriented primarily to questions of intermediality. In 1976, at the House of Cultural Milieus [Dom Środowisk Twórczych] in Łódź, Antoni Mikołajczyk presented the video installation *Apparent Image* [*Obraz pozorny*]. "A video camera was placed in the gallery facing [a] clock. A microphone amplified its ticking. The monitor in the room showed an image of the clock. This image, however was transmitted from [a] hidden camera which was transmitting a still photograph of the clock. At the beginning, reality and image were identical. After some time a dischord [sic] appeared between the two. This dischord [sic] was perceived only after a long time, which proved to me that the identification of reality and its recorded image prevents accurate perception of either"[15] – as Mikołajczyk explained his concept, illustrating it with photographs and a sketch of the structure consisting of a camera, a monitor, a second camera, and a photograph.

In "White Noise," Królikiewicz also takes an interest in the structure of the electronic installation represented by television (and video), and the interference it causes in the image of the world and of ourselves as viewers. However, the starting point is another kind of interference, which we involuntarily witness "in the moment of an idiotic zoning-out" after a program is over, the set is still on, and on the screen we see (and hear) white noise – "snowfall."[16] Królikiewicz interprets this phenomenon as an image or echo of the Big Bang, the beginning of the universe and, at the same time, the "debut of visibility,"[17] when invisible energy materialized. We should understand this phenomenon in the

most literal terms, not only as an inspiring metaphor or intellectual provocation, and open up to the profound metaphysical shock inevitably brought about by, on the one hand, confrontation with the awareness of the nothingness of the universe (both prior to the emergence of matter and after its disappearance) and, on the other hand, the primary electronic installation imposed on us by television: "camera – lamp – video cassette recorder – screen – lamp." Królikiewicz refers to this structure as the "generator of the present" and remarks that, in spatial terms, it is also responsible for generating "the overtly artificial image, which does not reproduce anything anymore."[18] The medium of television is entirely self-referential, oriented toward the production of artificial reality and a new character of cognition. It does not offer a mediated image of reality (which cinema can still do), but an image that "does not fit into the formula of realism devised by the empiricism of Western Europe."[19] It is an image devoid of any reference to reality and, at the same time, it undermines any realness of the world. At this point, Królikiewicz's reflection resonates with Jean Baudrillard's philosophy of representation – both turn out to be similarly critical of the very foundations of Western thought: the illusory and intoxicating mixture of rationalism and empiricism.

However, when compared to Baudrillard, Królikiewicz takes interest in slightly different effects of the confrontation with the artificial video-television reality, which can be analyzed both from an individual perspective (the question of the identity of the observer) and a collective one (civilizational and cultural transformation resulting from electronic media). Królikiewicz approaches the latter in a rather cursory way, although he highlights a crucial question, seldom addressed by contemporary media theory, which may actually be considered in the context of Marshall McLuhan's classic reflection. Against widespread belief, television (but also other "new media" such as the Internet) is not a common and universal medium; on the contrary, "television is,

by virtue of its own structure, a device which merely exaggerates the informational differences between various civilizations."[20] Nor does television create any new unitary civilization or a grand synthesis of humankind's cultural achievements – there are only medial utopias produced by contemporary societies, resulting from erroneous and archaic cognitive habits. Królikiewicz notes, however, that television can be considered within a new paradigm, "the paradigm of the imagination" – but this would be a medium of an entirely different kind, with a different structure. Thus, it would not be television.

What turns out to be more interesting – and surprisingly topical – is Królikiewicz's reflection concerning the status of the subject in relation to what he calls the "video mirror." Watching one's own image on the screen, oneself in a technically reproduced image, is only seemingly like a confrontation with a mirror reflection. When we see ourselves in the mirror, the "self" and the "reflection of the self" are simultaneous in the temporal dimension, but reversed in the spatial dimension. In the "video mirror," the subject and its image are not reversed, but are inevitably separated by a momentary distance, a "temporal split" resulting from the principle according to which the medium functions. The moment of recording can never be identical to the moment of projection; perception of the self is separated from perception of one's reflection by temporal distance, sometimes almost imperceptible, but always present. As a result, the subject cannot be identical to its screen (and, after all, also its photographic) image, the "self-image" projected by cinema, television, video, and – to follow Królikiewicz's intuition further – new digital and web-based media, remains false at the level of perception and existence. Aside from the Sartrean "existential rupture," Królikiewicz also evokes Lacan's "mirror stage." However, as opposed to the "secondary identification" of video, he calls it the "primal identification" experience.[21] The reference to Lacan's concept and its unobvious interpretation in

the context of reflection on the situation of the subject that builds its own identity on the basis of technically reproduced and mass-distributed reflection testifies to Królikiewicz's ability, so significant in his thought, to notice sometimes surprising partners in theoretical climbing. Let us remember that elements of Lacanian psychoanalysis were applied in reflection on cinema and, more broadly, on visual culture only from the 1970s. Królikiewicz therefore once again chooses routes and "holds" that are still little used, venturing into almost unexplored areas of reflection on the status of the image in contemporary culture.

Theories of seeing and image, or rather the numerous dispersed and mutually complementary notions and concepts that could be extracted from Królikiewicz's thought and creative practice, can be considered as still-tempting (though not always "stable") tropes serving research on visual culture. According to his intuitions, the "climbing wall" involved is rather the dynamic entirety of cultural theories and practices, and not only the narrowly understood "means of transmission" and "media content."

1   Piotr Marecki and Piotr Kletowski, *Królikiewicz. Pracuję dla przyszłości* (Kraków: Korporacja ha!art, 2011).

2   Before embarking on a not-unambiguous defense of the director, Mirosław Przylipiak begins his text about Królikiewicz by quoting the following anecdote: "When Królikiewicz's movie was discussed during the selection of films for one of the festivals in Gdańsk, a prominent figure opposed to the film purportedly said: 'Ladies and gentlemen, Królikiewicz is a lunatic. His brother is a psychiatrist in Gdańsk, and he visits him for treatment.' The only thing that is certainly real in this story is the psychiatrist brother – he indeed lives and works in Gdańsk." Mirosław Przylipiak, "Obrona Królikiewicza," in: *Film polski: Twórcy i mity*, ed. Kazimierz Sobotka (Łódź: Łódzki Dom Kultury, 1987), 139.

3   In the volume of texts under the telling title *Off, czyli hipnoza kina* [*Off, or the Hypnosis of Cinema*], Królikiewicz explains his "off" position specifically, for example by indicating that this was how Jerzy Bossak, a professor at the film school, defined it, and, on another occasion metaphorically, by referring to his principal theoretical concept: "In

the film narrative, *off* means a relation between image and sound in which something can be heard from offscreen that cannot be seen in the frame. To use a close comparison – *off* may also be a relation established in the image when something from offscreen is felt as present in the narrative, although it cannot be seen in the frame. To use a broader comparison – *off* is a relation in culture... and so on, and so forth..." Grzegorz Królikiewicz, "Posłowie," in: idem, *Off, czyli hipnoza kina* (Warsaw–Łódź: Centralny Ośrodek Metodyki Upowszechniania Kultury, Łódzki Dom Kultury, 1992), 145.

4   In this context, Łukasz Ronduda pointed to the methodological kinship with Stefan Themerson and Workshop of the Film Form (WFF) artists [Łukasz Ronduda, "Skolimowski, Królikiewicz, Żuławski, Uklański. Excerpts from the History of Polish New Wave," in: *Polish New Wave: The History of a Phenomenon that Never Existed*, eds. Łukasz Ronduda and Barbara Piwowarska, trans. Marcin Wawrzyńczak et al. (Warsaw: Instytut Adama Mickiewicza, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, 2008), 30]. Królikiewicz actually collaborated with some of them, for example with Zbigniew Rybczyński on the film *The Dancing Hawk* [*Tańczący jastrząb*]. I do not think the comparison is entirely accurate. The character of the WFF's visual work was much more incidental, performative, and impermanent, which also renders theoretical commentaries more ephemeral and more closely related to specific works, not fully independent, and, more than anything, they do not form such a consistent theoretical position as in Królikiewicz's case.

5   Cf. Przylipiak, "Obrona Królikiewicza," 141.

6   Cf. Kuba Mikurda, "A Thing about Królikiewicz," in: *Polish New Wave*, 70.

7   Królikiewicz, "Posłowie," 146.

8   Interestingly, Królikiewicz does not directly refer to Bergson in any of the cited texts, although he sometimes seems to quote him almost literally. Only in the conversation with Piotr Kletowski and Piotr Marecki does he state: "To be able to exclaim like Bergson: 'My God, the human mind has the nature of a cinematograph!' Commensurateness is needed between the rush in the brain the rush on the screen. And this is likely one of the greatest mysteries of cinema." Marecki and Kletowski, *Królikiewicz*, 331.

9   Grzegorz Królikiewicz, "Ekshumacja czasu," in: idem, *Off*, 38.

10   Grzegorz Królikiewicz, "Ucieczka obrazów," in: idem, *Off*, 53.

11   Ibid., 61.

12   Przylipiak, "Obrona Królikiewicza," 153.

13   Marecki and Kletowski, *Królikiewicz*, 237.

14   Grzegorz Królikiewicz, "White Noise," *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture*, 27 (2020), https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/27-formatting-of-late-television/white-noise.

15   Antoni Mikołajczyk, "Obraz pozorny – plansza," in: *Workshop of the Film Form 1970–1977*, ed. Ryszard W. Kluszczyński (Warsaw: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, 2000), 46.

16   Królikiewicz, "White Noise." We should of course remember that in this text Królikiewicz analyzes (and in a way also theoretically constructs and simultaneously deconstructs) the workings of analog television. As for digital television, an adequate ontology and archaeology should probably still be devised.

17   Marecki and Kletowski, *Królikiewicz*, 229.

18   Królikiewicz, "White Noise."

19   Ibid.

20   Ibid.

21   Ibid.