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In 1978, Józef Robakowski moved into the "Manhattan of Łódź:" a complex of five high-rises located at 19 Mickiewicz Street. From his ninth-floor kitchen window, he began recording footage of the courtyard below – a practice he maintained over the next two decades. The product is From My Window: a collection of black-and-white footage shot on sixteen-millimeter film and video between 1978 and '99 and edited in 2000. Using the device of an offscreen voiceover recorded in hindsight yet seeming to narrate the footage in real time, Robakowski resets the contemporaneity of the last two decades. In this article, I discuss the film's flexible temporality and the resultant lines of empathy binding window watcher, courtyard subject, and viewer. I make the counterintuitive claim that Robakowski's observation of his neighbors is a form of engaged empathy. Through his past-yet-present-tense voiceover, he refunctions voyeurism into a kind of civil service.

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Civic Voyeurism. Józef Robakowski's Aerial Views of the Commons

May Day 2020 was a day without parades. And yet, two months after the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) a pandemic, footage of May Day parades from decades past filled the screens of laptops worldwide. The footage was part of the online screening series *From My Window / From Your Window* (organized by e-flux and the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen). The series' namesake and reference point was Józef Robakowski's film *From My Window* [*Z mojego okna*] – a compilation of footage shot from the artist's home in Łódź between 1978 and 1999. A recurring motif of the film is the May Day parade that once annually traversed the street below the artist's window. The series' organizers screened the film on May 1 and solicited responses from contemporary artists in various states of social confinement due to the pandemic – sealed behind their own windows.

Artists submitted "video letters" – a format that recalls Robakowski's utopian investment in this medium's analog form:

> All over the world, video brings artists and viewers into contact. [...] Like mail art of the 1960s and '70s, video has potential as a form of independent communication. It is optimistic. The videotape becomes a letter.[1]

Józef Robakowski, study for *From My Window*. Copyright Józef Robakowski

The video letters responding to *From My Window* exert peculiar retroactive effects on this record of late socialism: the story unfolding outside Robakowski's window is over and yet not quite over.

Anchored in the past, it feeds a hungry, disoriented present. The May Day demonstrations it records are a cliché – evidence of how the ethics of worker agency can be reduced to mass spectacle – but they are also reminders of the socialist project's stakes.[2] Two decades after Robakowski finished filming, governments in crisis revive social programs reminiscent of socialism (direct payouts to individuals, redoubled unemployment insurance). "What is the social body without the body?" write the series' organizers. The future is still "up for grabs,"[3] they continue.

In 1978, Józef Robakowski moved into a newly built complex of five high-rises known to its tenants as the "Manhattan of Łódź."[4] From his ninth-floor kitchen window, he began recording footage of the city square below – a practice he maintained over the next two decades. *From My Window* was edited after the fact, and its accompanying voiceover was recorded in 2000; in spite of this, it narrates the onscreen action in the present tense. My reading of the film will center on this temporal discrepancy, which, I will argue, opens the film up in multiple ways: what otherwise reads as distanced satire becomes an exploration or an experiment. I will claim that this unstable past tense opens lines of empathy between the moment of the work's completion, the socialist past, and a future still "up for grabs."

Józef Robakowski, *From My Window*, 1978–1999.

Running parallel to his collection of footage was a second archival project, as the year he began filming, Robakowski and his wife Małgorzata Potocka founded a gallery in their home. A group of Yugoslav artists visiting Łódź met with Robakowski in his apartment and gave him samples of work they had brought to Poland. With this gift, an ad hoc institution – the Exchange Gallery [*Galeria Wymiany*] – came into being.

Until 2004, the gallery operated within the artist's home as a research center and forum for screenings, exhibitions, and lectures.[5] The Exchange Gallery was named for its acquisition model: the collection was amassed through gifts and trades, and its contents were not for sale. This improvised gift economy was a small-scale alternative to the socialist state-patronage system. Robakowski and Potocka were building on the tradition of artist-initiated authors' galleries [*galerie autorskie*] common in the 1960s and '70s.[6] These autonomous forums were the result of artists' withdrawal from official art institutions into the space of the home. This shift reflected their diminishing trust in state-affiliated venues to accommodate critical work. *From My Window* conveys the same disenchantment through its narrator's immobile position in the home.

The alignment of this biographical context with *From My Window*'s narrative frame – for both converge in the same domestic milieu – may tempt viewers to conflate artist with narrator. In a strictly spatial sense, this is justified, for Robakowski did live in this building (a fact made public by the existence of the Exchange Gallery). The film opens with a line that seems to reinforce its autobiographical status: "My name is Józef Robakowski. I live on the 9th floor of a big high-rise at 19 Mickiewicz Street." The narration, however, is a work of fiction, for while the footage was not staged, the audio commentary is the artist's projection.[7] This fact does not lower the stakes of the story being told here, nor does it preclude the narrator's attachment to the community pictured; Robakowski does not disclose the fictionality of his script during the film. I have therefore chosen to respect the diegetic world as one whose integrity is not contingent on its referential link to reality. In the reading that follows, I will reconstruct this world as it is given to us by the narrator.

Still from Józef Robakowski, *From My Window*. Copyright Józef Robakowski.

We can draw a parallel between the transactions emerging indoors, as Robakowski and Potocka amassed their gallery's collection, and the social interactions documented in *From My Window*. The community of neighbors depicted in the film provide one another with favors and informal services, resulting in a social economy that suggests a shared belief in their common interest. We meet the superintendent's son, Marek, who once prevented a thief from stealing the narrator's car battery. We meet Paweł Schmidt, who has professionalized the art of being a good neighbor: to make extra cash, he moves furniture, fetches groceries for the elderly, and plays with the neighbors' kids. Interspersed in the portrait of '80s-era hardship are indications of a favor economy that occasionally works, despite external interference. These interactions are facilitated by the city square shared by the tenants, which is expropriated from them several times during the film. Police exploit it as a stage on which to demonstrate their authority; in 1983, it is converted into a parking lot, and in '99, a five-star hotel. If we evaluate the tenants' community against their changing access to the square, we see that it depends on this shared resource; on the other hand, the square makes the neighbors vulnerable to one another by virtue of being mutually visible. *From My Window* attests to this: Robakowski's aerial view – his power to observe – gives him access to but also leverage over his neighbors.

Naming the film's setting, the voiceover alternates between "square" [*plac* – public space open to all] and courtyard [*podwórko* – a semi-enclosed space within a housing community]. The latter suggests that the square's function is to serve the tenants of the nearby buildings as an extension of their collective

home. The voiceover uses the phrase "our concrete courtyard" [*nasze betonowe podwórko*], inviting us to think of the space as a commons: a resource belonging to all members of a social group and managed and maintained by that group.[8] State socialism redefined an individual's entitlement to property as a right of usage. This conception of property resonates with the commons' legal status as a socialized resource. In both cases, ownership is replaced by the right of usufruct (the right to use and derive benefit).

In his 1967 text "Right to the City," written on the centennial of Marx's *Capital*, Henri Lefebvre defined the city as an "experimental utopia," where strategies for serving social needs can be tested, demonstrated, and improved.[9] What might we gain from evaluating the square in *From My Window* as a localized "experimental utopia"? It is here that the tenants self-organize their five-building community by "testing, demonstrating, and improving" ways to live together and serve their mutual needs. On the same site, however, this emerging collectivity is thwarted by exertions of state power (police activity, martial law). Is it not naïve to speak of an "emerging" "utopia" in late socialism – a period branded with the keyword "stagnation"?[10]

In what follows, I will argue that the narrator of *From My Window* cultivates conscious ambivalence toward this question. In 1983, his fatigue peaks: "I want to end my film," he says. He even feigns doing so, substituting his aerial view with a blank white frame. One beat later, he picks up again: "I decided to wait for the next May Day." The film tracks his disappointment but leaves room for his obstinate investment in the city square as a commons. He gives up and starts again, withdraws and re-engages. These stuttering moods call to mind Samuel Beckett's maxim: "I can't go on. I'll go on."[11] To read this story as one of unambiguous disenchantment is to overlook the second

part of this reversal. To better attend to the disappointment and investment embedded in the film, I will make the counterintuitive claim that the narrator's observation of his neighbors is a form of engaged empathy: I believe that he refunctions the act of surveillance into a social service.

The two times of *From My Window*

Related to the tempo of stopping and starting again is the voiceover's verbal tense, which toggles between present and past. These "two times" stimulate two modes of reception – two ways of watching that engage the film as different kinds of text. *From My Window* is a finished archival record of a past way of life, but also resembles a nature documentary portraying the "concrete courtyard" as a maelstrom of vital processes. The film's visual and auditory components – at times seeming synchronized and at others spaced apart – cue viewers to process the film in two ways: as epitaph and live action. The latter is more dynamic, for it asks the viewer to suspend disbelief and buy into the voiceover's simulated contemporaneity. Its fictionality may again be relevant here, for it imparts an element of improvisation to the fabula. One can imagine the artist ad-libbing the story directly from the footage, seeing long-shelved memories anew. In fact, when Robakowski first began screening *From My Window*, he would play the footage with no recorded soundtrack and add his commentary live, altering the story each time.[12] This dynamic of spontaneous fabulation adds a playful vitality to the voiceover, cultivating a subtle camaraderie between window-watcher, courtyard subject, and viewer. At his window, is the narrator in the commons or just beyond its outer edge?

The answer may lie in how he utilizes the offscreen voice as a cinematic device: is this a distancing mechanism? Alternatively, is this voice embodied in any sense? As theorist of the voice Mladen Dolar reminds us, the human voice's apparent externality to the body is an illusion, for in fact: "[it] comes from the inside,

the body, the belly, the stomach – from something incompatible and irreducible to the activity of the mouth." Dolar likens the voice to "the dwarf, the hunchback hidden in our entrails."[13]

From My Window belongs to a body of work Robakowski calls "personal cinema" [*własne kino*].[14] This project entails turning the camera inward, on the artist's body and home. In other films under this banner, he accentuates his voice's bodily source. For instance, *Ouch! My Leg Hurts* [*Ojej! Boli mnie noga*, 1990] records an offscreen voice repeating the word "*ojej*" [ouch], while an unseen cameraman – presumably the speaker – walks through a forest. In repetition, the phonemes in (*ojej*) mutate into an indistinct moan. *I Am Going* [*Idę*, 1973] records a voice counting steps as the cameraman climbs a tower. The voice gradually loses coherence, ending on a tattered "200" that radiates fatigue: the front vowels of the Polish *dwieście* [200] make the word indiscernible from a sigh of exertion. In both films, the categorical distinction between word and interjection disappears. The voice's semantic function cedes to its physical one: to relieve the body by releasing breath. While neither film visually divulges the speaker's body, to call these voices disembodied is misleading, for the body is intensely present in the voice, which becomes a sensitive instrument for expressing strain, exhaustion, and relief. Can we say the same of the voiceover of *From My Window*? Is it similarly embodied, or is its illusion of externality left intact?

To answer, we can only listen. The viewer's ability to measure the narrator's engagement in this story depends on her aural sensitivity – her willingness to "read" vocal texture, perhaps by practicing what Pierre Schaeffer called "reduced listening."

This mode of listening takes the sound itself as its object, rather than treating it as vehicle for something else.[15] By tuning into the voice, I have identified several disruptions of its deadpan demeanor. In the table below, words enunciated with intense tonal inflection are in boldface:

Polish line	English line	Themes/attitudes conveyed
*Mój sąsiad Karol Ptyś **wie**, że filmuję.*	My neighbor Karol Ptyś **knows** that I am filming.	The narrator's panoptic effect on his neighbors *and* their consent to be watched.
*A ten samochód **stoi i stoi** już drugi rok.*	And this car **sits and sits** there – for two years now!	Tedium *and* curiosity.
***Pan Szpak** na czele peletonu.*	**Mr. Szpak** leads the peloton.	The thrill of group movement *and* one individual's primacy over the group.

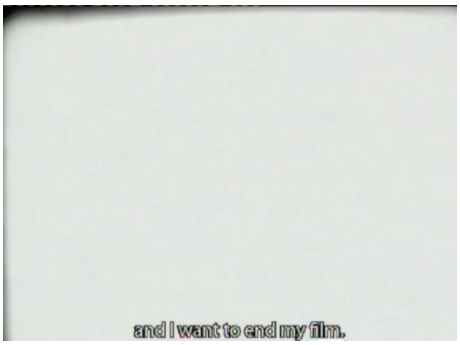
The inflections carry notes of tedium and scorn, but also attention and curiosity. The viewer who privileges semantic content over volume and tone may miss these attitudinal incongruities and scan the voice as either solely sarcastic or naïvely optimistic. By listening for the body in the voice, the viewer (listener) gains access to the narrator's conscious ambivalence.

Film theorists describe the offscreen voice as "acousmatic" – a term derived from the Greek *akousmatikoi*, which refers to Pythagoras's new students, who were required to listen to his lectures from behind a veil. The term was adopted into film theory by Michel Chion, who posited the movie screen as Pythagoras's veil[16] and introduced the modified concept of the "acousmetre," "[a] kind of voice-character specific to cinema that in most instances of cinematic narratives derives mysterious powers from being heard and not seen."[17] Typically, this cinematic device marks forces of evil, threat, or excessive power. For Chion, the acousmetre is all-seeing and all-powerful, for it is omnipresent.[18] This power is, however, conditional. With no anchor in filmic space, the offscreen voice is dispossessed of its potency (disacousmatized) the moment its

source appears onscreen. Dolar suggests something different of the acousmatic voice: once endowed with phantasmal powers, the voice can never be cleanly remarried to the body, for the pieces will never fit. The acousmatic voice is:

> in search of a body, but even when it finds its body, it turns out that this doesn't quite work, the voice doesn't stick to the body, it is an excrescence which doesn't match the body [...].[19]

What does this mean for the voiceover of *From My Window*? Does the narrator's concealment position him as pedagogue? An authority? A threat? What might we learn from the voice behind this screen? I will now read two moments in the film as false revelations of the voiceover's source. The first I have already cited here: in 1983, the voice announces: "I want to end my film." The screen goes white for two seconds. The viewer glimpses not the face behind the veil but the veil itself – a white screen. The second moment occurs after 1989, when the street below the window is no longer named after Adam Mickiewicz – 19th-century poet and figurehead of Polish Romanticism. Its new namesake is Józef Piłsudski – military hero and revolutionary socialist turned political leader, who was Chief of State from 1918–1922.[20] When the narrator of *From My Window* announces the street's new name, the courtyard footage disappears, and a portrait of Piłsudski flashes onscreen. Romanticism yields to pragmatism; the charismatic bard cedes space to the charismatic leader.



Still from Józef Robakowski, From My Window, 1978–1999. Copyright Józef Robakowski.

I suggest we read these moments in sequence, for both violate the formal law established in the film's title: to show only what is visible from the window.[21] In the first, the complexity of the courtyard fades into a blank slate onto which the voice projects apathy and exhaustion.[22] The second moment finally delivers a face, but one that does not fit. The thought of matching the "sensitive instrument" of the narrator's voice to this autocratic visage is uncanny. I read these two images as false epiphanies. In the first, the voice becomes an abstract void emancipated from the body. This revelation is false, for Robakowski does not end his film but promptly resumes his footage. He musters enthusiasm to do so only because of his longstanding allegiance to May Day. In the second instance, individualism appears to finally triumph over the promise of collectivity – the hybrid social unit cedes to monocratic power. This, too, is a false revelation. Piłsudski's face occupies the screen for less than two seconds. His lips do not move in time with the words. In fact, he has no mouth to issue any voice at all. His chin is resting on his fist, which conceals the mouth from below, while his iconic moustache hides it from above, reducing it to shadow. The first false revelation discredits the speaking subject as an omniscient, bodiless abstraction, while the second discredits him as a discrete individual. Who, then, is he, and what is his status vis-à-vis the courtyard community? Does he participate or observe? Can he do both?

An adjacent typology of the disembodied voice goes unmentioned in Chion's study: the documentary voiceover.[23] This archetype complicates his argument, for while it retains the privileges of omniscience and an infinite field of vision, it lacks the phantasmal and disciplinary forces that typify Chion's

acousmetre. In *From My Window*, the tedium of the nature documentary overrides the portent of the "Master behind the curtain."[24] With its prosaic footage of the social behaviors of a habitat, it is closer to the nature documentary than the suspense film. The voiceover might recall David Attenborough narrating the behavior of creatures in their environments. The police pursuit of the narrator's wife after she parks illegally, and the speed traps set for passing cars might call to mind dramatized footage, for example of a predator closing in on its prey. The black-and-white film shows human subjects and the urban surface in grayscale, producing a visual effect that seems to affirm the tenants' right to their commons. As gray figures camouflaged against gray ground, they belong in this habitat and are its native species. Alternatively, the pervasive gray evokes the sensibility of surveillance footage. The more access the cameraman gains to his neighbors' lives, the more he has to use against them. The result may be a gentle parody of two styles of narration: a cautionary tale of surveillance under socialism, and a naïve museum diorama of a scene from nature.

Viewed in the latter mode, the courtyard becomes an exhibit where onlookers can observe the inhabitants of a world unlike their own. The film, then, offers a record of the socialist urban environment, intended, perhaps, for an audience remote in time, for whom non-capitalist society is just as alien as the mating habits of seahorses or the migratory patterns of birds. *From My Window* becomes a time capsule that preserves a specific way of life for those

Still from Józef Robakowski, From My Window, 1978–1999. Copyright Józef Robakowski.

unable to visualize alternatives to their worlds.

Recall that the retroactive voiceover narrates past events in the present tense. As viewers, we are conditioned to match sound to image, and to force continuity where none may be apparent. Bound by what Chion calls the "audiovisual contract" – film's default congruence of image and sound – we are likely to glue voice to event and accept the voiceover as real-time narration. When the voice slips into the past tense, we are jilted out of the film's verisimilitude.[25] Instinctually, the viewer is likely to cohere these attitudes of reception, using the "ear's temporal resolving power"[26] to reconcile discrepant visual and auditory content. Chion calls the resulting effect "synchresis,"[27] the "spontaneous and irresistible weld"[28] linking concurrent images and sounds. Synchresis reckons with contradictory content through juxtaposition and combination. For Chion, "it never creates a total fusion of the elements of sound and image," as "it still allows the two to subsist separately while in combination."[29] What does this mean for *From My Window*? With conscious ambivalence, the viewer can listen to the film in the past and present tenses. This animates the courtyard world: the story of the socialist city is over and yet not quite over. The commons is dismantled and still in construction. This is a cold case, but it is also a resource for thinking one's way out of the thickness of the present.

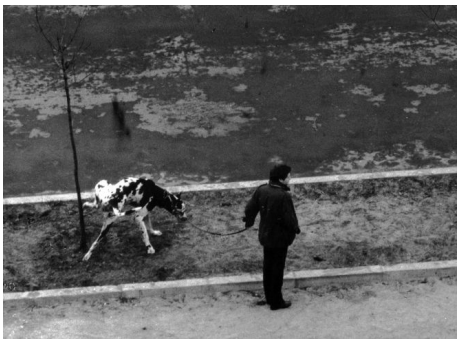
Civic voyeurism

The narrator does exploit his acousmatic authority by role-playing the neighbor-informant – a recognizable archetype of socialist life.[30] His window-side location invokes Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, and Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Camera Buff* [*Amator*], which came out in 1979 and likely influenced the project.[31] The male-coded archetype of the voyeur (Hitchcock's Jeffries, Kieślowski's Filip, Michael Powell's Peeping Tom) can be productively compared to the archetypal mother

confined by housework to the home, who leans just beyond the window's threshold to observe the outside world. Does the narrator of *From My Window* lurk behind (as male voyeur) or lean beyond?[32] While the former implies passivity, the woman at her window engages with her environment. She shouts across the courtyard to her child and shares gossip with her neighbor. In its title, *From My Window* invokes the cinematic legacy of the voyeur – the villainized proprietor of the male gaze.[33]

Could it be, however, that the term's pejorative weight obscures its other properties? Crucially, Robakowski never directs his camera into his neighbors' homes. If the narrative gaze lays claim to outdoor space, it at least respects the threshold of the home as where its purview ends. My aim, however, is not to pardon this particular voyeurism, but to go further – by validating it as a form of social participation.

I argue that the narrator's voyeuristic posture embodies the virtues and hazards of socialized accountability. The tenants' collectivity is not without tension: will the narrator get caught ogling his neighbor's wife? Will Mr. Z get away with dealing black-market meat? Can one ethically spy on one's neighbors? Patrycja Grzonka has suggested that the narrator is more flâneur than voyeur, for despite his static body he observes, yet withholds judgment.[34]



Still from Józef Robakowski, From My Window, 1978–1999. Copyright Józef Robakowski.

Does this redeem his voyeurism? Does he participate in the commons, or merely map his neighbors' lives in patterns visible only from above? His neighbors seem abstractly aware of his project; they know that at any moment their neighbor may be watching from on high. Did this taint the freedom they felt outdoors? Is the panoptic surveillance not more potent for its inconsistency?

We may be able to redeem this voyeurism by scanning it for signs of empathy. The first obstacle to this task is the irony saturating the narrative voice. Any attempt to attribute earnestness to the narrator or the artist looming behind him (and supplying his voice) could be promptly shut down by Robakowski's manifesto-like text "I Manipulate" [*Manipuluję*, 1988]:

> I am convinced that the artist is a perfidious swindler, a social abscess whose very vitality consists of manipulating the self as a form of self-defense against annihilation, which is to say, public acceptance and acclaim.[35]

Robakowski's language is strong. However, to be forthright about deceit is a kind of oxymoron. If manipulation is indeed the artist's vocational mode, then these (dis)avowals must also be read as devious games. To insist that one is lying can, counterintuitively, function as a cover for sincerity. After all, it is not malice that motivates the artist's "swindles." Manipulation is a mechanism of self-defense. It is a buffer against "annihilation" defined transparently as public acceptance and acclaim: co-option of the artist's sincerity by the market, state, Party, or other institutional bodies. Deceit is a tactic for protecting what the artist holds dear. By implication, there must be something worth safeguarding: a kernel of sincerity or investment, however thickly camouflaged it may be.

Moreover, the artist's and narrator's earnestness need not be one and the same. Let us therefore evaluate the narrator's proximity to his subject. He keeps tabs on the tenants' misdemeanors (Mr. Z's meat racket, his wife's illegal parking) but is implicated in them: he too buys Mr. Z's meat, if only from time to time. Moments of self-incrimination are subtle but crucial interventions on the film's surface narrative, for they contradict the passivity associated with voyeurism. The narrator descends to the square once, offscreen. When he sees two girls miss their bus, he invites them in for tea. They stay in touch. The girls write him "cool letters." The narrator's voyeurism is a necessary precondition for this act of hospitality and the friendship that follows. The courtyard subjects are our narrator's family: he listens to music with the superintendent's son, chats with Mr. Narbutt ("his old friend") in the elevator, plays chess with Edward from the twelfth floor, and takes note of his neighbors' name days. His affection is palpable when he sees his brother Andrzej go sledding after the winter's first snowfall. If his sustained attention toward his neighbors warrants accusations of surveillance or voyeurism, then I propose we call it "civic voyeurism": an ethics of watching perhaps akin to the anthropological fieldwork method known as participant observation. This technique of ethnographic data collection requires the investigator to share in the activities of the studied group. In its ideal form, it dilutes the violence of the investigator's gaze. However, participant observation, like the civic voyeurism of *From My Window*, raises complicated questions of consent.

As a civic voyeur, our narrator does render a valuable service to his neighbors, by chronicling the story of the housing estate against the tide of time. "Lately I haven't seen them around," he says of older neighbors. At one point, he observes an older woman crossing the square. He does not know her name, but from her frequent crossings, he knows she lives nearby. "Lately, I haven't been seeing her," he reports. The woman walks

behind a van, which hides all but her torso and head. Abruptly, she pauses there. The camera holds still on her. In one of the film's rare moments of silence, the viewer can ponder the motives of the woman behind the van, half concealed and half exposed, unknowingly posing for and hiding from the camera. Does this indicate her consent to her neighbor's project? Or, could her half-obscured position mark her reluctance to be watched? Does she sense that her time on the courtyard is running out and is therefore acquiescing to be recorded for posterity?

Still from Józef Robakowski, From My Window, 1978–1999. Copyright Józef Robakowski.

Contained in her hesitation are the ambivalent effects of the narrator's civic voyeurism. His gaze is a caring one that nonetheless renders its subjects vulnerable. He keeps tabs on his neighbors and takes care of them as well. He watches them and watches out for them. He may even aim to resuscitate them – to bring them back from the dead. In Dolar's study, the acousmatic voice is bound up with death. It is "a phantom of presence, invoking death at its heart."[36] The offscreen voiceover is poised for the work of telling the dead's stories by virtue of its own phantasmal presence.

If we acknowledge the ethical viability of civic voyeurism, *From My Window* becomes a recuperative archive of a particular commons and its constituents. Yet, like any archive, it excludes more than it saves. For all the footage included in its twenty-minute running time, so much more was inevitably left out. While the narrator watches, he also sorts, selects, and discards.

His voyeurism is coupled with custodianship over the commons, defined as a relation of caretaking that also includes the right to divulge, delete, conserve, or conceal at whim. He is like Derrida's *archon*: a commanding magistrate and keeper of files, a civilian whose private home [*arkheion*] doubles as a storehouse for public documents. By housing these records, the Derridean *archon* earns the "hermeneutic right" to interpret their contents (to tell the story of the commons), which comes with the power to invoke or impose the law.[37] If *From My Window*'s narrator kept his home archive out of empathy, this does not negate or excuse his archontic authority. To negotiate the ethics of civic voyeurism is to reckon with this ambiguity.By performing and satirizing the role of voyeur, the narrator addresses the confusion of living in a social system where both agency and control have been socialized. He reacts to surveillance by adopting and refunctioning it. He tests how to internalize responsibility without internalizing control.

Continuity problems

From My Window assimilates two decades of heterogeneous material into a formally consistent product. The courtyard becomes a parking lot and, finally, a hotel. Tenants lose their jobs, buy new cars, and move away. Socialism ends. For the post-socialist footage, Robakowski switches from 16mm film to video. These ruptures are smoothed in the process of montage. The present-tense voiceover supports the illusion of continuity, countering narrative discrepancies with sonic uniformity.

Yet, if we reconstruct the scene of its making, we find it studded with starts and stops. We might speculate about the curiosity that drew our narrator to the window, camera in hand, or the apathy he may have felt on other days, when he considered but dismissed the impulse to record. For the confession "I want to end my film," we can imagine other

unrecorded moments when his faith in the project wore thin. His twenty-year commitment expresses the mood: I can't go on. I'll go on.

In the face of the caesurae of its timespan (turns of decades, the end of socialism), the film offers an illusion of continuity that weds past to present. It documents the changing topography of socialized space as one might record the diminishment of a forest as it is timbered. Watching the film, we may feel ourselves witnesses to the death of a habitat. Can satire be elegiac? Does the narrator's ironic distance preclude lingering investment in the ideal of the socialist city?

What have we to gain from this illusion of continuity? Parallels can be found on both sides of 1989: when tenant Jan Narbutt's dog dies, he adopts a new one. Repetitions land like moments of déjà-vu, softening the barrier between present and past. The narrator identifies still-functioning aspects of real existing socialism after 1989. In 1990, the neighbors pool chores, "sweeping, repairing, painting, sawing, even laying cement." After a blizzard, they gather with shovels to clear the snow. This common labor compels the narrator to again call the square "our concrete courtyard" – a phrase suggestive of the tenants' right to their commons. Then, remembering all that has passed, he self-corrects: "Oh! Excuse me. Our parking lot."[38] Note that while the window is the narrator's proprietary space (*From "My" Window*), the courtyard is consistently paired with the inclusive possessive pronoun "our."

Jacek Świdziński has made the intriguing suggestion that the film is, in fact, two works of art: a durational performance (the artist's window vigil) and its residual film.[39] The hypothesis has two important implications: firstly, it reintegrates Robakowski-the-artist with Robakowski-the-narrator by embedding the artist's presence in the work. It also casts the tenants as the audience of Robakowski's performance, adding another link of reciprocity between the pictured subject and

artist/narrator/window-watcher (in this reading, the three are in tension but closely aligned). Recall that the film was first screened without sound, accompanied instead by Robakowski's live commentary. This seems to confirm the film's pliancy as both a live and a static document. Contemporary viewers, having only the film as an access point to the live performance, can witness it by mentally transporting themselves back to the time of action. Whether we read *From My Window* as live action or epitaph rests on how we experience the film's internal time and where we position ourselves in relation to it. If we resist the illusion of real-time narration and lock the actions in the past, then the film is a postmortem. Alternatively, if we buy into the illusion of continuity and allow the present-tense voiceover to disturb the logical time index, then the film exists in two times: yes, we are listening to a story told from its endpoint, and yes, this story can carry us back to its time of action; both statements can be true. The tense in which we hear the film may carry with it an implicit value judgment about the socialist project: is this a critique (in the past tense) of a dysfunctional system that is, thank goodness, over? Or, is this an exploration (in the present tense) of the still-relevant challenges of socialized accountability?

To the viewer receptive to these discrepant attitudes, *From My Window* delivers the story of a community which functioned despite its obstacles. The film becomes a stereoscopic portrait of a community-at-work, overlaying the remembrance of a bygone world. The present-tense vision is unstable, for it is incomplete. It implicates the viewer, for it seethes with the not-yet-depleted potential of socialized accountability and the still-potent threat of socialized control. The acousmatic voiceover unclasps our internal sense of causality, for as a voice without a body, it is an effect without a cause.[40] This disturbs chains of events we may take for granted (the courtyard is doomed, socialism will fail), leaving an opening for intervention.

This fluidity later cedes to a forceful conclusion. The fate of this particular commons is no longer "up for grabs." In 1999, a five-star foreign hotel is built on the square. Footage of construction workers becomes an eerie after-image of the parading workers lionized on May Days past. "In a little while," the narrator laments, "the beautiful view from my window will show only a fragment of a hotel wall bearing the inscription: 'End of Film'." Setting aside the merits and failings of what preceded 1989, the panacea promised by neoliberalism has made no reparations to the tenants dispossessed of their commons.

To end, let us leap forward from the May Day parades viewed from Robakowski's window to the parade-free May 1st of 2020. In a text introducing *From My Window* for the Oberhausen screening series, the organizers state their motives: "It is our hope that this collective record of the present will help us imagine a future that we want to live in."[41] This leaves unstated a third point in time – the socialist past embedded in the film. That Robakowski's monologic voiceover can feed and sustain a "collective record" decades later is, to my mind, proof of its internal porosity – its openness to the world outside its window and outside the hermetic spatial metaphors applied to 20th-century socialism: blocs, curtains, and walls. Its success as a creative prompt for "video letters" today suggests that it too is a video letter that solicits continuous response.

Still from Józef Robakowski, From My Window, 1978–1999. Copyright Józef Robakowski.

In 2020, we continue the concrete courtyard's social economy in the form of mutual aid: a model of self-organization both pragmatic (based on proximity and need) and utopian (based on a shared belief in social accountability). Mutual aid takes many forms: community gardens, barters, ride shares, pooled grocery runs, direct wealth transfers, or simply answering pleas for help. In all its forms, it requires spontaneous negotiations of how self-interest and common interest overlap, and whether privacy is subordinate to mutual welfare. Could it be that privacy is not an indivisible, inalienable human right, but rather something that is worked for, earned, and bartered away whenever we live in community? As I read resource-sharing sign-up sheets posted in the stairwells and courtyards of apartment buildings during the covid-19 pandemic, I am reminded that mutual aid makes one *visible* to one's neighbors. To watch out for your neighbors is also to watch them. If the narrator of *From My Window* bears an uneasy resemblance to the archetypal neighbor-informant, then let us sit with this unease; the film can invite us to scrutinize our discomfort with the sacrifices required by good neighborship. In 2020, as we newly improvise the ethics of socialized accountability, we suffer from a deficit of common public space in which to resolve these challenges together.

What strategies might we source from the twenty years of data collected in *From My Window*? Its narrator takes great interest in the visual trope of group movement: he enjoys the sight of crowds moving in unison on May Day. With affection, he observes a cycling group that rides together every Sunday. They ride in a peloton – a group formation that allows individuals to

conserve energy by sticking together, which reduces the drag caused by wind. He admires a path cleared through the snow by those attending a nearby church. To avoid stomping through unplowed snow drifts, tenants walk where others have gone before and tamp the snow down for those who may come after. The images speak for themselves: moving together is easier than moving alone.

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1 Józef Robakowski, cited in Isabelle Schwarz, "Galeria Wymiany," *Sztuka i Dokumentacja* vol. 4, 5–47: 13.

2 Ewa Mazierska analyzes filmic representations of May Day in late socialism in her article "The ideal and reality of work in the 1970s films of Krzysztof Kieślowski" (*Studies in Eastern European Cinema* vol. 6, no. 1, 64–81: 66). Kieślowski's film *The Bricklayer* [*Murarz*, 1973] is set on May 1st, 1971. The protagonist, Józef Malesa, joins the audience of a May Day parade. Similarly, the narrator of *From My Window* takes interest in the annual parades, but only as a spectator. Mazierska describes Malesa's attitude toward the parade as a mixture of bitterness and pride. This combination resonates with the narrator's ironic yet loyal interest in *From My Window*.

3 See: "From My Window / From Your Window." Series description: https://www.e-flux.com/video/series/329136/from-my-window-from-your-window/ (accessed May 24, 2020).

4 Robakowski used his window as theme and formal frame for other works during these decades (*Bliżej – Dalej* [1984] and *Samochody, samochody!* [1985]).

5 For a close study of the gallery and its activities, see: Schwarz, "Galeria Wymiany."

6 Comparable initiatives include Ewa Partum's Address Gallery and Andrzej Partum's Bureau of Poetry. For background on the authors' galleries, see: Grzegorz Dziamski, "Przestrzeń artystyczna; galerie autorskie," in: *Szkice o nowej sztuce* (Warsaw: Młodzieżowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1984), 118–153. This practice had parallels in the Soviet Union, such as the APTART exhibition organized by former Collective Actions member Nikita Alekseev in his home in 1982. Visitors were drawn to the show by word of mouth, and Alekseev would welcome them in if he happened to be home. In the Moscow cultural scene, the apartment was an intense locus of creative activity. See: *Anti-Shows: APTART 1982-84,* eds. Margarita Tupitsyn et al. (London: Afterall Books, 2017); Claire Bishop, "The Social Under Socialism," in: *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London & New York: Verso, 2012), 152–154.

7 Bożena Czubak describes the film as a combination of "factual and medial reality, an objectivized recording, and authorial interpretation." See: idem, "Kino własne," in: *Moje własne kino: Józef Robakowski* (Warsaw: CSW, 2012).

8 The term "commons" is derived from a British legal category for resources held in common. In its original context, it refers to land. The term was popularized by Garrett Hardin's 1968 ecological treatise *The Tragedy of the Commons*. Today, the idea of the commons has new currency in cultural theory. An N-gram of the term's usage shows a sharp spike in 1968, following the publication of Hardin's book. Since 1987, its appearance frequency has again risen steadily, nearly doubling in the last two decades. Its renewed relevance may be linked to debates over online intellectual property (the "digital commons"), and Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's idea of the university as an undercommons. See: idem, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe & New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).

9 Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," in: idem, *Writings on Cities*, trans. & ed. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford & Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 147–159: 151. Lefebvre had a storied track record with the (actually-existing) socialist city. His contact with student movements, philosophers, and workers' councils in Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia fed into his theoretical vision for how a city should serve its constituents. In 1986, he collaborated with architects and planners on a reconstruction proposal for New Belgrade. However, his observations of state socialism in East and Central Europe eventually led him to repudiate orthodox Marxism. His damning verdict that socialism had failed to produce "a space of its own" is polemicized by Michał Murawski in his critique of the consensus narrative that socialism failed. See: Michał Murawski, "Actually-Existing Success: Economics, Aesthetics, and the Specificity of (Still-)Socialist Urbanism," in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* vol. 60, no. 4

(2018), 907–937. For an account of Lefebvre's disenchantment with East European state socialism, see: Łukasz Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 233–244.

10 This term originated as a master metaphor for late socialism with Mikhail Gorbachev's diagnosis of Leonid Brezhnev's tenure as Soviet state leader. The notion of the 1970s–1980s as years of stagnation [*period zastoia*] has become shorthand for the exhaustion of Soviet-style communism as an economic model as well as a pervasive mood of disenchantment. For writing that theorizes this mood, see: Alexei Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense, and the *Anekdot*," *Public Culture* vol. 9, no. 2, 161–188, and Lilya Kaganovsky, "The cultural logic of late socialism," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* vol. 3, no. 2, 185–199. Relevantly to my argument, Anna Fishzon applies the keyword to cinematic time in her article "The Fog of Stagnation: Explorations of Time and Affect in Late Soviet Animation," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* vol. 56, no. 2–3, 571–598.

11 Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder Publications, 1994), 418.

12 See: Czubak, "Kino własne."

13 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge & London: MIT Press, 2006), 70.

14 See: Józef Robakowski, "Kino własne," in: idem, *Dekada 1980–1990. Sztuka poszukiwania decyzji: wybór tekstów* (Koszalin: Moje Archiwum, 1990), 4.

15 See: Pierre Schaeffer, *Traite des objets musicaux* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 270. An explication of this listening mode can be found in: Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen,* trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 29–33.

16 Some speculate that Pythagoras's veil was a metaphor that perhaps referred to figurative speech. See: Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 45–72.

17 Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 221.

18 Ibid, 129–130.

19 Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More,* 60–61.

20 Piłsudski coined an aphorism about the primacy of national sovereignty over the transnational project of communism which uses, curiously, the city street as a metaphor: "I have left the streetcar 'socialism' at the stop called 'independence'."

21 The film begins and ends with additional violations of this law: the title screen is imposed over an establishing shot showing all five high-rises from a distance. A closing title frame shows the Exchange Gallery's address. Since these frames bookend the film, I place them in a different category from the internal formal breaks discussed here.

22 The white screen can be linked to the snowstorms periodically logged in the film. Robakowski plays with the visual effects of the snow, which threatens to efface his view but ultimately renders the tenants' social intimacy even more visible: paths stomped in the snow record group movement, and his neighbors' efforts to shovel the snow demonstrate their readiness to collectively care for their commons.

23 Chion's acousmetre refers to diegetic sound. This raises an important question: is the voice in *From My Window* diegetic? This depends on the temporality we assign to the film. If we accept the voiceover's present tense, then, yes, it is the diegetic voice of a man narrating events as they unfold. Conversely, if we hear the voiceover as retroactive, it becomes extradiegetic sound (external to the film's depicted world).

24 Dolar deems the curtained wizard of L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* a paradigm of acousmatic authority: "At the center of the story is precisely the acousmatic voice in which all the wizardry of the wizard consists." Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 62.

25 This occurs five times: when he watches his wife get chased by the police; when he starts to narrate the events of 1981 while footage from a previous year is still onscreen; when he tells a story about inviting two girls in for tea; and on two other occasions, when he mentions the eventual disappearance of people from the courtyard while they are still onscreen.

26 Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 134.

27 In other films made during these decades, Robakowski plays with the synchresis of film's visual and auditory elements by establishing an indexical relation between onscreen content and offscreen voiceovers. The films *Videopieśni* and *Videocałuski* (1992) translate the sounds of kisses and the human voice into abstract, colorful forms, and in *Samochody, samochody!* (1985), the voiceover lists vehicles appearing onscreen without editorial commentary. These direct correspondences between the artist's vocal insertions and what physically occurs before the camera have no equivalent in *From My Window*, where the narration skews "what really happened." Nevertheless, the

synchresis linking sound to image produces a sense of proximity between voiceover and footage, even if this is not corroborated by what we know of the production process.

28 Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 63.

29 Ibid., 188.

30 I will name a few staples from the trope's cinematic canon: *Balkan Spy* (dir. Dušan Kovačević and Božidar Nikolić, 1984) is a Yugoslav comedy about the chaos that ensues when a man decides to spy on his subtenant; the Czechoslovak film *The Ear* (dir. Karel Kachyňa, 1970) is about the paranoia of a couple whose home is being surveilled (here, the watchful eye is replaced by the ever-listening ear). From the Polish context, alongside Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Camera Buff* (discussed here), also relevant are his *Dekalog: 6* (from the ten-part television series *Dekalog*, 1988) and its expanded version *A Short Film About Love* [*Krótki film o miłości*] (1988). In these last films, the act of watching one's neighbor is laden with the erotic violence traditionally associated with voyeurism.

31 Anna Taszycka explores the parallel voyeurs in *Camera Buff* and *From My Window* in her article: "Co widać z okien neoawangardy? Z mojego okna (1978–1999) Józefa Robakowskiego i *Czarny kwadrat na białym tle mieszka w widoku z mojego okna* (2017) Tobiasza Jędraka," *Pleograf* no. 2.

32 A helpful resource for connecting male-coded voyeurism to the gendered cinematic voice is Kaja Silverman's book *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

33 For critical texts on voyeurism, scopophilic pleasure, and the male gaze in cinema studies, see: Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* vol. 6, no. 3, 6–18; Christian Metz, "Story/Discourse (A Note on Two Kinds of Voyeurism)," in: idem, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 89–98; Elena del Río, "The Body of Voyeurism: Mapping a Discourse of the Senses in Michael Powell's Peeping Tom," *Camera Obscura* vol. 15, no. 3, 115–49.

34 See: Patrycja Grzonka, "Kino Osobiste," in: *Józef Robakowski. Obrazy energetyczne. Zapisy bio-mechaniczne 1970–2005*, eds. Piotr Krajewski and Violetta Kutlubasis-Krajewska (Wrocław: WRO Art Center, 2007), 22.

35 Józef Robakowski, "Manipuluję," exh. cat. for *Energetic Corners* [*Kąty energetyczne*] (Warsaw: Mała Galeria, 1988).

36 Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 63.

37 This conception of the *archon* comes from Jacques Derrida's etymological analysis of the word "archive," which traces the word to the Greek *arkheion* (the public archive and private home of the *archon*). The *archon* safeguards public documents, and in turn is empowered to interpret them. See: Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," trans. Eric Prenowitz, *Diacritics* vol. 25, no. 2, 9–10.

38 To better understand the still-functioning post-1989 commons, we might consult Michał Murawski's reflections on "still-socialist urbanism." Murawski argues that socialist planners, by building premises of collectivity and multifunctionality into urban design, created spaces that are still socialist well after socialism's "end." His case in point is the Palace of Culture and Science: a still-socialist enclave in capitalist Warsaw. See: idem, *The Palace Complex: A Stalinist Skyscraper, Capitalist Warsaw, and a City Transfixed* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

39 See: Jacek Świdziński, "Między nostalgią a melancholią. Videoperformance Józefa Robakowskiego 'Z mojego okna' – próba rekonstrukcji i analizy," *Kwartalnik Filmowy* vol. 70 (2010), 194–207: 195.

40 Mladen Dolar calls the acousmatic voice an "effect emancipated from cause." See: idem, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 67.

41 "From My Window / From Your Window."

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