

## DANIEL BIRD "WALERIAN BOROWCZYK: RENAISSANCE MAN?"

This year, KINOTEKA invites you to rediscover the amazing work of painter, sculptor and filmmaker Walerian Borowczyk. For the first time, BFI Southbank and the ICA will be jointly holding a retrospective featuring newly restored copies of this remarkable and often controversial artist. In addition, the ICA will also be hosting the first UK exhibition of Borowczyk's artwork, featuring his inimitable graphics, preliminary work for his groundbreaking animations as well as his bizarre sound sculptures.



Born in Poland in 1923, Borowczyk studied at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts, where he befriended the poet Tadeusz Rozewicz, became acquainted with art historian and painter Andrzej Wróblewski and met his lifelong muse, a beautiful noblewoman whom he subsequently cast in many of his classic short films and features, Ligia Branice.

At the height of Stalinism, Borowczyk won the National Prize for his lithographic cycle on the construction of the Nowa Huta district of Krakow, before establishing himself as one of the key artists of the so-called Polish Poster school of the 1950s. During the late 1950s, he joined forces with another poster artist, Jan Lenica, to make a handful of short films that would revolutionize animation not just in Poland, but around the world.

In 1959, Borowczyk relocated to France, where he produced a procession of short films that both wowed audiences and defied classification. *Renaissance* paved the way for Czech animator Jan Svankmajer whilst *Les Jeux des Anges* prompted Amos Vogel to acclaim it as a brilliant, disturbing imagining of holocaust hell, which was not just a masterpiece of not just cinema, but modern art *per se*.

By the end of the 1960s, Borowczyk made the transition to features, first with the unique *Theatre de M et Mme Kabal*, and then with *Goto, l'île d'amour*. In France, *Cahiers du Cinema* devoted an whole issue to Borowczyk, while in the United Kingdom his work served as a catalyst for a whole generation of artists including Monty Python animator Terry Gilliam, feminist fabulist Angela Carter, not to mention poster maestro Andrzej Klimowski and fine artist Craigie Horsfield. Meanwhile, the Communist in Poland banned *Goto*, as did the Fascist regime in Franco's Spain - it would seem that while Borowczyk's favored hermetic fantasy over concrete reality, he was, nevertheless, a dab hand when it came to touching nerves...

*Blanche*, Borowczyk's free adaptation of Juliusz Slowacki's Romantic drama *Mazepa*, changed the way films about the Medieval period were made, with its fresco live *mise-en-scene*, not to mention the stunning arrangement of ancient

music taken from the *Carmina Burana* song book. However, when Borowczyk presented 'a work in progress' at the 1973 edition of the London Film Festival, things would never quite be the same again...

Before the screening, many filmgoers regarded Borowczyk, like David Thomson in his *Biographical Dictionary of the Cinema*, as one, if not the finest talent to have emerged from behind the Iron Curtain. However, after the screening, many of the spectators who had witnessed *Contes Immoraux*, a portmanteau film dealing with eroticism through the ages, felt duped. Was it the work of a master prankster? Or, was this sexually explicit satire something altogether more transgressive? Matters were further complicated by Borowczyk's next film, his one and only Polish feature, *Dzieje grzechu*, a passionate adaptation of a maligned novel by Stefan Zeromski, that proved to be an international box office smash not to mention a headache for the Catholic Church... Then there was *La Bete*, an outrageous, operatic farce which pitted bourgeois vanity against monstrous, animal lust...

While he decried being labelled the maker of sex films, Borowczyk nevertheless explored eroticism as a serious theme, not least the remarkable *La Marge*, in which a grief stricken trader allows himself to be engulfed by the allure of an icy prostitute against the backdrop of a hellish Paris...

By the early 1980s, Borowczyk was, once again, consigned to the underground, where he unleashed arguably his most mischievously perverse film to date, the utterly insane *Le Cas étrange du Dr Jekyll et Miss Osbourne*. Misunderstood for decades, Borowczyk is a filmmaker not only ahead of his time, but whose films still, remarkably, are capable of tickling, rattling and, quite often, completely unnerving film-goers supposedly inured to the erosion of taboo.

So, in May 2014, allow yourself to be swallowed by a riot of on screen objects, bodies and animals, in the inexcusably opulent fantasies of the most hair-raising filmmakers of all time.

Daniel Bird, curator of Walerian Borowczyk's Retrospective