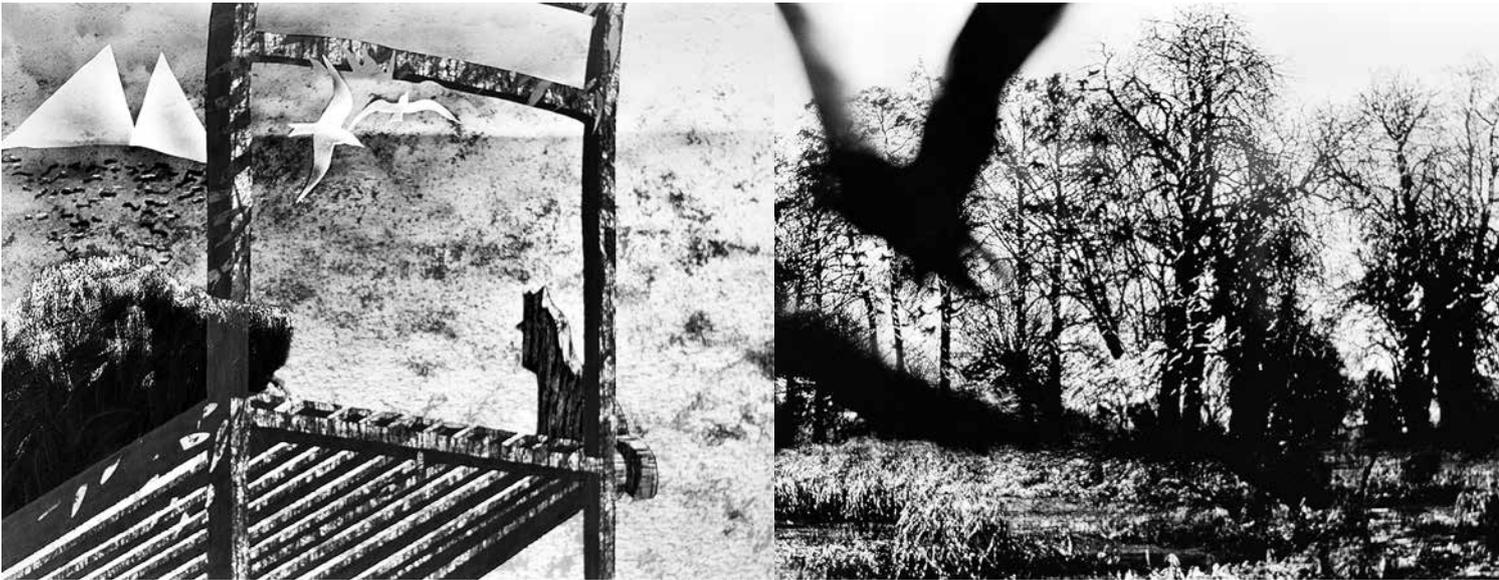


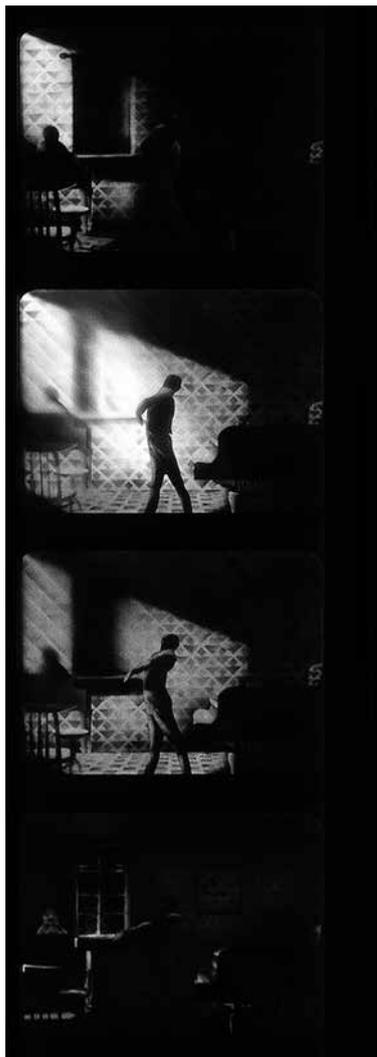
Animator in Focus: Jerzy Kucia



Black Trains through Dark Landscapes

This year's animator-in-focus implements unique film techniques to poeticize about the deepest layers of the human soul. Jerzy Kucia is one of the world's greatest poets of imagery.

ANIMATION HAS ALWAYS been an integrated part of film culture, and its ups and downs have been distinctly related to the prevailing situation in the film industry of different countries or regions. The great French pioneers of animation, like Cohl and Méliès, worked in an environment characterized by enormous enthusiasm in the film industry founded upon the Lumière brothers' successes with their new "cinématographe". Similarly, Victor Bergdahl's animated film production was directly connected to the large boom for Swedish feature films in the 1910s, including directors like Sjöström and Stiller. The Swedish classics were denoted by epic treatment of nature, landscapes and the wide, billowing sea. Similar stylistic features are also



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found in Bergdahl’s animated films. The same thing applies to Lotte Reiniger, whose animated silhouettes were a part of Germany’s cinematographic expressionism in the 1920s, where artificial backgrounds and strong contrasts between black and white comprised essential elements. A fundamental part of Hollywood’s so-called studio system has doubtlessly been the popular animated films made by Fleischer, Warner Brothers and of course Disney.

The same applies to Poland’s high-end tradition of animation, which alongside the British tradition stands out as Europe’s most creative national productions in this field. Poland’s high status as a film nation resulted from the democratic changes in the Communist Party and the state in the 1950s. At that time, young filmmakers like Wajda, Kawalerowicz, Kutz, Holland and Polanski

were given the opportunity to explore and critically tackle the nation’s contemporary history. Meanwhile, Polish animation studios began developing a unique and cinematographically innovative tradition.

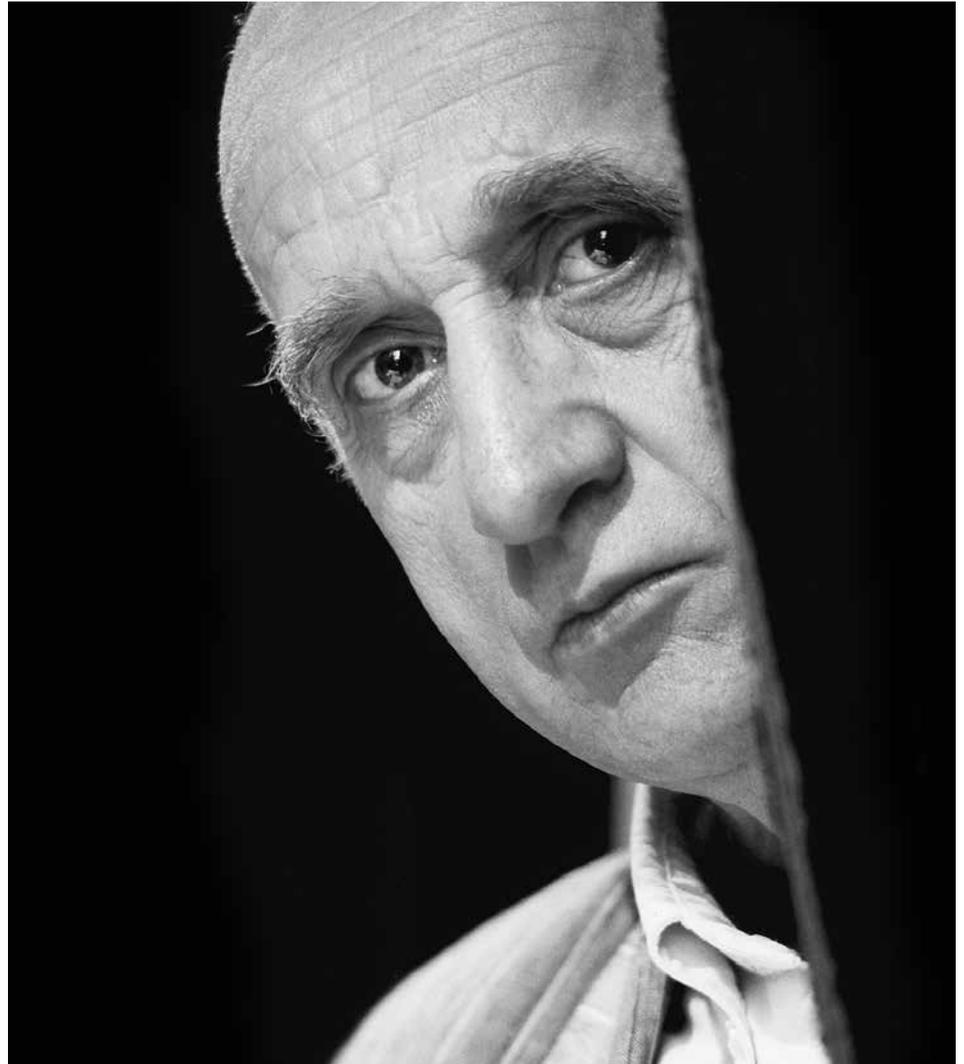
WHAT SET POLISH ANIMATION aside was its absurdist, macabre and pitch-black view of reality as related through bold experimentation with the form of film itself. Polish animators like Jan Lenica, Walerian Borowczyk, Witold Giersz, Mirosław Kijowicz, Daniel Szczechura, Jerzy Zitzman, Ryszard Czekala and Zbigniew Rybczynski preferred working with unusual forms of expression like object animation, cut-out and pixilation, rather than with the traditional production methods of animated film.

However, when the political climate took a

turn for the worse at the beginning of the 1960s, many Polish animators emigrated and continued their careers in the West. Critics accused the most talented filmmakers of “formalism” and censorship rose to a ludicrous level, which caused an enduring creative crisis and stagnation in Polish film.

A rebirth of Polish animated film occurred at the beginning of the 1970s and we can see traces of it still today. One of the foremost Polish animators to gain notoriety at that time was Jerzy Kucia (born in 1942), who had studied graphic design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. Many years later he became a professor and the head of the animation department at the same academy.

At first Kucia wanted to study painting and graphic art, and only showed a moderate interest in animation. The desire to make films came later,



when his development as a graphic artist reached a point where he felt a need to depict movement in images. At the same time, which Kucia pointed out in an interview with Melissa Chimovitz, the country's political situation made him want to "portray the Polish reality and relate his own situation."

ONE OF THE ANIMATORS who has decisively influenced the design of Kucia's style and sensibility is Ryszard Czekala. In his films, such as *Son* (1970) and *Apel* (1972), black and white forms, graphic realism and collage techniques are used to create a kind of "photographic effect," with which Czekala creates an atmosphere of fear, discomfort and restlessness.

Already in his first film *The Return* (*Powrot*, 1972), Kucia introduced his typical motifs. You

see silhouetted human figures, whose movements show exhaustion, black birds on fences, streets and railway stations embedded in a dark mist. You see black windows, sunsets over the city, harsh faces partially covered by the shadow cast by hats, which sometimes are reflected in glass or in water. And the darkness, once again this darkness... Aside from black and white, only a few colors are used, and only when Kucia wants to emphasize a specific feeling or hint at some hidden power moving beneath the imagery's black-and-white surface.

Trains are a particularly important symbol in Kucia's films. Trains function as a meaningful symbol across Central Europe. Trains enable arrival and departure, freedom to meet others, something that the region's population had often been deprived of. In nearly all his films you encounter a main on a train—sometimes we see

the train, and sometimes "the camera" is situated in the compartment, so we observe the world as a moving background seen through the train's window.

Based on this symbolically charged imagery, Kucia has developed his own method of narration, in which underlying connections, uncanny relations and complex correlations constitute main ingredients. His animation is characterized by rich, rhythmic variation. Brief close-up images with details of faces, hands or butterflies are followed by extended takes with nature scenes, gloomy urban environments and indescribable portrayals of spaces and places. Kucia is exceptionally adept at combining dynamic movement with stillness. Often in his films a tranquil scene is interrupted by a wave of emotions.

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THEMATICALLY KUCIA HAS chosen to consequently portray inner states of other humans. We do not consciously perceive a twenty-fourth of a second. We are incapable of sensing or understanding such small fractions of time. But Kucia always departs from such a point, he strives to reveal what lies beyond our observable reality, but which remains an essential part of our world. Kucia perfected a surrealistically visual language through which he exposed the unconscious and the darkness of nightmares. For that reason his animated images are excellent for describing and highlighting souls drained by poverty, or those terrorized by stupidity and ideological lies, and those who are terrified and numbed by gloom of everyday life.

Sergei Einstein once said that the best place to hide something was in public, since humans have difficulty grasping the obvious. In this respect you can say that Kucia “publicized” the depression and suffering people have fallen victim to by having living in a broken social system that called itself humanistic and socialist. Kucia has revealed hidden images demonstrating that people did not identify with the alleged success and justice of their reality, but that they instead experienced the system as a dark prison to which they were sentenced to serve their days in.

This has all become even clearer in his subsequent films, such as *A Life* (*Winda*, 1973), *In the Shadow* (*W Cieniu*, 1975) and *The Barrier* (*Szlaban*, 1976). Beginning with *The Circle* (*Krag*, 1978), Kucia began using specially modifying

photographs, something which accentuates the credibility found in his films

Reflections (*Refleksy*, 1979) is the only film by Kucia that builds up from a linear narration about a clear message. The film’s main characters are insects constructed with a nearly scientific exactitude in respect to their anatomy and movement. We get to follow an insect’s colossal strain as it struggles to free itself from its pupal shell. As soon as it’s free the insect is attacked by another, initiating the lifelong fight for survival. This is the only time in Kucia’s career that he used a perfect synchronization of image and sound in order to depict the anxiety and near-death experience in a convincing way—something which further elucidates the metaphor telling us our lives can end at any moment.





NEW SUCCESS CAME in the 1980s, through *The Spring* (*Wiosna*, 1980), *Splinters* (*Odpryski*, 1984) and especially *The Parade* (*Parada*, 1986). In the latter, Kucia develops his fascinating animation techniques, this time based on the optical printer and laser treatment of photographs.

In *Across the Field* (*Przez Polie*, 1997), Kucia turned back to his childhood and once again masterfully combined the visible and invisible “films” in mankind’s mental landscape.

Yet *Tuning Instruments* (*Strojenie Instrumentów*, 2000) can be seen as Kucia’s magnum opus. The film possesses an exemplary beauty, resulting from a unique craft of creating animated images with qualities that are impossible to obtain with computers or any other modern technology. *Tuning Instruments* definitively proves that

Kucia’s visual fantasy can be compared with that of Central Europe’s most famous animator, Jan Svankmajer. Notably, our eyes are the instruments that this beautiful film composition serves to fine-tune.

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