Introduction

A Private Universe

Kamila Kuc, Kuba Mikurda, and Michał Oleszczyk

In a seminal image from *Astronauts* (*Les Astronautes* [1959]), the first film Walerian Borowczyk made after immigrating to France, a DIY space shuttle traverses what looks like the most cluttered galaxy one could possibly travel to. All sense of proportion is gone: a vast landscape turns out to be someone's shoe, and tiny details acquire cosmic dimensions and surprising meanings. All this is fueled by a single man's curiosity: the titular astronaut, whose crazy quest seems to be to connect with and explore everything there is, from celestial bodies in the sky to a particularly heavenly body he sees in a lit window of an ordinary brownstone building … In one of the letters donated to Cinémathèque Française, Borowczyk writes of *Astronautes*:

> *Man has always dreamt of making outer space into his home. But that's still impossible without a special garment. It would be a peculiar sight, indeed: a run-of-the-mill dreamer, traversing galaxies in his typical gray outfit. With a basket of tomatoes as provisions. That's exactly the guy I decided to make a film about.*[1]

It is not very difficult to see this figure of an explorer and craftsman as a self-portrait of Borowczyk himself.

The usual story, which has become something of a film-historical cliché, goes that Walerian Borowczyk was an acclaimed filmmaker who went from art house stardom in the 1970s, to soft-core oblivion in the 1980s. Once hailed as one of the greatest visionaries of European cinema alongside Buñuel and Fellini, he ended his career as the director of late-night TV erotic series. As is often the case, the actual picture is much more nuanced and difficult to grasp. However it's certainly

true that his films are equally cherished by fans of art house refinement as they are by fans of (s)exploitation flicks; the "rise and fall" or "artist turned pornographer" narrative simply cannot hold when confronted with the diversity and scope of Borowczyk's extremely prolific career.

Boro, L'Île D'Amour: The Films of Walerian Borowczyk is the first English-language edited volume exploring the work of this label-defying auteur — an "escape artist," if there ever was one, passionately countering people's attempts to pigeonhole his work. The book coincides with the revival of interest in Borowczyk's work (retrospectives, film restorations, new editions), which nonetheless remains marked by the lack of a comprehensive source on this maverick director. This collection serves as an introduction and a guide to the complex and ambiguous body of Borowczyk's work. Consisting of sixteen chapters, contributions range from panoramic views of the director's entire work and analytical takes on particular movies, to more personal, impressionistic pieces, thus offering a wide and diverse perspective on the filmmaker's work. This collection constitutes a platform for a wide array of writers (from the United Kingdom, United States, and Poland) to explore previously unnoticed aspects of Borowczyk's oeuvre.

"I conceived all my films in an instant"

It's fair to say that Walerian Borowczyk's body of work presents a significant challenge to any historian's attempt to classify it and ascribe it to a single narrative. For one thing, the sheer scope of the work, ranging from shorts and features to animation and vérité-like realism, suggests a sensibility so eclectic and voracious as to be positively unclassifiable. Borowczyk's multifaceted talents, which allowed him to excel in fields as diverse as drawing, poster art, advertisement, sculpture, animation, film, poetry, and prose, at first seem an ocean too wide and too deep to navigate, much less place firmly on a map and confine to a particular location.

Borowczyk famously claimed that he "conceived all [his] films in an instant, and only objective factors prevented [him] from making them in that instant" (Borowczyk 1973). He does not believe in artistic evolution; he's a creationist, pure and simple. And indeed, there is something instantaneous about his works—rather than present the development of a style, a sense of emerging mastery, a

process of artistic self-recognition, they are defined and self-aware from the start. They are not a succession, but a constellation of works, where every element is as important as the next. Indeed, one is often puzzled when asked about "the best" piece in Borowczyk's oeuvre — his works are at their best when one approaches them all together, side by side.

Borowczyk's cinematic universe is a vast archive of multilayered collections of objects, texts, and images. These are interwoven in an audiovisual spectacle very precisely arranged by the eclectic stylist that Borowczyk was. Having studied painting techniques (particularly lithography), it is perhaps not surprising that his films explore, intentionally or not, the relationship between stillness and movement. The director's fascination with Étienne-Jules Marey's experiments further confirms this. Much has been written about Borowczyk's use of diverse imagery, but let's stress the most striking tendencies here.

Borowczyk's oeuvre can be characterized by a strong presence of more traditional art forms. These often constitute the very stuff of which his films are made: photography (*School* [1958]; *Rosalie* [1966]), collage (*Grandma's Encyclopedia* [1963]) and animated objects, watercolors and drawings (*House* [1958] made with Jan Lenica; *Angels' Games* [1964]; *Joachim's Dictionary* [1965]). More direct references to painting can be seen within the actual frames of his films, as in the case of *The Beast* (1975) in which Władysław Podkowiński's painting *Frenzy of Exultations* (*Szał uniesień*, 1894) decorates the wall. Not to mention Borowczyk's magnificent still life compositions (*Renaissance* [1963]). Moreover, a few of Borowczyk's works are composed of filmed paintings (the repollero technique) (*Rewarded Feelings* [1957] made with Lenica), and he also developed a new technique — pulverographie — "dustography" — which involves color photocopying. Borowczyk employed this method to illustrate his collection of short stories, *The Anatomy of the Devil* (1992). But his engagement with static art forms does not stop there. Borowczyk's fascination with the realm of painting is also visible in a calculated flatness that characterizes films such as *Blanche* (1971), where the impact of medieval iconography is particularly evident. Borowczyk frames the shots as if they were a painting, with the characters looking out of its frame. Though not medieval in its visual composition, a corresponding shallowness of picture can be found in *Goto, Isle of Love* (1968).

To the Moon and Back

One aspect that was often neglected by authors writing about Borowczyk was the adequate placement of him within cinematic trends that either coincide with his activity or precede and anticipate it in illuminating ways. More than any other auteur within a select group of international cinematic provocateurs (including such figures as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Oshima Nagisa, Andy Warhol, Dušan Makavejev, Russ Meyer, and Barbara Rubin), Borowczyk's sensibility is easily traceable to the influence of three major filmmakers that helped shape his own aesthetic: Georges Méliès, Sergei Eisenstein, and Luis Buñuel.

Each of the three represents a different aspect developed by Borowczyk: Méliès stands for the DIY film magic so often employed in Boro's animation (most notably in *The Astronauts*, which can be seen as a free-associative riff on *A Trip to the Moon* [1902]); Eisenstein for the ongoing fascination with montage; and Buñuel represents the methodical rebellion against bourgeois morality and religion, often enacted in terms of an absurd comedy of manners that surfaces even in the wildest of Borowczyk's features, such as *Theatre of Mr. and Mrs. Kabal* (1967).

Of the three, it is arguably Eisenstein that Borowczyk owes the most to: the entire Soviet school of montage seems to have had a profound effect on his sensibility (not a surprise in an artist taking his first significant steps amidst the heavy onslaught of propaganda in postwar communist Poland). In fact, one may be surprised by how many instances of inventive editing are to be found in Borowczyk's most famous sequences, including intensely erotic ones — climaxes in both "The Tide" and "Lucrezia Borgia," segments of *Immoral Tales* (1974), are dramatized less in terms of body movement or the actors straining to enact pleasure, but chiefly by inventive fragmentation of bodies, props, and costumes, which are then suggestively merged by the editing process. Screen sex in Borowczyk's films is more a matter of editorial splices than of physical thrusts: a strategy that echoes classic Soviet sequences, such as the thawing river in Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Mother* (1926), in which running torrents equal revolutionary fervor by means of rhythmic juxtaposition (see "The Tide" and witness the virtual repetition of that strategy in which the rising sea equals the oncoming ejaculation). In Borowczyk, the careful singling out of trembling limbs, furtive gazes, slightly parted lips and slowly hardening nipples all amount to an effect far more titillating than any conventional porn (focused on documenting intercourse, rather than on suggesting it) has to offer.

The work of Luis Buñuel, in some ways as eclectic and iconoclastic as Borowczyk's, is another strong influence — doubly appropriate, since *Immoral Tales* had in fact been awarded the L'Âge D'Or Award upon its initial release, thus displaying a link with Buñuel's notoriously explosive 1930 screen provocation. Borowczyk's interest in sex, surrealism, fetishism, as well as his biting critique of the Catholic Church all make him a direct heir to Buñuel, even if the latter's propensity for satire and elaborate dramatic structure was significantly stronger. Even allowing for all the differences, it has to be said that the sharp awareness of class divisions that Borowczyk so often brings forth in his work (most evidently in *Diptych* [1967]) seems very close to Buñuel's own take on society, consistently present in films as different as the documentary short *Land Without Bread* (1933) and *The Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964). Last but not least, sexual obsessions that Borowczyk habitually scrutinizes are explored with equal fervor by Buñuel, in such masterpieces as *Un Chien Anadalou* (1929) and *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955). It's not difficult to imagine the latter being paired with Boro's *A Private Collection* (1973) to form a perfect late-night double bill.

If Buñuel and Eisenstein represent the "revolutionary" strand in Borowczyk's influences, there is also a much more conservative framework one could apply to a reading of his work: that of strict, highly moralistic realism, represented by Roberto Rossellini and Eric Rohmer. While neither of the two seems an obvious influence at first, there are in fact close ties to be found between Borowczyk's approach and theirs. Rossellini's late work, in particular, provides a fascinating background for what arguably is Borowczyk's most accomplished feature film, *Blanche* (1971). The master of Italian neorealism, famous for such classics of post-war humanism as *Open City* (1945) and *Paisan* (1946), had shifted at the end of his career toward exploration of philosophical ideas rooted in the distant past, which allowed him to produce a number of works that remain absolutely original in their presentation of historical events and figures. It was in *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* (1966) that Rossellini presented an entirely new way of staging history for the screen. Freed from the bombast of the standard Hollywood approach, which stressed visual opulence over meaning, Rossellini presented the everyday existence of the French royal court as matter-of-factly as possible, with its casual richness neither denied nor emphasized by the mise en scène. The result was uncanny: a documentary portrait of life two centuries ago, rich in detail and unburdened by trickery. It's difficult not to think of Rossellini's approach when one is watching *Blanche*: possibly the most successful depiction of the European

Middle Ages on screen (at least until Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac* [1974], itself influenced by Borowczyk). Even though Borowczyk's film is slightly more stylized than Rossellini's (lighting and framing are often at odds with total transparency that Rossellini advocated so much), the basic impulse to liberate oneself from the established convention of staging the distant past in terms of a grandiose spectacle is identical.

The tie to Eric Rohmer is much subtler, as well as easier to define in terms of opposites that he and Borowczyk represent: while Rohmer gained international fame by producing *Six Moral Tales* (1962–72), Boro struck commercial gold by unleashing his *Immoral* ones (even though the first segment, "The Tide," starred Rohmer's regular, Fabrice Luchini). While Boro explored liberated sex rather freely, Rohmer applied a slightly secularized Christian ethic to matters of desire and fidelity — a chief difference between them. Both directors, however, shared a distinctive interest in minimalist expression by their actors, as well as attentiveness to landscapes, props, costumes and detail that make their work strikingly alike upon formal scrutiny. The frequent inserts of isolated objects and written text (notes, letters, signs) that is so plentiful in Borowczyk, also constitutes one of the stronger formal traits in Rohmer. Both artists were almost compulsively prolific and both were fascinated by highly formalized erotic behavior (courtship in Rohmer, seduction and coitus in Boro). What's more, both displayed great affection for historical costume, even though Rohmer ventured into that particular territory more rarely (*The Marquise of O* [1976] is probably the most famous example). Taken together, their bodies of work form two strikingly opposite artistic reactions of intellectually minded men variously shaped by Catholicism to the power of counterculture — all the more fascinating for sharing so many intellectual and aesthetic traits.

The greatest irony of Borowczyk's career is that he initiated so many movements and tendencies that thrived independently of his work that it's sometimes difficult to trace them back to their original source (one of the tasks of this book is to rectify that, of course). In fact, the entire montage-saturated decade of the 1980s, which saw the rise of the erotically charged music video, owes a lot to Borowczyk, who by that time had been relegated mostly to less personal projects, such as *Emmanuelle 5* (1987) and directing episodes of *Série Rose* (1989–91). Even such classics of commercialized erotica as Adrian Lyne's *9 ½ Weeks* (1986) or Zalman King's *Wild Orchid* (1989) seem to bear the influence of Borowczyk (as does Bob Fosse, whose famous "Airrotica" number from *All That Jazz* [1979]

could have been influenced by Borowczyk's aforementioned use of fragmented bodies and isolated erotic gestures).

In a way, it's through Borowczyk's limitations that we can best place him within specific film traditions. For one thing, his art is not easily classifiable as progressive, since it's so completely isolated from any traces of queer sensibility — Boro's erotic utopia is almost exclusively heteronormative. Furthermore, his relationship to issues of race is also problematic and often verges on colonial smugness: from the silently submissive black servant in *The Beast* (1975) to the cartoonish, Daffy Duck-dubbing of the Japanese tourist in *Love Rites* (1988). What's most important, though, is that Borowczyk's definite lack of interest in individual personality may be the ultimate key connecting all of his work, as well as the feature that sets him eons apart from the other great Polish émigré director, Roman Polański.

With the exception of his sole Polish feature, *Story of Sin* (1975), which used the strong narrative arc provided by Stefan Żeromski's 1908 novel to present a character-driven story of *l'amour fou*, all of Borowczyk's films are premodern in their obliviousness to individual motivation and psychology. In one of the interviews included in the magnificent "Boro" box set, issued by Arrow Films just as this book neared completion, Borowczyk explains that his main theme is "the way we as people interact with the world around us," which is tantamount to saying that his interest is in epistemology, not psychology. In other words, just like Jean Painlevé, Jan Švankmajer, and the Quay Brothers (not to mention Wes Anderson), Borowczyk's universe is intensely focused on processes and objects that surround and envelop individuals, without ever truly penetrating them. His cinema is not that of immersion, but of analysis and fragmentation: even at its most erotic and illicit, it presents us with a collage of fragments — apparently incongruent at first — that achieve a synergy so complete, it occasionally reaches the intensity of a powerful climax.

Contributors' Chapters

This book offers a peek into Borowczyk's macrocosm, but in no way does it propose a fixed reading of it. If anything, it is hoped that in its experimental character, it will point toward areas of Borowczyk's work that still need further attention. We were extremely fortunate to have excellent writers and scholars sharing their expertise with us. Together, they form what the reader is about to experience in *Boro, L'Île D'Amour: The Films of Walerian Borowczyk*.

The volume opens with an extended biographical chapter by Kuba Mikurda. By means of researching his documentary film on Borowczyk, he has gained access to various archives in Poland, France, and the UK, including the Cinémathèque Française collection, donated by Borowczyk himself. He also met with many of Borowczyk's collaborators, as well as with people who corresponded with him. He then put the results of his research into a historical perspective, framing Borowczyk's work within the larger context of world cinema. The Borowczyk emerging from Mikurda's chapter is a true "escape artist": a filmmaker who defies all simple classification, crosses all possible borders and searches for new forms of expression and fresh challenges. He's a trickster, a provocateur, an eternal rebel, who replenishes his energy by entering into conflict with the critics, the audience and the film industry alike.

The distinguished historian of film and animation Marcin Giżycki argues in his chapter that three phenomena are key to Borowczyk: surrealism, Hy Hirsch, and Kunstkamera. He describes the way in which Borowczyk looks at animate and inanimate objects, and in the second part of the chapter addresses the influence of Borowczyk's background as an animator on his live-action films, in particular the construction of mise en scène and directing actors.

In an informed conversation, Kuba Mikurda and visual artist Jakub Woynarowski discuss various facets of Borowczyk's animated works, which defy easy definition and still inspire with their innovative mixture of playfulness, provocation, and formal audacity. Contrary to received opinions, they suggest there is a deep consistency between Borowczyk's animated and live-action films, which have largely been viewed as belonging to separate phases of the director's work.

In her pioneering chapter, "Cruel Imagination: Borowczyk's Post-Traumatic Surrealism," Iwona Kurz explores the influence of World War II traumas on Borowczyk. This theme is discussed relatively rarely in the context of his films, which at first glance can seem untouched by politics or ideology. As Kurz aptly shows, contrary to other distinguished Polish filmmakers of his generation — such as Andrzej Wajda or Stanisław Różewicz — Borowczyk never approached those issues head-on, choosing indirect strategies instead, such as the employment of surrealist imagery. Kurz closely analyzes two films by Borowczyk: *Angels' Games* and the "Erzsébet Báthory" segment of *Immoral Tales*.

Kamila Kuc's piece, the most unorthodox in this book, constitutes an exploration of Borowczyk's take on Guy de Maupassant's *Rosalie Prudent* (1886) through the lens of the original source. Kuc's text explores a fictional dialogue between a

number of cultural icons, which are brought together in this scenario because of the subjects and themes that dominate their work. The players here, apart from de Maupassant and Borowczyk themselves, are Nietzsche and Tolstoy, while Ligia Branice makes an appearance as Rosalie Prudent. The aim of this fictional piece was mainly to draw attention to Borowczyk's use of camera and sound, as well as his employment of rigorously minimal mise en scène. Kuc also wished to highlight certain themes that underpin many of Borowczyk's films, namely his take on motherhood.

Fernando C. Croce, known in the cinephiliac universe as the master of the short critical form, turns his eye to four of Borowczyk's films, only to discover a disquieting richness of textures indicative of the films' power to seduce.

James Snazell's piece investigates the importance of Borowczyk's visual background (particularly his preference for lithography) to the later development of his visual sensibility, from *Goto, Isle of Love* to *Behind Convent Walls*. The emphasis here is on Borowczyk's use of still imagery in his films, as seen in his employment of photography, collage and painting techniques. As Snazell aptly puts it: the attachment of Borowczyk's films to such tags as surrealism and eroticism fall apart, as "Borowczyk's work slips and slides when you attempt to shoehorn his work into neat categories."

A Private Collection is the subject of Edwin Carels' chapter, in which he argues that the film announces Borowczyk's aesthetic strategy, centered on attacking the hypocrisy surrounding pornography and sex. Carels proposes that Borowczyk's "insistence on the evasion of the eye of the law," turns *A Private Collection* into more "than a straightforward documentation." Carels also draws the reader's attention to Borowczyk's engagement with sculpture.

Never before have Borowczyk's films been written about in regard to any connection with Shakespeare. In his gripping and original chapter "The Beast with Two Backs," Phillip Warnell draws parallels between *The Beast*, "a tale of tails," and Othello, via Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* (1946). Warnell argues that in Borowczyk's film the beast and the monarch are treated as a palimpsest, "a duo of refinement and perversion." Using Derrida's understanding of the sovereign, Warnell argues that the figure of the beast in Borowczyk's film is treated as one beneath the law, thus beauty and the beast eventually becomes beauty as the beast.

As its title suggests, Marta Rabikowska's chapter "Enjoying Excess: A Bataillean Interpretation of *Story of Sin* (1975) by Walerian Borowczyk and Stefan Żeromski," uses Bataille's writings to investigate the relationship between Żeromski's 1908

novel and Borowczyk's 1975 adaptation of it. Rabikowska provocatively argues that there is not one film made by Borowczyk in which "love does not smell like death." Her chapter addresses a significant gap in Borowczyk scholarship, as she not only discusses contemporary responses to both Żeromski's novel and Borowczyk's film but offers new translations of Żeromski's complex novel in an attempt assess its impact on the film.

Kamila Wielebska introduces an original notion of "victorian surrealism," which she recognizes in Borowczyk's films, particularly in *Immoral Tales*, *The Beast*, and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Miss Osbourne*. Her investigation into these films is strengthened by a wide literary and philosophical perspective. She also asks an uncomfortable question in trying to establish whether Borowczyk's films are chauvinist or pro-feminist in their approach.

Jonathan Owen focuses mainly on *A Private Collection* and *Immoral Tales* in his discussion of the meeting spaces of Borowczyk and his friend and fellow traveler through the erotic, André Pieyre de Mandiargues. Owen argues that the latter's affair with the cinema was at its best when collaborating with Borowczyk. Both men were, as Owen points out, united by their sympathy for surrealism and fascination for objects.

In his erudite chapter entitled "Sex and the Sacred: The Obstacles to Desire Becoming its Objects," Jakub Majmurek shows how Borowczyk's films often feature religion and religious imaginary, or to be exact — symbols, images and rituals associated with the Roman Catholic Church. Majmurek explores the dialectics of desire and law/prohibition, which fuels Borowczyk films with an ever-present erotic tension. Addressing Borowczyk's fascination with objects, Majmurek suggests that it may have been triggered by his Catholic background and this religion's relation toward sacred artifacts.

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Miss Osbourne gets a close reading in a sparkling chapter by Budd Wilkins (of *Slant Magazine*, amongst other publications), who connects it both to surrealist tradition and exploitation cinema.

Simon Abrams, Odie Henderson and Michał Oleszczyk engage in a vivid dialogue about what is perhaps the least loved of all Borowczyk films, *Emmanuelle 5* — widely seen as Borowczyk's ultimate act of succumbing to mainstream commercial erotica. They try to identify the film's redeeming features, as well as discern differences between the European and American cuts.

One of Borowczyk's final efforts (his last finished feature), *Love Rites*, gets a reading by the supreme director of visual essays, Kevin B. Lee, who starts by

singling out a particular image and uses it to fuse the film's complicated relationship to touch, sex, and speech.

Note

1. A typescript, dated 28 August 1961, found in the collection of the Cinémathèque Française.

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Kamila Kuc, Ph.D. is a writer, experimental filmmaker and curator. Co-edited with Michael O'Pray, her most recent publication is the first study of Polish avant-garde film (*The Struggle for Form: Perspectives on Polish Avant-Garde Film 1916–1989*, Columbia University Press, 2014). She publishes widely on the subject of experimental film and has also curated programmes of experimental film for international film festivals and venues (New Horizons Film Festival, Poland; Cinephilia, UK; Experiments in Cinema, USA). Her short films have been screened at international film festivals, most recently the Alternative Film/Video in Belgrade, Serbia (December 2014) and Experiments in Cinema, Albuquerque, New Mexico (April 2015). She is currently a Postdoctoral Research Assistant in the Department of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Kuba Mikurda, Ph.D. is a film critic, curator, broadcaster, and "Linia Filmowa" book series editor (Korporacja Ha!art Press). He has edited and co-edited books about contemporary filmmakers (Terry Gilliam, Brothers Quay, Guy Maddin, Tsai Ming-liang) and surrealism in Polish cinema (with Kamila Wielebska). He teaches at the Film School in Łódź. In 2013 he published *Corpus Delicti*, a visual essay about Borowczyk's objects (designed in collaboration with Jakub Woynarowski). He is currently working on a feature documentary film about Borowczyk, forthcoming in 2016.

Michał Oleszczyk, Ph.D. is a film critic, scholar and translator based in Warsaw. He works as the Artistic Director of Gdynia Film Festival, and is a regular contributor to *RogerEbert.com, Slant Magazine*, and numerous Polish media outlets. His work has also appeared in *Cineaste, Sight & Sound*, and *IndieWire*. He published the first Polish book on the work of Terence Davies, and has co-authored (with Kuba Mikurda) three books on the work of Guy Maddin, Brothers Quay, and Terry Gilliam. His Polish translation of J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosebaum's *Midnight Movies* was published in 2011. He works as a programmer for Polish Filmmakers NYC, a New York-based organization devoted to promoting Polish cinema in the United States.