

Franciszka and Stefan Themerson Extraordinary Avant-Garde Artists

A lecture by Małgorzata Sady

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great honour to have been offered this great opportunity to talk to you about the Themersons at the University of Tokyo today. I am very grateful to Ariko Kato for her dedicated facilitation of this event.

Today is a special day for Poland. Exactly thirty-two years ago, on December 13th 1981, martial law was introduced in Poland. After much hope for changes towards freedom, following the legalization of Solidarity, events took a tragic turn. This phenomenon is strangely related to the Themersons. The opening of their retrospective exhibition at Art Museum in Łódź, one of the most renowned venues for presenting contemporary art, was originally planned for December 10th but the Themersons asked to move the opening a week later... In the meantime, martial law was introduced; General Jaruzelski and the army took control over Poland, causing many deaths; factories were evacuated; a curfew was imposed, traveling without permission was forbidden. There was neither the atmosphere and interest, nor any possibility to appreciate art. However wonderful the exhibition was, only a small number of people visited it, even though it also went to Warsaw and Wrocław. It was the strictest time of military restrictions; a grim and tragic time in Polish history.

Franciszka and Stefan...

Stefan was born in 1910 in Płock, a small but culturally and historically important town, 100 km north of Warsaw. His family was Jewish. Stefan's father, Mieczysław Themerson, was a doctor, a modern Don Quixote, helping the poor, traveling in the middle of the night to treat patients, often not charging any money. He initiated the building of council houses for the unemployed. Mieczysław Themerson was also a writer of short stories and novels, and had good connections in the literary world. Stefan always suffered from a bad memory and therefore he had problems at school. One year, not being able to learn the succession of Polish kings and queens by heart, he missed promotion to the next class in school. His father considered it to be dishonor to their family so he met with the history teacher at a trendy café in Płock and came to a gentleman's agreement which meant that he would be allowed to enter the 5th form, but would not attend school for a whole year. During that year he built his first radio set and started experimenting with photography. When he recalled those days later, he praised slovenliness – at night he went to the cinema and a slovenly operator did not join the acts of the films properly; three feet of scratched film-scrap tore across the screen introducing him to new ways of perceiving this medium – as abstract images. As a teenager, Stefan started writing and publishing short stories and poems in the local press. At the age of eighteen his ground-breaking essay "The Potentialities of Radio" appeared in the Warsaw magazine *Wiek XX* (The 20th century) in which he predicted the birth of present-day television.

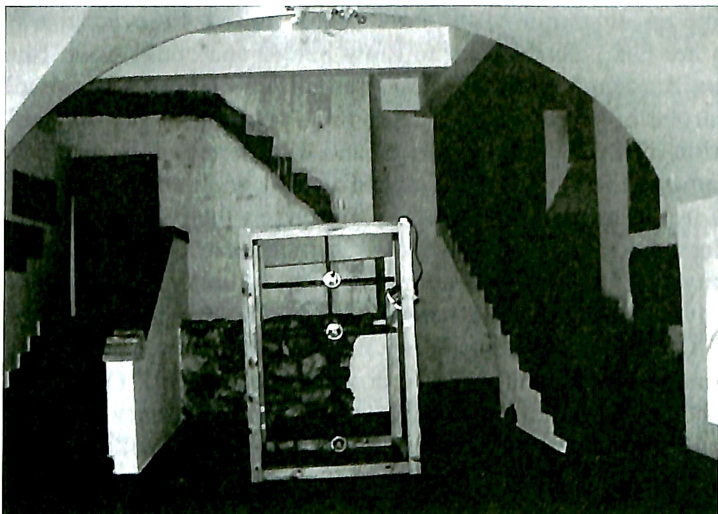
Franciszka was born in 1907 in Warsaw into an artistic family. Her father Jakub Weinless was a painter, who studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. Her mother Łucja Weinles was a

pianist and her older sister Maria became an illustrator of the books for children. Franciszka was said to have been born with a pencil in her hand. She started to draw before she could walk. She recollected her first memory of her own drawings when she was five: "I was sitting on a small stool facing the large mirror in the wardrobe of my parents' bedroom and trying to make my self-portrait. I looked carefully at the reflection of my face in the mirror and tried to repeat its shape in my sketchbook. All went well until I came to the eyes. I couldn't make my pencilled eyes look at me with the same intensity as my eyes in the mirror. So I tried to strengthen them. I made them blacker and blacker. And they became less and less like my own eyes, which were light blue. But I had no means yet to translate the intensity of a look into a drawing, or even to understand that this was what I wanted to do. So I pressed my pencil harder and harder until two holes appeared in the paper and, exhausted, I burst into tears. Our old cook, hearing my howling, ran from the kitchen, took me in her arms and seeing the damage I had done, tried to console me, saying: 'Don't cry, sweetheart, I'll buy you another sketchbook.' She did not see the work of art. She only saw two holes in the paper. Upon which I cried still more bitterly. This was my first experience of not being understood by the public."

Stefan and Franciszka met in 1929. Franciszka was a student of painting and graphic art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. She graduated with the highest distinction and was pronounced the best student both of her year and of the whole Academy. Stefan was a student of architecture. They were both crazy about the cinema and this is where their collaboration started in 1930.

The Themersons are considered to be the most important and extreme representatives of Polish avant-garde cinema during the interwar period. They were independent filmmakers; they did not belong to any art groups, although they showed their films at the screenings of START (Stowarzyszenie Miłośników Filmu Artystycznego, 1931-34). Their films were also presented by the Preasens group (Warsaw), the Studio of Polish Film Avant-Garde in Cracow, Awangarda Film Club in Lvov and elsewhere. Stefan Themerson wrote: "Organizations are incapable of creating an atmosphere appropriate either for creativity or for presentation. A creative atmosphere cannot exist where there is no current slogan. Only a common slogan can guarantee a sufficiently stable temperature in an incubator for art to mature. The slogan should be: "conquer the materials of film-making, produce ferocious experimental work!"

The Themersons were independent and entirely self-sufficient. They wrote their scripts, did all their own filming, edited the material and looked after the composition of the visual form, all by themselves. It is beyond any doubt that they succeeded in creating their own style of avant-garde film-making. They were pioneers of animation in Poland. All their films were either entirely animated or incorporated animation. In frame by frame animation, one needs to shoot 24 frames to get one second of film. The length of the films was determined by how much material they had at their disposal. One roll of film lasted for three minutes and that is how long their first silent, black-and-white film *Apteka* (Pharmacy) of 1930 was. *Apteka* involved transmitting the lyrical qualities of photograms – images of light – on to a screen and setting them in motion. Earlier photograms were used only in static photography (for instance by Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy). In order to set photograms in motion, Stefan constructed a special trick table.



Reconstruction of the Themersons' trick table. From the exhibition *Stefan Themerson, The Urge to Create Visions*, curators: Małgorzata Sady, Wojciech Juszcak, Paweł Polit. Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, 2008. Photo: Mariusz Michalski.

The camera – a yellow wooden coffin (whose original owner may well have been the cameraman who did the first screen test of Pola Negri) – photographed objects which were placed on tracing paper and on top of a horizontal piece of glass. By moving the source of light and objects, the Themersons made compositions which were then filmed frame by frame. Light was the major animated material. The rigours of narration were loosened in order to investigate the technical potentialities of film. An accident was not approached as an interference but inspiration. In the Themersons' approach film was a stimulator of the viewer's imagination; the essence was its visual side, contrasting juxtapositions and movement resulting from operating with light. A positive film (white on black) was not copied and the original (black on white) served as a negative. *Apteka* included frames of pharmaceutical props, images of hands, fragments of face as well as Stefan's photograms of 1928-29. The recycling of existing material, placing it in other contexts, and the use of self-quotations and self-references are characteristic of the Themersons' oeuvre in its all variations.



Photograms by Stefan Themerson. 1920s-1930s. From the exhibition *Stefan Themerson, The Urge to Create Visions*, curators: Małgorzata Sady, Wojciech Juszcak, Paweł Polit. Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, 2008. Photo: Mariusz Michalski.



Photograms by Stefan Themerson. From the exhibition *Stefan Themerson, The Urge to Create Visions*, curators: Małgorzata Sady, Wojciech Juszcak, Paweł Polit. Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, 2008. Photo: Mariusz Michalski.

Apteka was an absolute innovation on the Polish film scene. It was met with severe criticism and considered a weird deviation. It was shown at the screenings organized by START. Only three years later, film critics and theoreticians started to pronounce enthusiastic opinions about the film and recognised its pioneering character, especially after it was shown in Paris in 1935, where it received very good reviews.

The Themersons won true recognition after the premiere of their second film *Europa* (1930-31), which was based on Anatol Stern's futurist poem and had typography and graphics by Mieczysław Szczuka and Teresa Żarnowerówna. It was an illustration, sometimes literal and sometimes metaphorical and abstract, of the literary text. *Europa* was a silent film of fifteen minutes. There were plans to add a sound track to it, but it turned out to be too expensive. Due to the fact that there was no sound (text), the images functioned completely autonomously; words got transformed into moving pictures. *Europa* was a translation of the text into images, "tethering the words and retrieving their meaning and new taste". As in *Apteka*, there were photograms in motion and frame-by-frame filming. Abstract elements were juxtaposed with live-action sections, inscriptions, fragments of actions, movement, changes of texture. Movement was composed within the frame of the screen and was precisely controlled. It happened either in space or in time. Movement in space depended on the change of position or shape, the alteration of darkness and light, changing positive into negative, the penetration of one image into another, and the gradual construction of the photomontage, multiplication, etc. Movement in time depended on montage, on aggregations, the rhythm of these changes, rhythmical repetition of the same images (sometimes only a few frames in length). The dynamic collage-editing, which followed a definite rhythm, a constructivist form, Dadaistic and surrealist iconoclasm, acts of combining what cannot be combined, were transgressing the existing syntactic rules of film language.

Stefania Zahorska, a renowned critic of the interwar period, called *Europa* “the first good Polish film”. She wrote: “*Europa* is a film poem. It is not an abstract film as there are objects, figures, fragments of action in it, yet all these elements are deprived of their direct concrete meaning; the relations among them exist only on an ideological plane, verging on the symbolic. On that plane, there are placed, next to one another, a surface of cut bread, lumpy and coarse, expecting lips and teeth, female hips, not mysterious and with clear indication – and next to them appear multiplied, by means of an interesting trick, gestures of hands and lips, chewing and then bites – in shortcuts, with a light from a very sharp angle. It is shown materially and tangibly that *Europa* eats, *Europa* reproduces, a normal circulation functions, and cannon fodder is constantly born.” At the other pole there was another review of the film saying that “the title *The Philosophy of Life by a Young Madman* would be a hundred percent more appropriate for this experiment.”

Europa was definitely the most important and widely discussed film of the Polish avant-garde films made in the 30s.

The next three films which the Themersons made in Poland are sound films. *Moment Musical* (1933), with music probably by Maurice Ravel, was a short, three-minute advertisement commissioned by Wanda Golińska. In its formal layer the film was an investigation of the correlations between music and images (“sound as an equivalent of the phenomena of light, space and movement”). It was considered the most beautiful – from the visual as well as musical point of view – Polish film of an unusually high standard, and the audience received it enthusiastically in many cinemas, where it was shown before feature films.

“*Moment Musical* is the only entirely positive point in the balance of Polish film production of 1932/1933, raising no objections”, – commented critic Teodor Toeplitz. Stefania Zahorska considered it “a gem, charming poem (like one by Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska), the most beautiful moment – abstract and concrete, poetic and advertising”. The movement of objects was animated in keeping with the rhythm of music. *Moment Musical* was a prelude to the experiments attempting the synchronization of vision and sound, culminating in *The Eye & the Ear*, which was shot ten years later (earlier, eighteen-year-old Stefan wrote about it in his article “The Potentialities of Radio”). In the 30s the Themersons had no proper technical resources which would allow them more advanced experiments. “In *Złota Street* we had our studio in a small room, next to the kitchen. In *Królewska Street* the studio was in the bedroom. In *Czeczota* (which later became a birthplace of the Film Authors’ Cooperative) the bedroom was in the studio”, they recollected.

Short Circuit (1935) was a short, ten-minute educational film, commissioned by The Institute of Social Affairs. Witold Lutosławski, then a very young composer, was interested in the issues pertaining to sound and its relation to the image, just like the Themersons, and he approached them with an idea of writing music to their new film. A very interesting experiment was carried out, which is evidence of a full understanding between the composer and film-makers. Music for the abstract part of the film was composed first, and the rest of the music was written after the shooting. *Short Circuit* was a dramatic poem. “Its action takes place without people. It builds up on an electric wire poorly hung, on a broken fuse replaced by a nail; it bursts into flames, winding along the wall. There is a poetry of objects, lines, patches, lights; a drama of electricity; a short circuit of breathless forms and a convincing expression of images. A beautiful film” (S. Zahorska). The structure of *Short Circuit* was closely related to its soundtrack. A definite number of frames corresponded to each note. The critics called the film a symphony of light and electricity, and recognised the absence of incomprehensible symbols and acrobatic metaphors, which had shocked them in the Themersons’ earlier productions, as a positive development. “Supreme formal

composition, both with respect to images and sound – this film should be considered one of the major achievements of Polish cinema.”

Short Circuit was shown at Cinema Club in Paris (along with *Pharmacy*) in 1935, and at the “Film Olympics” in Venice in 1936.

The last film that the Themersons shot in Poland, *The Adventure of a Good Citizen* (The skies won't fall if you walk backwards) of 1937 with music by Stefan Kisielewski is an irrational humoresque, the plot of which tells of a journey of two people with a wardrobe, full of absurdities, in which an important part is played by a mirror (a characteristic feature of the couple's oeuvre). The major protagonist of *The Adventure* is an average citizen, office clerk, who overhears on the telephone that “the skies won't fall if you walk backwards”. He takes it seriously, gets up from his desk and starts walking backwards; he goes out into the street, bumps into the wardrobe, which he carries through the city, goes into the woods and finally flies up on to the roof of the house, sits on the chimney and plays the flute. In the end he stops playing and turns to the audience saying: “You need to understand the metaphor, Ladies and Gentlemen.” Walking backwards revolts society and causes protests. They run after “a good citizen” with banners “The skies will surely fall!”, “Down with walking backwards!” However, when they reach the wardrobe, they find nobody there.

In its formal layering, the film was enriched by backward movement, increased speed, animated photograms, changes of focus, use of negative, abstract light reflexes. *The Adventure* had the character of a collage – apart from its live action which was subjected to transformations; there were also poetic shots, composed of light, abstract elements painted directly onto the film. “The curious thing is that it makes sense also when you view it backwards, from the end to the beginning, both the picture and the sound, those who walked backwards – walk forward, and those who walked forward – walk backwards...”

Twenty years later, Roman Polański made use of the plot and a number of visual ideas from *The Adventure of a Good Citizen* in his famous étude *Two People with a Wardrobe*, without acknowledging the source of his inspiration, which he found in the archive of the Łódź Film School. When I asked the Themersons how they felt about this dishonesty on Polański's part they looked at me and said with a radiant smile on their faces: “You know Poland is such a country where two people have to carry a wardrobe every thirty years.” They were such extraordinary people, with wise, insightful and humorous approach to the world and its matters.

The Adventure of a Good Citizen was met with negative reactions from both the critics and audiences. The film's depiction of Polish society and its world of values were not easy to digest. Years later parallels were drawn with an attitude advocated by Witold Gombrowicz in his novel *Ferdydurke*. However, it was published after the film was made, so there was no way the Themersons could have read it beforehand – it was probably the spirit of the time that the artists discerned.

Out of five films made by the Themersons in Poland only one survives – *The Adventure of a Good Citizen*. In 1940 the Themersons deposited all their films at the Vitfer Film Laboratory in Paris, which was eventually confiscated by the Germans and their fate remains unknown. In Poland all the films were lost, apart from *The Adventure of a Good Citizen*, which was probably found somewhere in the Soviet Union and ended up in the Łódź Film School Archive. The Themersons learned about this only in 1960 when the Central Film Archive approached them with a request to submit a short commentary on it due to the planned screening of the retrospective of films by

START and the “Film Authors’ Cooperative”. As quite a few copies of some of their films were made we still hope that they will emerge in some unexpected places one day.

In 1935 the Themersons founded S.A.F. – the Film Authors’ Cooperative – its list of members included the then leading figures of Polish cinema, photography and music: Anotni Bohdziewicz, Janina and Eugeniusz Cękański, Aleksander Ford, Wanda Jakubowska, Witold Lutosławski, Stanisław Dziewulski, Stanisław Wohl, Jerzy Zarzycki and Kazimierz Halczyk and others. Its objective was to facilitate the production and distribution of experimental films. Among others, they organized the first screenings of French and British avant-garde in Poland.

In 1937 they published *f.a.* (film artistique, the artistic film) – a magazine (in Polish, French and English) devoted to avant-garde film, designed according to the principles of the so-called “new typography”. In *f.a.* 2 Stefan Themerson published his most important text concerning film – “The Urge to Create Visions”. In 1983 an expanded version with rich visual material was published by Gaberbocchus + De Harmonie in Amsterdam. The Themersons travelled to Paris and London and brought back avant-garde films to show in Poland. When they started making films they knew nothing about experiments carried in other countries. Even though you can find some parallels with French, English or German films, the Themersons worked completely independently.

Apart from making the films, Stefan wrote and Franciszka illustrated books and painted. She had her first exhibition at the age of fifteen, along with her father and sister, followed by many other exhibitions while she was a student and later. Stefan was publishing articles related to films, and also poems. He wrote fifteen books for children and had many stories published in various magazines, all illustrated by Franciszka. Franciszka’s illustrations were very unusual for their time: her drawings added another dimension to the text, as if creating a parallel structure, modern and experimental. The Themersons’ literature for children always had an educational dimension; they told children about the origins and development of writing, different professions, means of transport, ways of designing and building houses.

In 1938 Franciszka and Stefan left for Paris, the Mecca for experimental film-makers. They did not succeed in making any films due to the lack of funds, but it did not stop them from carrying out experiments with colour film (their “Statistical Atlas of Paris” / “Rehabilitation of Capitalism”). Franciszka painted, illustrated books for children (Flammarion), and published her drawings in French magazines. Stefan wrote, now also in French, and contributed articles to various journals. After the outbreak of the war they both volunteered for service in the Polish Army which was formed in France in September 1939. Franciszka got a job as a cartographer at the Ministry of Information and Documentation. After the capitulation of France in June 1940, she was evacuated to England with the Polish Government in exile. After the dispersal of his regiment, Stefan returned to Paris, and from October 1940 lived at a Red Cross refuge for the Polish army in Voiron. There he wrote a novel *Professor Mmaa’s Lecture* (he was sending successive chapters to London and Franciszka illustrated them), collections of poems *Croquis dans les ténèbres* and *Dno nieba*, and wrote a diary. For a few months they had no contact with each other. Franciszka was imagining and drawing what Stefan was doing. They were writing letters to each other, some unsent because they did not know where to send them or did not want to upset each other. Franciszka’s drawings were called *Unposted Letters* with scenes of her life and imaginary scenes of Stefan’s life in France. The dog who follows or watches him has Franciszka’s eyes.

Their families were in Poland, and Franciszka’s mother, sister and little niece were in the Warsaw ghetto. She was helping them by sending parcels containing luxurious goods (for instance, tea and coffee) which they could sell, for money to buy food and other necessary things. The British

authorities learned about it, even though she was doing it via Portugal and the United States and she was ordered to stop it. According to the British German-occupied Poland was enemy territory and it was against the law to help the 'enemy', regardless of the fact that her actions were for the benefit of her Jewish family imprisoned in the ghetto.

In 1942 Stefan managed to get to England and started working at the Film Unit of the Ministry of Information and Documentation in London. Having proper technical and financial resources, the Themersons made two more avant-garde films.

Calling Mr Smith (1943) – a ten-minute film in Dufay-colour with sound – was a propaganda film which aimed at conveying to an average British citizen the truth about Nazi crimes and the introduction of a New German Order in the occupied Poland (the British censorship removed frames which it considered too drastic...). It contained the fragments of documentaries and actual photographs, posters and book pages. Narration had an amorphous character and images were juxtaposed in an abstract way. The score included pieces by Chopin, Szymanowski, Bach and the distorted Nazi song "Horst Wessel Lied". The film was a success, but the British audience could not believe in the authenticity of the presented documents and facts. In spite of being a propaganda film, *Calling Mr Smith* maintained a high artistic quality. It was realized with the use of a trick-table for animation, some of the frames were handmade. It was considered the most valuable film of its kind realized during the war.

The Eye & The Ear was a continuation of a line launched in *Moment Musical*. It was an experimental film (a fact which Stefan Themerson emphasised), investigating correspondences between image and sound, filmed according to precisely elaborated scores. Many years later, Rybczyński's *Tango* was made in a similar way.

The film analyses four songs by Karol Szymanowski written to "Słopiewnie" by the poet Julian Tuwim. Music, its melodic line, orchestration and the contents of poems found their visual, graphic representation.

The four songs were treated in four different ways – commented Themerson.

1. "Green words". The vocal part replaced by solo violin and the words replaced by the corresponding visual images (woods, leaves, lights, water) synchronized with music. It was a lyrical, emotional, "impressionistic" interpretation.
2. "St. Francis". The score more closely analysed. Geometrical shapes synchronized with the melodic line (the vocal part), superimposed on "thematic" images (Della Francesca's "Nativity", starry sky) synchronized with the instrumentation.
3. "Rowan Towers". Each instrument of the orchestra represented by a simple geometrical form which changes its shape up and down according to the pitch of the note. Shapes representing different instruments were superimposed by multi-exposure, frame by frame. Crescendo, diminuendo, staccato, pizzicato, all had their visual counterparts. The vocal part was in "unison" with a horizontal line in which a "wrinkle", whose position depended on the pitch of the corresponding note, spread symmetrically to left and right.
4. "Wanda". Perfectly circular photogram-waves, aroused from the centre of the screen by each note of the music, moving both outwards and inwards, satisfy 3 motifs at once: the melancholy

mood of the song (the rhythm) + Shapes found in Nature (waves) + artifice of geometry (photogramic treatment of waves in water).

The Eye & the Ear summed up the Themersons' investigations focused on rendering music into images with all its attributes.

The closing down of the Film Unit of the Ministry of Information and Documentation put an end to the Themersons' film-making. Due to the lack of sufficient funding and technical resources their other projects remained unrealized. However, the dream was not abandoned for a long time. In the late 50s Stefan Themerson wanted to construct a device called AVOTON – an Audio-Visual One-To-One Normalizer – and a second version called a Synthetic Sight and Sound Coordinator. This instrument was a kind of keyboard capable of producing optical arrangements of space on a kind of screen, and at the same time producing musical notes which would possess a one-to-one relationship with the screen. This device was to allow further experiments with sound and vision.

The Themersons did not make any films after 1945. However, in 1948 they founded the Gaberbocchus Press, which they ran for thirty-one years. It was the most recognized independent publishing press in the United Kingdom at that time. The books they published were characterized by unique design and typography which corresponded closely with their contents. They were termed “best lookers”, as opposed to best sellers. Gaberbocchus Press published books by Alfred Jarry, Raymond Queneau, Kurt Schwitters, Henri Chopin, Bertrand Russell, Stefan Themerson and others. Gaberbocchus is a Latin translation of Jabberwocky, the name of a dragon from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*. A looking-glass was one of the Themersons' leitmotifs. A mirror serves as a transition to fantasy world. Mirrors which are featured in the Themersons' oeuvre are complementary to photograms, though they are seen from the other side. A mirror reflects an object, a photogram encodes directly the shadowed imprint of an object's surface. A mirror image can be the reflection of reality, but it can also be seen as an illusion. In *Tom Harris*, Stefan's novel of 1967, the narrator experiments with reflections, working out the laws in which reality works, figuring out what is left and what is right, hence what is forward and backward. Franciszka was commissioned to illustrate *Through the Looking-Glass* in the 40s. This book was published only a few years ago in the USA in an edition of 420 copies. Franciszka used the original figure of Alice, as drawn by Tenniel, and she added her own extraordinary visual interpretations of other characters.

Between 1948 and 1979 the Themersons published over sixty books, some of them had several editions. One of Gaberbocchus' earlier books was *Wooff Wooff or Who Killed Richard Wagner?* by Stefan (1951). The book was originally written in Polish, then translated into English. In the 50s Stefan stopped writing in his native language. There is only one short text written in Polish in the 60s: *The Missionary on the Island*, expressing Stefan's bitterness over his experience in England.

Gaberbocchus Press employed only four people. Franciszka Themerson was its artistic director. She designed and illustrated most of the books. Sometimes they used illustrations by other people. Stefan also designed some covers, as well as the alphabet for Queneau's *Exercises in Style*. Barbara Wright was the translator, and the fourth person was Gwen Bernard, an artist. Stefan was the director of Gaberbocchus Press.

Gaberbocchus was a very friendly dragon, who loved reading and writing. He was portrayed by Franciszka in many different ways and featured in all their publications.

The first book that the Themersons published was *Jankel Adler: an Artist Seen From One of Many Possible Angles*.

Their second book was Æsop's fable, *The Eagle & the Fox & The Fox & the Eagle: Two Semantically Symmetrical Versions and a Revised application* (devised by Stefan Themerson).



From the exhibition *Stefan Themerson, The Urge to Create Visions*, curators: Małgorzata Sady, Wojciech Juszcak, Pawel Polit. Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, 2008. Photo: Mariusz Michalski.

These early books were printed on a hand press in two or three colours on hand made paper. They appeared in limited editions of 400 copies. Each was signed by Franciszka, accompanied by a drawing of a little figure, a portrait of herself. These books were designed as objects to read, look at and touch.

Europa was a poem by Anatol Stern, translated by Stefan Themerson and Michael Horowitz. The Gaberbocchus edition of this work is a facsimile of the 1929 Polish edition designed by Mieczysław Szczuka, with a cover by Teresa Żarnowerówna. The Themersons' film of 1931-32 was a translation of this poem into images.

In the late 40s Stefan Themerson invented Semantic Poetry. He felt that poetry had lost its impact, words had lost their true meaning and flavour. His solution to the problem was Semantic Poetry translation. His concept consisted in replacing the words with the definition of words. Semantic Poetry created a typographical problem. A piece of text that had originally taken up a single line now expanded and required a special arrangement on a page. Two-dimensional text, based on sentence structure, could be spaced horizontally and vertically, like a musical score. There were arrows helping to navigate throughout the page, drawings, graphic elements – an anticipation of interactive media and electronic books.

In 1954-1960 Stefan Themerson composed the semantic opera *St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio: or Brother Francis' Lamb Chops*. Its score for voice and piano was not published until 1972. The opera conveyed the drama of a modern St. Francis, a poet, who tries to stop the Wolf of Gubbio from killing the lambs. It ends with both of them running a factory that cans lamb chops.

St. Francis' family first appeared in a drawing by Franciszka in 1949, and was then incorporated into the collection *Semantic Divertissements*, finally published in 1962. It provides yet another example of the rather unusual collaboration between these two artists as the drawings came first and the text was added to them, and not the other way round.

Musically the opera was a collage of different styles, and it had not been performed with the original score until few years ago at Poznan Opera in Poland. Earlier productions used Stefan's lyrics and some musical ideas incorporated into works by other composers.

When the Themersons came to London, they befriended several extraordinary people, among them the philosopher Bertrand Russell. The friendship between Russell and the Themersons started with Stefan Themerson's book *Bayamus*, which Russell read and enjoyed: "Perhaps the highest compliment that I can pay to your book is to say that it is nearly as mad as the world." Soon after their correspondence began, Russell contributed the preface to Stefan Themerson's *Professor Mmaa's Lecture*, offering encouragement and praise. Their friendship and correspondence continued until Russell's death in 1970. With a letter written to the Themersons in 1952, Bertrand Russell enclosed "something that has no purpose beyond fun". He added: "I can image delicious illustrations by Mrs Themerson." Stefan Themerson replied that Franciszka "intends a separate (pictorial) letter to you based on *The Good Citizen's Alphabet* for which she is devising some salient, reverend though frisky visual cross references." This collaboration resulted in a book, published in March 1953 by Gaberbocchus Press, and consisting of 26 letters of an alphabet, each accompanied by a word and its definition by Russell, and illustrations by Franciszka. *The Good Citizen's Alphabet* was described as "an adventure in wicked humour" and received enthusiastic reviews. Originally, the Themersons wanted to publish Russell's collection of short stories *Satan in the Suburbs*, but the book was already committed to another publisher, The Bodley Head. Aware of their disappointment, Russell sent them this text as a Christmas present.

The Themersons worked in many different areas: film, publishing, theatre, music, poetry, literature, philosophy, drawing, painting, collage, photography, photograms, design, typography. They were looking at the world from different points of view, always opposing classifications and labeling, because "the world is more complicated than our truths about it". When asked about who he was, Stefan replied that he wrote quite a few books, but he was not a writer, made quite a few avant-garde films, but he was not a filmmaker, wrote over a dozen books for children, but was not really a writer of children's books, wrote quite a few poems, but he was not a poet. And he added that actually he was a verb, not a noun: He said that "for many years I was not happening. Now I am happening and soon I will stop happening". These are the characteristics of a verb, not a noun...

It was difficult for them to be accepted by the British society, based on a class system, hence labeling and classification. Who are you? You are a philosopher, and a writer, and a filmmaker, and a composer, and a photographer, and a poet ...what's that all about? It was difficult for the British to come to terms with such 'difficult to classify' people as they constituted a threat to their order.

In the basement of Gaberbocchus Press the Themersons opened what they called 'Common Room' which operated from 1957 to 1959. It was a place where intellectuals, scientists, philosophers,

artists, poets, writers, musicians could meet and exchange their ideas. Meetings were held twice a week. Common Room offered lectures on art, science – physics, mathematics, astronomy – anthropology, literature; concerts, exhibitions, discussions. It was the only place in England practicing the marriage of diverse, creative fields. Common Room was closed for the summer of 1959 and never re-opened due to the lack of funds.

Kurt Schwitters was another friend of the Themersons. Stefan's book *Kurt Schwitters in England 1940-48* was the first publication of Schwitters' English poems and prose written during the last eight years of his life. The text was based on the talk he gave at Gaberbocchus Common Room. The book was printed in black and grey on yellow, salmon, black, blue and white paper, and was illustrated with photographs, typographies, reproductions of manuscripts and collages.

Another tribute paid to this extraordinary artist was *Kurt Schwitters on a Time-Chart*. Time-charts was one of Stefan's favourite genres. This one was putting Kurt Schwitters in the context of time, historical events, political events, cultural events, books written, paintings painted, wars breaking out. Readers were supposed to read the chart horizontally as well as vertically, with arrows helping them to navigate through the text, an illustrated diagram, with experimental typography and collage elements, perfectly complementing the subject.

The most renowned book published by Gaberbocchus was *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry. It was the first English translation of this legendary theatre play, coming quite late to the UK, over half a century after its French publication. Barbara Wright, the translator, wrote the text directly on litho plates and Franciszka added her drawings on the same plates. They were not typical illustrations, but were rather like another layer of the book; they served as a background for the text and, at the same time, a commentary. The pages of the book were yellow, the text black and the drawings in pencil looked as if they were not printed, but drawn directly in pencil. *Ubu Roi* has a special significance for Polish people. Jarry places the action of the play in Poland, that is nowhere. At the end of the 19th century when the play was written Poland was erased from the map of Europe, partitioned by three countries: Russia, Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The historical events that Jarry presented were completely imaginary. In the 30s when the Polish translation appeared, it caused fierce discussions, criticism and much political ferment. Gaberbocchus' *Ubu Roi* was also noticed and widely discussed. The way it was designed and printed was very unusual, especially for its date – 1951. The fact that the text begins with the word "shirrrt", which was Ubu's variation on the word "shit", was problematic for the British establishment. The book had several editions over twenty-five years, printed in different sizes, hardbound and paperback.

Franciszka's creative association with Ubu did not come to an end with the publication of the text. After producing the book, she made papier-mâché masks for a reading of the play at the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art) in London. In 1963 she was commissioned to design sets, costumes and puppets for a Swedish production of *Ubu Roi* at the Marionetteatern in Stockholm directed by Michael Meschke. The performance was premiered in 1964 and then performed all over the world for over thirty years, winning high acclaim from critics and audience. As a result of this production, Franciszka was awarded the Gold Medal at the 1st International Triennale of Theatre Design in Yugoslavia in 1966. Music for the performance was composed by Krzysztof Penderecki, another Polish contribution to the production. The director Michael Meschke, even though not of a Polish descent, was born in Gdańsk, then a free city, before the war. One day he saw Gaberbocchus' *Ubu Roi* and fell in love with Franciszka's drawings. He sent her a letter asking her to collaborate on his puppet performance. She agreed and after a year of meetings and correspondences, came to Stockholm and made all the sets, costumes, puppets. Only Pere Ubu and Mere Ubu are humans in costumes. The rest of the characters are either puppets of different sizes,

depending on their importance in a given scene (if they play a significant role they are big; if not, they are small). Some puppets were three-dimensional, but most of them were flat. Franciszka translated her book drawings onto a theatre stage. There were big battle scenes which were just one big, flat drawing moving on wheels. Recently Michael Meschke reminisced how it came to pass that Penderecki composed the music for the production. Meschke went to Kraków to see a play directed by the celebrated Tadeusz Kantor. When the performance finished, it started pouring with rain, so he could not leave the theatre. A little man with an umbrella approached him and offered his assistance. Meschke is very tall so it must have been funny to see them walking under one umbrella. He told the little man about his plans to produce *Ubu*, and the man said that he had been thinking about composing music to *Ubu*. The conversation was so fascinating that they walked several times around the hotel...And so, Penderecki wrote music for Marionetteatern. Many years later, he composed his opera *UBU ROI*.

In the 70s Franciszka produced a *Ubu Roi* comic strip. On its ninety pages, she abbreviated the text of the play and made extraordinary drawings/collages. The comic strip has been published in different languages, including (in 2013) in Polish. Significantly there is a version in Japanese – the only Themersons' work published in Japan.

All the writers published by Gaberbocchus Press were experimental, avant-garde writers, sometimes completely unknown and later internationally recognized. One example was Raymond Queneau. Following Stefan's suggestion, Queneau's *Exercises in Style* was translated by Barbara Wright; it was the first of the author's works to be published in English. The cover and the letters of the human alphabet with which each chapter of the book begins were designed by Stefan Themerson.

Another book with a cover designed by Stefan Themerson was his own novel *Cardinal Pölätüö*. The cardinal was an imaginary father of Apollinaire. He had an affair with a Polish duchess who became pregnant for nine years and then gave birth to the future poet. The cardinal considered Apollinaire a mortal enemy, a great threat to the Church. Using his influential position, he conspired to have him killed in many different ways. The cover was based on a mosaic, based on a painting by Piet Mondrian, that decorated the floor of the cardinal's private chapel.

It was not easy for Gaberbocchus to survive financially. One of the ways to acquire funding was to produce post-cards for various occasions, as they were popular and brought some income. Post-cards were drawn by Franciszka who had a terrific sense of humor and special ability to notice and observe what escaped others' attention. There are minute details which capture an entire mentality, the way a man holds a glass, for instance, and the glass itself, all subtleties conveying various flavours. Franciszka was a painter, but she was first of all a great master of drawings. Even her paintings were 'drawn' into the rich texture of thick layers of paint.

The Themersons did not intend to emigrate from Poland when they went to Paris in 1938. The war broke out in 1939, and they eventually ended up in England. As the political system in Poland changed and they were in the 'wrong' part of the world, they could not come back. If they had returned after the thaw of 1956 maybe they would have been forced to emigrate in 1968. They missed Poland, kept up to date with events and artistic life there, and always spoke very beautiful Polish. Franciszka frequently used to warn me against emigrating: "Never ever think about leaving Poland."

Stefan continued writing – novels, stories, poems, philosophical essays dealing with ethical and linguistic issues. He wrote a theatre play, composed an opera, made thousands of doodle drawings,

took photographs, and made photocollages. Franciszka painted, drew, illustrated books, designed sets and costumes for theatre, and taught at art schools. They were a unique couple of artists who devoted their whole lives entirely to art, never confining themselves to the frames of definite categories, thereby allowing themselves to approach the world from many possible points of view.

Stefan and Franciszka both died in 1988, twenty-five years ago. Franciszka died first, Stefan two months later. Soon after her eightieth birthday Franciszka had an operation, which went completely wrong, she suffered a brain stroke. She lost her memory and became partially paralysed. One day she started drawing, which required a tremendous effort on her part. She was so weak that she could draw only five minutes a day. And then like a miracle, her memory started getting better, she could draw more and more every day. When I saw her three months before she died, her mind was absolutely clear. We talked in our usual, lively and warm way, laughing a lot...

Franciszka was always very critical about her own work, whereas Stefan would keep every tiny piece of paper with his notes or drawings. Franciszka often destroyed her works. But when she was so ill and too weak to control all that was happening around her, Stefan would take her drawings out from the bin and put them in a safe place. Franciszka never stopped working. Last time we met she was making sketches for a new painting. She gave me one of them – a study for a big painting of her father. She told me: "I know that I will not be able to climb the ladder to paint it"... but nevertheless she was working on it. It tells much about what kind of person Franciszka was – very strong, powerful, determined, with a wonderful sense of humour.

After her operation, the Themersons stayed for a few months with Franciszka's niece, Jasia. In March 1988 they returned to their flat, bought many pots with blue hyacinths and felt very happy there. Every day whoever woke up first asked the other: "Are you still alive?" They knew how to enjoy every moment of their life and wisely accept whatever it brought. When Franciszka died in June, Stefan did not want to live any longer, he gave up fighting with cancer, did not want any treatment. He soon followed her...