

In memoriam of Zdzisław Beksiński

# The Artist is dead

by Piotr Andrejew

An article for film magazine KINO 6/2005. Translated from Polish language by Andy Teszner.

I was greeted by a tall, thin man with piercing eyes and a round face. Still very boyish, despite his forties. He smiled and held out his hand in greeting. We met in a narrow corridor of a small, low ceiling flat on Warsaw's Służewie district. A new giant block (the flat had a 3 digit number) smelled of cement and construction adhesives. After a while we sat at a large square table, which almost completely filled the room crammed with bookshelves, stacks of pre-cut fibreboards, and an easel.



Stills from "Fotoplastykon". Zdzisław Beksiński, a teenage witness of a collapse of the world.

It was 1977, Zdzisław Beksiński was 48. He was already an acclaimed, great, experimenting photographer. For several years established a European reputation in a completely new field: painting. He painted quite differently than photographed. His photos were almost abstract, although paintings were close to a magical realism. Moved to Warsaw from Sanok where he abandoned his family home. As he said "I wanted to live just anywhere, in a big city, to simplify everyday life". It could be either Hamburg, New York or Milan. It made no difference whatsoever. The idea was to have more time to paint. He showed me stacks of drawings made with pale strokes of hard pencil on a yellowed, rough tracing paper. Each drawing was a draft of a painting, yet to be created. There were hundreds of them: "I have many more, not drawn yet"... Our meeting was preceded by my phone calls yet to Sanok. He scoffed: "I could find you there some kerosene lamps." He saw somewhere my film "Here Comes the Freeze", my film about Cracow graphic artist Daniel Mróz. And he was convinced that I need is a picturesque scenery. Although I denied many

times, even after the film about him he gave an interview in which he spoke of the filmmaker's disappointment about absence of oil lamps in his house.

He liked irony, joke and scoff - also of himself. It was not serious, but in contacts with him there were also some darker note. Beksiński was something painful. He did not like contact with people, even avoided human communities. He treated Media as a necessity for selling his works, essential to create new paintings.



Following few conversations with him, I could feel a deep indefinable fear he was carrying. Once at the cup of tea I asked about it directly, in presence of his wife Zofia. First she, then he, some kind of forced, told me about the end of the war. As a teenager he saw the fall of the world which for centuries in Polish Galicia continued unchanged - the cruelty and technical superiority of Germans, the destruction of Jews, and fratricidal conflicts with the Ukrainians, which for years after the war were debilitating the foot of mountains Bieszczady.

He told me about the liberation: the last bursts of cannon and a strange silence, hours of silence. They all sat in silence in the house and listened with fear. It was a summer sunset, and the boy was not to be simply stay at home. Sneaking walked out to a nearby road. The Germans have fled. You could not see nor hear anyone. Only a soft no rhythmic steps from afar. A drunken Soviet soldier walked in the middle of the road, with Papasha on a cord... A new order began and after a few days Beksiński, then still 15 years old, was detained by the town's council for illegal possession of weapons. Weapons were available everywhere. All who wanted them had them. But someone has decided to scare the boy. They told him that he will be executed. In those days people were shot. A week later Beksiński's father finally managed to bribe the Russians, and the boy was released. Decades later Beksiński still had a palpable intensity of the fear and sense of tragic grotesque of death.

In my opinion, he always painted scenes from his childhood. They were processed images, visual, but in detail referred to the war he knew. It sounds like a scheme, but in Beksiński's case, what he did, the images he painted, through their mastery, were far from the scheme. It was a prediction based on childhood experiences - the history and the future in one. Southern Poland in a terrible vision of the future war, after the rockets from both sides fired. Landscapes, characters, images and dreams about winter after nuclear war. Sanok's surroundings became the whole world in these paintings.

In the winter of 1978, our crew of Educational Film Studio, with the producer, then in his twenties, Andrzej Traczykowski (now director of the WFO), went from Łódź to Warsaw. The place around the block where Beksiński's family lived was still dug up. I had hoped for the presence of Beksiński in front of the camera, and I brought from Łódź an Arri 300 with Blimp, a camera with sound, which had to be carried by two men, and which occupied half the room. Although it had one advantage – it didn't even murmur. Special switch allowed to turnoff in appropriate time. The sound was being recorded constantly, because the tape did cost almost nothing. A great editor, Maria Stalińska, could find the sync by lip movements on the screen. In those days a short film about an artist, was recorded on Kodak 35mm negatives. An orchestra soundtrack was ordered with a composer. A 35mm copy was made for distribution in cinemas.

On the first day of shooting a surprise was waiting for us. Beksiński was in a good painting mood, and couldn't let us into his atelier. Obviously, we plugged the power in his flat, and were treated with a dinner,

with our camera operator Zbigniew Wichłacz. However Mr Zdzisław stated that he could not let the whole crew to his home, as he would be behind with painting. He aimed to paint a new picture every week.

At dinner there was a funny moment. We've sent the rest of the crew for a dinner to a restaurant, but Beksiński was in hurry to paint. Frustrated at his wife, that she made us wait a minute for pouring soup, he said "I can never solicit that dinner is at the same time. Sometimes it's at 14:30, the next day at 14.27. Let it be whatever time it is, but one fixed time, so I know when to stop painting without wasting time." I looked at my watch. Indeed, it was 14:28.

For the first couple of days we worked in the stairway, in front of Beksiński's door. Bringing images from his house and building a story around what is presented on them. To justify use of the blimp from Łódź, I shot a few apparent interviews with Beksiński's neighbours then I've sent the camera back to the film factory. In the morning of the third day it turned out we have a full access to the artist's atelier. We could even film him painting. For accurate focus adjust Beksiński repeated certain moves. We recorded hours of conversations and also filmed his family photos. As he clarified, he did earlier what he had to do. Again I felt a moment of a strange fear when Beksiński asked how close the camera is able to catch the brush on the screen. Quite a lot mixed feelings. I don't think he painted for real then, rather played in front of the camera. He didn't want it to come out wrong, but still painted a little. He didn't like when someone looked at him working. Especially with such a close-up.

After dinner there was a moment when we just wanted to talk. I noticed a big fan at the head of the bed in Beksiński's bedroom. Lady of the house explained: "He always gets stuffy in this flat. So, often turns on the fan at night and says <we're on the plane to Rio> because the fan is noisy. "

Then with Wichłacz we went for a few days to Sanok. When our film truck waded through the winter roads around Sanok, I felt like wandering in the world of Beksiński's paintings. Dirty grey snow, hungry birds on leafless trees. Cemeteries with broken tombstones, poor villages, deserted, with traces of other better past. The museum in Sanok had at that time the most beautiful collection of early Beksiński's paintings. We didn't make the task easier by bringing from Łódź a great device, which spun any object in front of the camera, while the camera stayed in one focus setting. We also used a relatively large light spots placed far from the paintings to eliminate the reflections. Museum staff was happy, light from the lamps will not damage the paintings.



Zdzisław Beksiński's paintings used in film "Conversation with the Painter".

When I came back to Łódź for editing, there was a surprise waiting for me. In my absence, Maria has already edited the film using scenes with Beksiński at work. I had something completely different in mind. Despite it was a neat movie, it seemed dull to me, lacking an element of surprise.

So we started from scratch. I wanted a clear distinction. The richer is the world of paintings, the simpler the film has to be. A film came out showing two journeys. First a short one, through still photos telling the

life story of Beksiński. And longer journey to the world of Beksiński's paintings. Lech Brański's music highlights this static, anachronistic, but changing world of the artist, like in a Photoplasticon.

Few months later I've shown this film to Beksiński. There were problems with phones at that time. In Ursynów they said that the new phone switchboard went to the Olympics in Moscow. It was due to be returned, but it hasn't for some reason. Beksiński could be reached on the phone through his friend's, who would announce when he is available. On Mondays between 17:00–19:00. He didn't like to come out of his house. He spent all the time painting, really. But he made a proposal "I'm going out on Thursday to get some beer, perhaps we meet then?"

So I took him in my car to the screening room in Warsaw's documentary film studio. We're sitting alone, heavy rain outside. After screening he was surprised. On my "How was that?" he replied "Good."

I pulled back looking at him. "Very good" he says. Nothing else. Okay then. I took him back home. After some time, on the way back, he said: "You know, in your commentary there..."

– "Yes?" Beskiński said ironically "Oh, you torn up in it, didn't you".

One evening in February this year, a friend of mine phoned me up from far away. "Beksiński is dead. Murdered." The attacker stabbed him many times with a knife, killing repeatedly. With a vicious, murder folly. Because if one wanted to force Beksiński to do something, he found a wrong man.

Here is an Artist without any restraint, denying himself, painful for his loved ones, ironic to friends, inaccessible to strangers. Someone who understands what surrounds us, more than we do. A man who always anticipated his destiny. It is a great loss for us as a community that we could not deny this prophecy. A dramatic alarm, that we are not able to protect such an Artist.

### **Fotoplastykon**

written and directed by: Piotr Andrejew

photography by: Zbigniew Wichłacz

music: Lech Brański

editor: Maria Mastalińska

sound: Jan Freda

studio executive: Teresa Oziemska

producer: Andrzej Traczykowski

Educational Film Studio (WFO) Łódź 1978

duration: 13 min

### **Conversation with the Painter. Beksiński.**

edited by Maria Mastalińska, from an unused footage recorded during filming of "Fotoplastykon"

directed by: Maria Mastalińska and Piotr Andrejew

producer: Zbigniew Grefkowicz

Film crew from "Fotoplastykon".

Polish Television, Warsaw 1982

duration: 11 min