

Witkacy & Malinowski: a cinematic séance in 23 scenes
Peter McKay in conversation with filmmaker John Gillies

Peter McKay: *You have been based in Sydney for a long while, but you come from South East Queensland originally and studied in Toowoomba, so you have a personal connection to this location of this story. But I am curious, how did you come across this history, this train ride from Brisbane to Toowoomba on the first day of spring in 1914? Was it immediately obvious that you would make a work on the subject, or was it a slow realisation?*

John Gillies: It was a slow burn that intersects with my memory. I first heard the story of Witkacy and Malinowski mentioned on ABC radio and it always intrigued me. That Toowoomba should be the place for the famous intellectual and personal argument by two of the most influential Poles of the 20th century seemed highly incongruous.

In Toowoomba I formally studied visual art but also music, theatre and film so I'm interested in combining these forms within the rubric of the visual arts and cinema. Before that I was a musician in a pilot for youth theatre in regional Australia, based in Toowoomba in the late 1970s that was influenced by the visits to Australia of Polish experimental theatre director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski. Grotowski was highly influential around the world at that time, particularly in the US and Australia, for example Performance Space in Sydney was created after his many visits here. Recently I presented this project as a work in progress at the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław.

PM: *Could you introduce both these figures, Witkacy (Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz) and Bronisław Caspar Malinowski a little more for us? I am interested in Witkacy's absurdist expressionist practice across several media and Malinowski was a foundational anthropologist. Did they also make a personal impact?*

JG: Witkacy has been called 'the most universal artistic figure in Poland in the first half of the twentieth century': art and theatre theorist, painter, photographer, playwright, novelist, and philosopher. He formed the first experimental theatre in Poland and his texts have been acknowledged as a precursor to what was later called the Theatre of the Absurd (Beckett, Ionesco et al). He is also claimed as a precursor to conceptual art (The S. I. Witkiewicz Portrait Painting Firm) and performance photography. His life and work became famous in Poland as a posthumous counter-cultural figure during the Communist era, but is less known outside. His extraordinary theatre texts are often performed in Poland and his earlier 'Pure Form' paintings and drawings including some of his Australian landscapes are displayed in many museums including major Polish state collections. His portrait photography is in The Met and MoMA. He is the only major European dramatist to have written a work set in Australia.



Tom Pelik (Witkacy) in *Witkacy & Malinowski: a cinematic séance in 23 scenes* (John Gillies 2018)

Witkacy's friend, the influential anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski did his ground-breaking field research in the Territory of Papua, in what was then Australia, becoming the first person to really describe an indigenous economy. His book, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* has renewed currency as it describes a functioning 'gift economy'. A recent paper 'The Trobriandisation of the Western World: Bronisław Malinowski and the Sexual Revolution'¹, casts his anthropology as part of a two-way dialogue. Through him Trobriand Island cultural practices of the early 20th century influenced a much wider world, particularly the sexual revolution in the 1960s and '70s. The publication of his personal diary in 1966 has been called anthropology's 'post-modern moment', when it revealed his anxiety, doubt, lack of objectivity and flashes of racism. Witkacy's attack on his friend and the anthropological project in his theatre texts drew me toward this subject.

Working with these ideas and material, plus the model that Witkacy, Józef Szajna and other artists provide, reconfirmed my belief in the legitimacy of interdisciplinary art making, and bringing different artforms together into one form.

PM: *I'd like to hear more about the film itself. I've seen it described as an 'experimental docudrama'. When you showed me some of the early edits a few years ago I think I said much the same. Structurally this work seems very robust. The performers hold their space. They command every utterance. The strength of the acting emphasises the relativity of each character's experience. The influence of Einstein's thinking starts to show through.*

Coding different narratives to colour and black and white gives definition to the different threads too, those different experiences and views. Of course we also start to wonder which strands are real? The engine driver, Mr Tengier, and the stoker, Nicolas seem to exist on another plane. This

¹ Leip, John. *The Trobriandisation of the Western World: Bronisław Malinowski and the Sexual Revolution*, *Soumen Anthropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*, 39(4), Winter 2014, pp. 5-19

melding of form and content is very evocative of Witkacy and Malinowski's relationship, of the reverberations of WW1, and the dizzying new scientific perspectives on the world. How did you go about crafting and assembling all of this?



Matej Busic (Bronislaw Malinowski) in *Witkacy & Malinowski: a cinematic séance in 23 scenes* (John Gillies 2018)

JG: I have a central image and a feeling in my head first, including the sound of the Polish language in an Australian landscape, then lots of reading, collecting research images and drawing. Then I tend to write quickly to get a flow going. In an extension of the cut-up and appropriation techniques that I developed first with video, the use of quoted written text in my work is influenced by Kathy Acker's approach to re-using other texts, quoting, re-writing and re-purposing them; in this case the words of Witkacy, Malinowski and William Bateson. Other dialogue is purely my invention. Incidentally I did attempt to produce one of Acker's works with her in Australia. Heiner Müller's technique of re-writing pre-existing texts so that they become a type of meta-dialogue for performance, is also model for this approach.

I also did a lot of general research around this period in Australia, a time when it was in the process of turning back from its contradictory but progressive Federation founding mythology, to the empire and a new founding mythology based on blood sacrifice in war that we still have today. Some of the dialogue draws on Brisbane newspapers around the day in question in 1914.

Then breaking down the script and the planning stage. Lots of testing of lens, cameras, costumes, colours, lights, angles and spaces. Each work I do has a different look though my interest in light is constant. I started as a painter so that underpins my approach to light. I also limit each production to a limited set of equipment and ended up making most of the lighting with custom elements from California that brought out skin tones. They're special lights that are used in operating theatres. These are automatically controlled to mimic the moving interior of a carriage. The black and white sequences are mostly controlled natural light shot with a very fast

lens. The aim of the image making was to be quite heightened and almost non-naturalistic in line with the language but with a strong basis in reality. I wanted it to be emotional.

I remember a brief exchange at this time with British performance writer and novelist Deborah Levy who also questioned why experimental art has to be always so unemotional.

All filmmaking and moving image art is collaborative and what people view on the screen most in a work like this are the performers, so casting is one most important aspects and it takes time, particularly for this project. I also wanted to mix performers with more conventional acting skills with performers from the Sydney contemporary performance world (Clare Grant, Katia Molino, Chris Ryan, Nitin Vengurlekar) seamlessly. That was a big worry, but I'm very happy with how that resolved and it suggests future work. There is a full spectrum between performance art (non-acting) on the one hand and acting on the other, that I'm interested in exploring. There are many performative modes that exist between these two obvious poles and I'm very happy when I'm working with great performers in whatever mode.

Each section has a different way of using the camera, a different kind of movement, from the jerky to the static, so there is a language of camera movement throughout the piece in both the studio and the location scenes, though most of the film is hand held. This is a work built around movement whereas other works of mine are static.

I conceived of the sound as an extended piece of Musique Concrète with dialogue placed at the forefront. Obviously the subject matter helped this: trains, steam, explosions, cicadas, water. Some sounds are more abstract, between music and sound design and are used as leitmotifs when certain things happen in the film. They help with the repeats and the cyclical nature of the work with its returning and looping form and the mixing of time past, present and future. There is also music interwoven with this that I composed and performed, but also a number of excerpts from pieces by experimental Australian composer and performer Jon Rose who I have collaborated with on previous music projects. His *Ghan Tracks* is performed by Ensemble Offspring on part of the soundtrack. I always try and include a song in my complex works and here it ended up in the credits sung by Clare Grant.

When recorded it was one of the only films in Australia where most of the ambiances including inside the trains were recorded ambisonically, that is recording in surround sound with a specialised microphone. That and the surround mix centre the audience inside the carriage on the runaway train. So when the prisoner says, 'Let me out of here', it should be felt. Much of the audio was recorded before the dialogue scenes were shot.

The more I got into this process the more I felt the echoes of Einstein's theories in the work. I look at it now and see new things all the time.

PM: *Was it heavily scripted from the start?*

JG: This is the most tightly scripted work I have done. The material demanded it. The words are very important, their exact meanings and nuances of translation from Polish and French in the work sourced from Witkacy's and other's writings. My next film work is not scripted as such.

PM: *Was there room for improvisation?*

JG: Not much improvisation except for one gestural section that ended up in the work, but there is always a level of invention by performers I work with in all my work. That's why I work with them, and that's my style of working. I give clear parameters and style and they will interpret that with my feedback. If something doesn't sit or gel I will tell them, or we will simply edit it out. Sometimes I will intervene while a shot is being prepared, as I want an unscripted reaction by the performers. For example in the denunciation scene I deliberately told the actors just before the camera rolled that Witkacy and Malinowski had sex just once (that is according to Witkacy's first unfinished novel). Tom Pelik's (Witkacy) reaction was brilliant, he kisses the seated Matej Busic (Malinowski) as he stands up to denounce him to the Australians present. It's the perfect gesture for one who is about to betray, an echo of Judas and Christ, and also suggests more about their relationship without being too literal. The engine drivers (Craig Meneaud, Richard Hilliar) had rehearsed their wordy dialogue in a static set but had never confronted being on a moving set until the shoot. They were excited and a maybe bit scared, which comes across in the performance. There is always an element of documentary, as a camera and microphone captures a moment in time with all its elements.

While I wrote gestures and direction into the script, a great performer is open to the implications of a situation and I'm interested that they can go beyond my limited imagination. I want chance, improvisation and collaboration to work for my pieces.

PM: *Did the structure form in the editing process?*

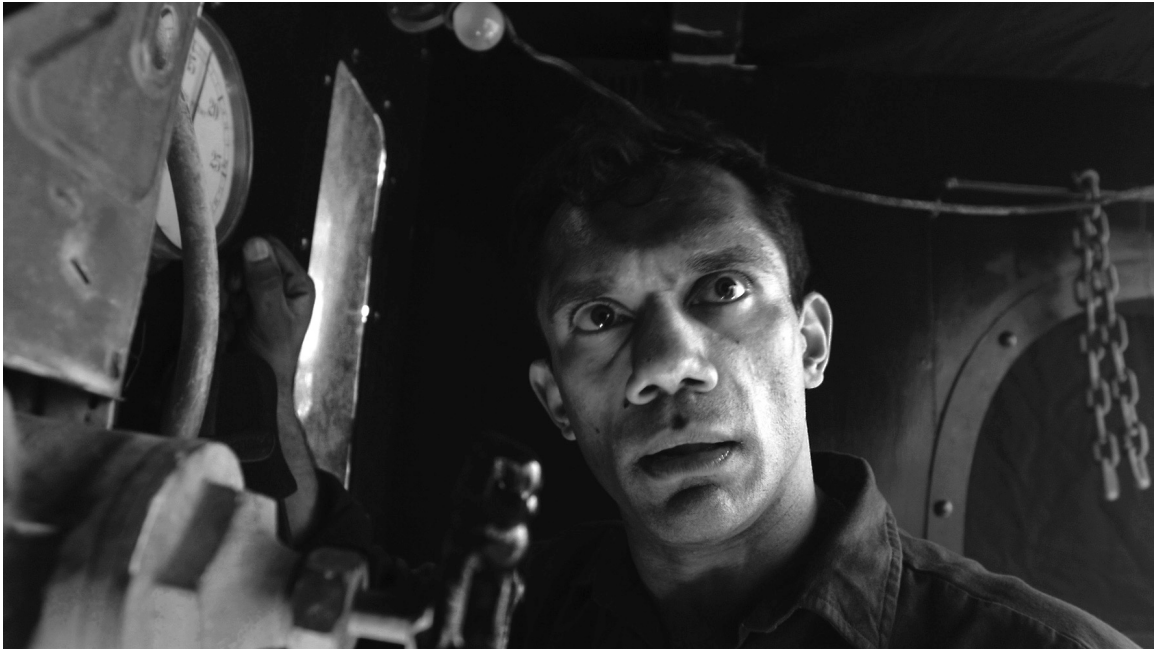
JG: In this work it basically follows the script except to work around scenes I couldn't afford to shoot. I'm very much editing in a sense when I write, and building in transitions early on. But the exact cuts come down to sound, image, rhythm, a word, meaning and gesture, and the developing organic relationship between those things as it is assembled. I also cut picture and mix audio at the same time so that one influences the other. Unlike a lot of contemporary moving image art I've always been very interested in montage as a form.

PM: *Was shooting an iterative process?*

JG: I'm more of a visual artist than a filmmaker and I do often shoot bit by bit over an extended period of time. That's partly due to budget, but I often get better results that way, and other ideas often come out during this extended process that aren't evident in the script, for example in this work the dialogue around photography and death. When it's working the work tells me things. Unlike a lot of artists I shoot, edit and sound design all my own work so I can afford to work like this, but it does mean it can take a long time to complete a complex work like this or previous works like *Divide* or even *Techno/Dumb/Show*. It doesn't mean I can't, or haven't worked in other ways, but this is a 'Possible Cinema' for me as Chris Marker defined it.

PM: *Are there certain productions of Witkacy's work that were influential here?*

JG: No, though I had seen Caitlin Newton-Broad's female cast production of *The Country Manor* and was aware of Tadeusz Kantor's performance and installation work that owes something to Witkacy's ideas.



Craig Meneaud (Mr Tengier) in *Witkacy & Malinowski: a cinematic séance in 23 scenes* (John Gillies 2018)

PM: *Where does Witkacy's own play *The Crazy Locomotive* (1923) fit in this?*

JG: That's at the core of a conceptual understanding of the work. Its influence is important and links strongly to apparatus theory.² A line from *The Crazy Locomotive* that resonates is 'I've always dreamt of something exciting happening, like in a film.... but in the end it means death'. While the film has been seen in the cinema version, it can also be mounted as part of a sculptural installation that amplifies the whole sense of film projection as apparatus, the confluence of train carriage and cinema, and of audience as passengers that is self-reflexively suggested by Witkacy's text.

PM: *Thinking of Witkacy's interest in hallucinogens – the whole experience is hallucinatory really, but it doesn't seem overt, more an underlying intent. How did that figure in the film?*

JG: I'm interested in art that alters states. When I see the audience at the end and they seem like they're gone to another place, and they are still thinking about it, my work is done.

PM: *Were there other influences in the mix too? Other works by other artists or was that unnecessary with such rich material?*

JG: Yes, rich, it mixes genres. It's not minimal. In this particular work I'm interested in the idea of cinema as escapist entertainment; the central ideas of cinema and its drive to destruction and the annihilation of the viewer. The classic sound cinema of the 1940's and 1950's is a certain high point in popular cinema, particularly with the look of Technicolor. The filmmakers I just happened to be looking at a lot before making this were Anthony Powell and Emeric

² Baudry, Jean- Louis. *Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus*, Film Quarterly, Vol 28, No 2, Winter 1974 – 5, pp. 39 – 47, University of California Press

Pressburger, sometimes with the wonderful and almost kitschy colour cinematography of Jack Cardiff. With my background in performance art I'm interested in non-naturalistic and heightened acting styles including melodrama and expressionism, Douglas Sirk, Marcel Carne and landscape as dreamscape. There are a number of scenes in Andrzej Wajda's war film *Kanal* which become hallucinatory and circular, caught out of time, that inspire me. I'm an artist who has been strongly influenced by the history of cinema.

PM: *Perhaps that leads us to the idea of a cinematic séance. The full title is Witkacy & Malinowski: a cinematic séance in 23 scenes. I understand that Witkacy was interested in mysticism, and would try to speak to his fiancé Jadwiga Janczewska through séances after she took her own life. What do you know about these?*

JG: More an interest in 'the mystery of existence' rather than mysticism as such, but I know very little of these séances, only what Daniel Gerould mentions in his book on Witkacy. I'm definitely hampered by only reading English sources, but I accept that as part of the whole conceptual conceit. What if a person in 100 years from Australia who can't read Polish made a film about Witkacy and Malinowski, what would that be like?

PM: *Were these public performances — something that figured in his art — or private events?*

JG: Private I think with friends.

PM: *How do you feel about the capacity of film to connect us to the past?*

JG: Yes very much so and with the future. There is a lot of interesting science fiction at the moment that grapples with this. Also with fake and incorrect versions of the past that creates false memories for society at large. In Australia we see film of the Gallipoli landings of 1915 over and over again. They are not; they are shots from a drama. Sergei Eisenstein's film *October* also gets used this way, and substituted for the real October Revolution which in reality was much smaller than his film. It seems trivial, but in my work the Australian flag that appears on Toowoomba Town Hall³ at the end when the prisoner crosses himself after 'surviving' the crash, is the original red version that was changed in the 1950s because it looked too communist. I've seen colourists go back to black and white archival film and make all the flags on Australian public buildings blue when most likely they were red.

Our memories are invaded with other's images. I don't think we can trust them, we are brainwashed. Realities that we have experienced in our lifetime disappear because a present cultural milieu cannot comprehend them, so what about realities before and after our experience?

PM: *Given enough time, do all films become séances?*

JG: Not sure, but I wanted to find out, as they seem to operate outside of the purely rational. Certainly the Theosophists, which also included an Australian Prime Minister of that time, thought that through radio we could hear the dead, and I guess that is true in a sense. Elvis died

³ Witkacy mentions the clock on Toowoomba Town Hall in a letter to his parents.

in 1977 but he is still crooning to us. I think the work also suggests that all photography is in the act of speaking to someone in the future.

PM: *Was Jadwiga's manifestation the respectful way for you to finish the film? The only way?*

JG: Obviously I'm dealing with sensitive material, and I have never met any of her relatives to discuss it. I wouldn't like to be pregnant, unmarried and involved with Witkacy in 1914. He obviously couldn't live with himself immediately after her suicide. Later in his written dramas a character might die in Scene 2 then reappear in Scene 5 as if nothing had ever happened. So in the spirit of the resurrected corpses of Witkacy's dramas she had to come with him to Australia in this work. For Witkacy this 'resurrection' idea is very much in line with the splitting of the accepted illusion of space-time unity that Cubism challenged in art and Einstein in physics.

The final shot became the most important and one of the longest in the film. It encapsulates the whole film through her monologue direct to camera. While it appears that the 'character' and the crowd around her are walking toward the camera they are in fact walking on the spot, in limbo, going nowhere, so the sense of movement is all out of kilter. Janczewska (Pollyanna Nowicki) is obviously not holding it together as a character in a drama, but appears as author of the words, making them her own until the last word. She is both inside and outside the dramatic conceit I am presenting.

PM: *Witkacy's mistrust of modern technology and the scientific impulse is a little perplexing. Is that his surrealist impulse coming through?*

JG: He was scientifically literate; a well educated 'hippie kid' though not formally. I'm seeing something in his writing that is very radical, something in tune with our own diabolical predicament at this particular time. That's why I chose to do this project. I could use his journey to Australia on the brink of technological war, and his writings, to say something about now and the suicide cult that we are part of. In *The Crazy Locomotive* Witkacy's characters argue using humour, sarcasm and absurdity to create a discourse around the death drive of technology (including cinema) in what I think of as a repost to Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto*. And yes it challenges Futurism, Constructivism and New Media positivism. Witkacy was also impressed by the fantastical nature of new technology he saw in Australia, for example the telephone booth in the desert near Kalgoorlie that he incorporates into the setting of the last act of *Metaphysics of the Two Headed Calf: a Tropical Australian play in 3 Acts*. Also, the ability of 'characters' to jump in time and space suggests the new physics. His work has nothing really to do formally with Surrealism but there are some strong parallels with Artaud. They arrived at some similar ideas quite independently of each other.⁴

⁴ Further reading see, Kiebuszinska, Christine, *Artaud and Witkacy: A Relationship Based on the Mystery of Existence*, in Antonin Artaud and the Modern Theatre, Ed Gene A. Plunka. 1994 pp. 146 -69, Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickson UP



Pollyanna Nowicki (Jadwiga Janczewska) in *Witkacy & Malinowski: a cinematic séance in 23 scenes* (John Gillies 2018)

PM: *In many respects I can appreciate Witkacy's sentiment — it has merit. He seems to poke at the conceit that to the ear the modern era sounds as if it arrives after colonialism, superseding it, but of course modern perspectives have been employed as cover to drive the colonial impulse further.*

The contrast between the worldviews of Witkacy and Malinowski is polarising, but contain a useful lesson about knowledge and power. At present I do find myself yearning for more of Malinowski's rationalist impulse as a relief from the confusion caused by today's 'fake news' attacks on understanding. There is a kind of symmetry here — knowledge can be misused, just as lies can be used. This is the kind of question that could take all night, but I am interested in your affinities here. Is Malinowski's impulse to understand necessarily on the path to uniformity and control?

JG: Bronisław Malinowski's 'self-making' as the great anthropologist through photography and writing is just as contrived as Witkacy's cultivated crazy artistic persona; it's just that Malinowski appears objective rather than subjective. Witkacy's critique of anthropology cuts to the core, but is also a very personal attack on Malinowski and his overweening sense of self-control; always subject while others are always object. I use Malinowski's *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* as a source for his hidden underlying anxiety; a great read that still generates controversy in anthropological circles. That said, Malinowski's work was radical and still of importance. I wanted to embrace both but that would have been a longer piece. I guess that in Australia now we can feel nostalgic for actions and beliefs that are made on the basis of evidence and informed argument rather than obscurantism, spin and conspiracy theories.

I would argue that Modernism quite clearly in many European artists' work including Witkacy's, was created from exposure to the colonial world and its subjected people's culture. In Witkacy's case he quite possibly experienced a Ngarrindjeri tourist corroboree in South Australia in 1914

that may have influenced his dramas and inspired his characters. It's very hard to speculate, but very intriguing and not un-problematic.

PM: *Thinking about cultural context, I understand many of the actors have Polish heritage. Do you have connections to Poland, or Polish community here, or arts community in Poland? Was making a connection important for you?*

JG: Very important. I find that in Australia it has become harder to make a work full of words in another language, with ideas that are not from the Anglo-sphere. Knowing many people from Jewish and Eastern European Australian families whose families have endured so much and have enriched Australian cultural life so much, I needed to honour this story and my collaborators, but it could not be in a prosaic way, it had to be alive and Witkacian in its approach to history and reality.

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John Gillies is an artist who lives in Sydney. His work *Witkacy & Malinowski: a cinematic séance in 23 scenes* was shown at the Sydney and Brisbane film festivals and installed at the Murray Art Museum Albury. Recently he curated a selection of works by seminal Australian sound artist Rik Rue at Casula Powerstation in Sydney. His work is in the collections of Art Gallery of New South Wales, Fukuyama Museum, National Gallery of Australia and Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art.