

The world as a work of art

Asked by a French critic about his fascination with technology, Zbigniew Rybczyński responded contrarily that he regards it as an obstacle. More, he believes that that it is impossible to achieve a desired goal and admitted that he would like his films to flow in the manner of life.¹

Could it be that the master of the video technique wished to capture with the assistance of computer technology the indeterminate “stream of life” in the manner of the Old Masters of painting or the novel? The thematic axis of Rybczyński’s numerous films is the symbolically portrayed “path of life” – from childhood to death and further on (e.g. the video clip: *Imagine* to music by John Lennon). In *Washington* a little girl plays with a kitten. A moment later she is already an old woman while the kitten has amazingly preserved eternal youth. Several sequences in *The Orchestra* also evoke the symbolic scheme of human life. Rybczyński starts his story from the end – a hearse appears at the beginning of the film and re-emerges at its conclusion.

The stream of images in *The Orchestra* is not ruled by the laws of association suggesting the reality of slumber or dream. This is not oneiric poetic or that of Surrealism. The succession of images is subjected to concealed symbolic action, which has its laws and rhythms, e.g. the sequence of the hearse – putting out candles – “resurrection”; childhood – growing up – serpent and apple – double bed. A courting scene involving maidens and hussars in the chambers of the Louvre is followed by an “apotheosis” of marriage – a couple of naked lovers soars below the vaulting of Chartres cathedral. The second part of the film consists of a parade of characters across a never-ending keyboard with girls and boys growing up, getting old and dying while playing the same tune. Another metaphor of life is the protagonist’s journey high above the earth along narrow planks on which normal, human affairs – food, sex, the struggle for women and money take place (part three).

This manner of depicting the path of life in *The Orchestra* brings to mind mediaeval or Baroque allegories. Rybczyński admires the allegorical art of past centuries. What meanings pertaining to human fate as a whole have been encoded? In what space is this uninterrupted game of life and significance played?

In Rybczyński’s world human space is totally artificial. This feature is additionally emphasized by elements of Nature introduced at the beginning and end of the film: birdsong, a hooting owl. First we see a sea-shore, which too appears to be not quite part of this particular film. Only when a hearse appears along the beach do we know for certain that it is “ours”. The framework of the film – and that of human life – is Nature. On the other hand, everything that is human

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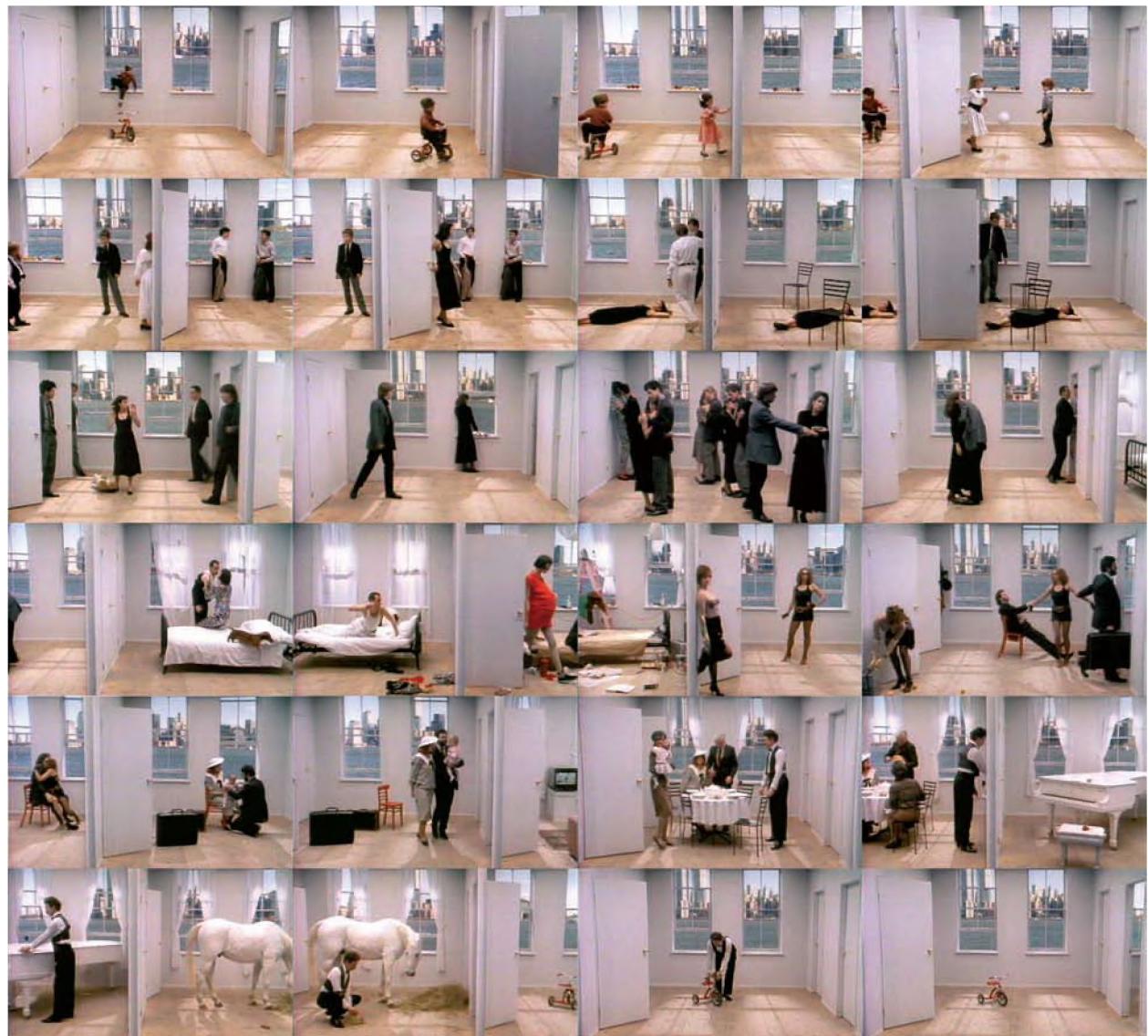
The Construction of Existence

transpires in artificial space and time with references exclusively to the sphere of culture.

Rybczyński shows that human space is always symbolic. There appear certain key motifs: an apple, fire, bread and wine, a serpent. Sometimes this is sacral space, as in the sequence from *Ave Maria* by Schubert, whose background is Chartres cathedral. In the last sequence – Ravel’s *Bolero* – we deal with sacral space *à rebours*: this is communist *sacrum*, degraded, false, and hopeless. But each time it is symbolic space. Man cannot force his way beyond it.

The paradox of art consists of the fact that that, which is artificial to the utmost sometimes indicates something that is as human as can be. I recall a certain moment from Fellini’s *And the Ship Sails On*, when the director appears together with a camera on the set of a ship rocked by a hydraulic device. We see the camera, the sets and the technical backstage but nevertheless are moved. Whence came this feeling once the backstage was revealed? This was a moment of particular tension, a betrayal of the artificial reality created on screen. Disillusion is an omnipresent strategy in twentieth-century art; it grants contemporary art the mark of irony or self-mockery. But in this case disillusion is not the disclosure of the artist’s “deception” or the manifestation of his absolute power. On the contrary, the director hands himself over to the spectators and craves complete acceptance not only for the products of his imagination. The credibility of the recounted story no longer calls for the autonomy of the portrayed world. This is the emotion, or rather its trace, that I experienced while watching *The Orchestra*. A specifically human element appears within computer technology.

In *Steps* Rybczyński showed the console at which he works, while in *The Orchestra* we encounter the intriguing master of ceremony who fulfils the function of the “inner author”. From time to time he appears on stage to personally supervise the progress of the spectacle. In the first sequence he is the waiter passing glasses in the “netherworld” and the magician juggling



Zbigniew Rybczyński, *Imagine*

flaming torches. According to his whim he bestows gifts upon some and takes them away from others. It is he who to the accompaniment of the opening sounds of Mozart's *Piano Concerto no. 22* sets into motion a bed with a couple of dead (?) old people. This *primum mobile* inaugurates a universal dance on the film's "Elysian Fields".

The artist-magician provokes the spectator's question about the concealed director of this *theatrum mundi*. Watching Rybczyński's films we are able to capture the thoughts formulated by Nietzsche: *The world is a work of art that gives birth to itself*² and: *For only as an aesthetic phenomenon are existence and the world eternally justified.*³

Rybczyński perceives the world in aesthetic categories. The implicit author of this great work of the applied arts, assuming that he exists, is not someone whom we recognise from religious depictions. Nor is he the "good Father" or the "Judge". He is an artist and

perhaps even the cheerful, playful Juggler playing with all elements of human reality. The role of the master of ceremony in *The Orchestra* brings to mind the great Artist sitting in the darkroom of the universe and trying out new models of games. Do we not experience a similar feeling while looking at the reality surrounding us, the history of the recent years or our own life? Is this not an astonishing spectacle performed according to some hidden model?

Who is the artist in Rybczyński's art and theory? The author of *The Orchestra* is close not so much to a Romantic image of the artist-creator and destroyer as to the Renaissance model of the artist-perfect craftsman. Andrzej Barański told me about Rybczyński's fascination with the works of Leonardo da Vinci, capable of creating *The Mona Lisa* (frequently filmed by Rybczyński), flying machines and double spiral stairs.

Rybczyński's favourite is the essay by Paul Valéry: *Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci* (Wstęp do metody Leonarda da Vinci).

tody Leonardo da Vinci in the collection: *Estetyka Słowa*, Warszawa 1971). He recalls that Leonardo began executing a painting with the deepest black and slowly progressed to light hues. In an interview for "Kino" Rybczyński admitted that he sees his future films as "half an hour of blackness" from which shapes and colours emerge.⁴

I also found out from Andrzej Barański that Rybczyński loves technology, not only the great electronic variety but also its small counterpart – assorted tools, screws, nuts and bolts. Just as other people search in antique shops so Rybczyński has his favourite tool store in New York. He admires the technical efficacy of America, e.g. nineteenth-century wooden "skyscrapers" and fire-escape stairs mounted to the outside, so characteristic for the New York landscape. Rybczyński does not glorify technology but renders it an ally of his cinematic epistemology:

*Our instruments may be primitive but with their help it is possible to discover something in reality that is not connected with its actual reception. (...) Thanks to new tools we perfect the possibilities of perception. (...) We can come closer to reality if we obtain the ease of operating with instruments. Then we shall be able to create a world somewhat similar to our thoughts.*⁵

II. Game of space and time

Mirosz Benedyktowicz defined Rybczyński's oeuvre as "manipulation with time and space". The objective of some of his films is to test time (*The Orchestra, Imagine*) and in others – to experiment with space (*Manhattan, Washington*). The films are dominated by an eternal present. There is no past or anticipation. There is only a narrow "now" repeated upon numerous occasions. Time is either depicted as a continuum or as "the edge of a knife" between two moments—both perspectives occur interchangeably.

Repeatability and rhythm are an – illusory – victory over time. Rybczyński thus tries to outwit time. Watching "floating" or "turning" space in such films as *Manhattan* and *Washington* we always hope that the same image will be repeated: the same face will appear on the other side of the screen, the director's adorable dachshund will play over and over again. When the outlined figure of Mirosz Benedyktowicz (deceased) appears in *Washington* the simple operation of repetition gains unexpected acuteness. We wait impatiently for the camera's close-up of Benedyktowicz, but quite a different game is already played on the screen. Rhythm binds image and sound, time and space into an entity. Rybczyński exploits the "artificial" rhythms of classical music and the "natural" rhythms of breathing or heartbeat, brilliantly transposed in music by Michał Urbaniak.

Rybczyński also exploits all forms of motion: the dance, circular motion, up-and-down motion, or motion deforming space (*The Fourth Dimension*). In each of his films he sets into motion the same objects taken

rather from the order of culture than Nature, and prefers chairs to flowers, beds to trees, a dachshund to a wild beast and *The Mona Lisa* to clouds. He sets into motion the element of the self and the world, time and space, imagination and cultural memory, objects from the refuse heap of mass culture and respectable props from the archive of myths and archetypes.

The director would probably agree with Mikhail Bakhtin who claimed: *When studying man, we search for and find signs everywhere (...).*⁶ The only path towards cognition and self-cognition is thus an interpretation of signs. In Rybczyński's films all objects are signs – they do not attract attention by their *être-en-soi* but refer to a domain beyond themselves. They include such symbols of past epochs and our contemporaneity as the telephone and the toilet bowl. Even Nature appears to be an artefact existing solely thanks to the mercy of the artist. A characteristic feature of Rybczyński is his absolute freedom in using the symbol – instead of an apple he immediately introduces a whole tray full of apples and a serpent is the size of a boa constrictor.

Studying his films one could resort to a semiotic analysis and seek predominantly significant relations and opposites. Just like the structuralists Rybczyński tries to capture the way "in which our world is made", the laws of our time, space and intellect (which could be one and the same). The quest for "universal laws that govern mythical thought" is according to Lévi-Strauss the fundamental duty of twentieth-century art.⁷

Considering the models of the world in Rybczyński's films it is impossible to neglect the philosophy of translation present in his art. The question of translating is the central issue of contemporary semiotics based on the idea of the translation, i.e. the transference of meaning from one system of signs to another. At this stage it is worth recalling the slightly older, Cabbalistic and hermetic conceptions of translation. The essence of Cabbala practices was incessant translation from the language of Nature, the cosmos or the elements into that of the human spirit and body. The Cabbalists changed the words of the Torah into numbers and new words endowed with magical power. Translation from one language into another or one art into another called for a third element of a "language-intermediary", which is the medium of translation. This function can be fulfilled by time or space, sound or light. The Cabbala focuses on a translation of the Torah and the world. The word changes into visible reality, as in the prose by Schulz, when spring bursts forth from the Book... In Rybczyński's work music blossoms into a garden or a cathedral. In the light of Cabbalistic philosophy the "third element" always involved in the process of translation is God. In this manner, the *sacrum* reveals itself along the crossing of the codes of culture.⁸

Apparently, the Cabbalistic theory of translation makes it possible to perceive Rybczyński's films differently – not from the "technical" side but from the

Cabbalistic viewpoint. Just as in the works of the Cabbalists the film witnesses an endless process of translation. Rybczyński – in the spirit of the Cabbalists – seeks the third element, the liaison between music and film. The discovered liaison is the element of time. Music is as if tamed time. Dance is the subjugation of space. We cannot tell what is a translation of what. This is not a visualisation of music but identical symbolic action pursued in several sign systems simultaneously.

The Cabbalists believed that translation leads the scholar to the contemplation of the *sacrum* concealed both in the holy signs of the Books and in the empty space between the signs. In the case of Rybczyński, the contemplation of mobile forms also indicates the existence of emptiness and motionlessness. Interestingly, the ceaseless process of translation does not produce an impression of chaos and clamour. Rybczyński's moving images refer us somewhere beyond the screen, towards an invisible backdrop, the place of the birth and disappearance of forms.

III. The game is a serious matter

I would like to register the flow of time in genuine creation – Rybczyński said in a conversation with Tadeusz Sobolewski. – To have such an unrestricted workshop so as to be capable of capturing the duality of our thoughts: yes and yes, no and no. ... And construction? Construction always exists in the world but we are unable to comprehend it. Nature, the universe are governed by laws of their own. Everything contains concealed structures unknown to us. Once we comprehend them we shall be capable of building something that at present seems to be chaos. Right now we are still confused. Imitation is not a way out. Expression – the process of expressing oneself – is meaningless. The only thing worth pursuing is the discovery of principles in science, art, everything.⁹

Rybczyński is, therefore, concerned not with expression or mimesis but with a special sort of creation. His films juxtapose the chaos of life and increasingly new models of the world. The author's imagination is to be supported by a disciplined experiment that would make it feasible to disclose the poetic of our world, a product of the applied arts. The objective consists of deciphering universal, possibly mathematical, rules of the game.

Art pursued by Rybczyński thus harbours maximalist ambitions. It is those bold ambitions that are served by computer technology. In *The Orchestra* in particular we can encapsulate the director's efforts to capture the culmination. Quite conceivably, this is a hazardous attempt. Has Rybczyński managed to depict certain rhythms and categories pertaining to the whole human world? The viewer is under the impression that outside the stream of life on the screen the surface of symbolic and allegorical imagery conceals some sort of a code, a model of human existence.

In our culture the "essence of things" is usually sought in intellectual speculations or along the con-

templative path of self-cognition. Rybczyński proposes a third course – a game played with the symbols of culture. The value of the game is familiar to children and artists. In his novel *Shosha*, I. B. Singer formulated the hypothesis that the game, which is the principle of our reality, is also the essence of the "thing-in-itself":

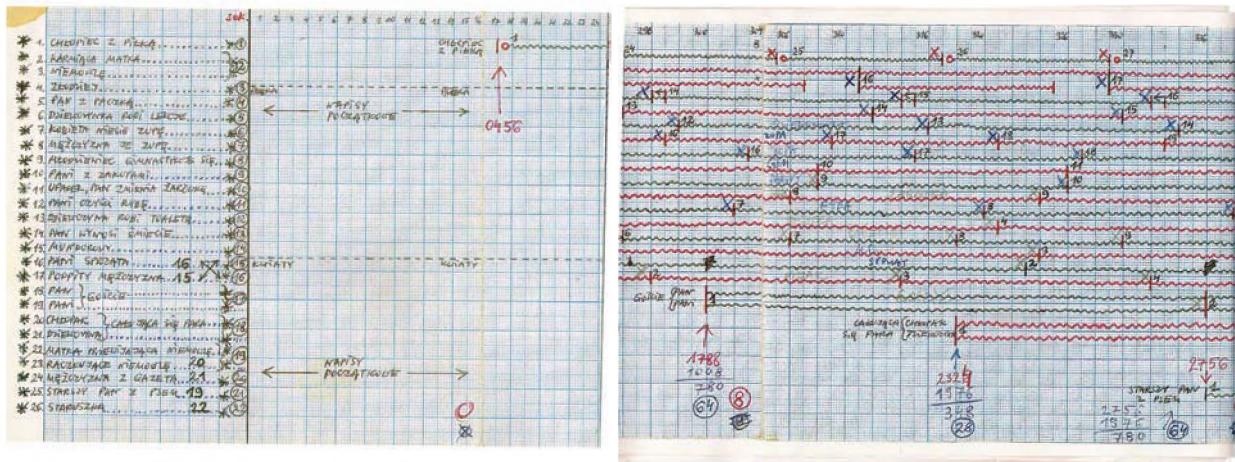
Since we are sure of nothing and there is even no evidence that the sun will rise tomorrow, play is the very essence of human endeavour, perhaps even the thing-in-itself. God is a player, the cosmos a playground. For years Singer tried to discover the foundation of ethics, and ultimately resigned. Suddenly it became clear that it is possible to base human ethics on man's right to play his game according to a choice that no one may compel him to make.¹⁰

Play is not frivolous — declared Hans Georg Gadamer¹¹ Contemporary philosophy and anthropology attach high rank to the conceit of play. Frequently, it acts as a key to a certain vision of culture (e.g. in works by J. Huizinga and R. Caillois). In Hindu philosophy it is one of the fundamental concepts with a metaphysical reference. The entire world is a game of Omni-consciousness— claimed the contemporary Hindu sage Swami Muktananda.¹²

Thanks to the played game the sole divine principle assumes the form of the world and becomes everything. For "liberated" man unity is always seen from behind multiplicity, and awareness of the world is primeval, independent *vis a vis* the predilection for its diversity. The Hindu conception of play is associated with the idea of the dance. The visual form of divine play, known as *leela*, is the dance performed by Shiva. Muktananda declared that the Lord of Supreme Consciousness compels all 8 400 000 species to dance on the stage of the outer world. Each performs its strange dance, as in a film. More, each – from Brahma to an insect – has been granted a suitable body. The human being, however, has succumbed to servitude and the lifelessness of his ego, he has forgotten his Self and suffers.¹³

One of the symbols of the Shiva dance is the multi-hued, opalescent peacock. The whirling circles of his feathers set time and space into motion. Shiva is the god of death and resurrection, the destruction and eternal transformation of forms. He could have been the patron of film. According to an ancient Hindu text all creatures of this world are assorted roles played by a single actor, God.¹⁴

Interestingly, seeking a metaphorical description of this dance, the very essence of human existence, the Hindu sage said: as in a film. It is precisely film that he envisaged as an analogy to the world of perennial change. At this stage we could add: just like in Rybczyński's film. Video technology created heretofore unknown possibilities of showing the endless resources of transformations.

Zbigniew Rybczyński, *Tango*, fragments of screenplay

The film technique of permeation conceals the suggestion that the individual is not enclosed within his limits but constitutes an exchangeable element. This fluidity of boundaries, however, does not carry negative connotations (anonymity, mass-scale qualities, etc.); on the contrary, it has a positive meaning. There is no gap between man and man and they fluently cross over. The game is conducted incessantly, and taking and giving, dressing and undressing go on endlessly. Life and death occur interchangeably – one dies and is resurrected while dancing. Death is only a masquerade and in the multitude of symbols it has lost its "sting".

The significance of Rybczyński's imagery cannot be contained within a single definition. It is difficult to ascertain whether the first sequence is an allegory of *vanitas* or of paradise, since each image in *The Orchestra* contains antinomy – or the idea of a paradoxical conciliation of opposites – and evokes assorted parts of the world of meanings, the world of life: in this interpretation passage and eternity, motion and motionless, life and infinity appear to be extremes of the same principle. The essence of such play is the struggle between the symbolic (and thus specifically human and creative) and the accidental, mechanical. The Japanese *High Definition* technique of the image used by Rybczyński is not only a tool but also an ideal model of a perception of the world. On a daily basis we live in a reality chaotically fragmented and "glued together" with the assistance of stereotypes of thinking and seeing. How can we link the "highest definition" of perception with the profound experience of unity?

Where is the fixed point? – asks the director celebrating his "turns of events": *Here [motion of the camera – A. S.] lies the whole theory of relativity. Are we moving or is it the world that is moving around us? Where is the fixed point? But at that stage we are entering the domain of metaphysics, and we were not supposed to talk about metaphysics.*¹⁵

The search conducted by Rybczyński brings to mind T. S. Elliot's poem: *At the Still Point of the Turning World*, inspired by a paradoxical vision of Shiva's dance in which motion and absolute stillness are one:

*At the still point of the turning world.
Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards;
at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. [...].*

Endnotes

- ¹ J. Kermabon, *Inny wymiar*, interview with Zbigniew Rybczyński, transl. W. Wertenstein, "Kino" 1991, no. 2.
- ² F. Nietzsche, *Wola mocy*, (in:) *Dzieła*, Warszawa 1907, p. 419.
- ³ F. Nietzsche, *Narodziny tragedii*, (in:) *Dzieła*, p. 22.
- ⁴ T. Sobolewski, *Fantazja na żywo, Rozmowa ze Zbigniewem Rybczyńskim*, "Kino" 1991, no. 2.
- ⁵ Ibidem.
- ⁶ M. Bakhtin, *Problem tekstu. Próba analizy filozoficznej*, transl. A. Prus-Bogusławski, "Twórczość" 1977, no. 5, p. 54.
- ⁷ Cf. C. Lévi-Strauss, *Antropologia strukturalna*, Warszawa 1970.
- ⁸ I discussed this topic more extensively in: *Czytanie kabaty*, in: *Problemy wiedzy o kulturze. Prace dedykowane Stefanowi Żółkiewskiemu*, ed. A. Brodzka, M. Hopfinger, J. Lalewicz, Wrocław 1986.
- ⁹ T. Sobolewski, op. cit.
- ¹⁰ I. B. Singer, *Szosa*, transl. S. Sal, Warszawa 1991, p. 166.
- ¹¹ H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. Cited after: J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Hermenetyka Gadamerowska w etnograficznym badaniu obcości*, "Polska Sztuka Ludowa. Konteksty" 1992, no. 1, p. 15 (fts).
- ¹² Swami Muktananda, *The Mysteries of the Siddhas*, Ganeshpuri (India), 1975, p. 373.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 48.
- ¹⁴ *Pratyabhi jandradayam. The Secret of Self-Recognition*, prep. J. Singh, Delhi 1980, vol. III, p. 9.
- ¹⁵ T. Sobolewski, op. cit.