

## Mieczysław Karłowicz: a Genius or a Dilettante of Photography?

Mieczysław Karłowicz's photography is a peculiar phenomenon that has been commented on and analysed for more than 110 years. It would seem that everything has already been said about it, and that there is no justification for writing another text. It turns out, however, that a careful reading of critical analyses and memoirs, as well as letters written by the composer-photographer himself to friends and acquaintances, nevertheless allows one to draw many interesting conclusions, both about Karłowicz himself and about the beholders and critics of his work.

In recent years, a certain idolising trend can be seen in statements by many people about Karłowicz's photographic activities, serving, it seems, to elevate Karłowicz the photographer to the altars of the highest art. On the other hand, however, the author of *Odwieczne pieśni* ("Eternal Songs") is almost absent from the pages of photographic history and completely absent from the minds of most contemporary photographers, except perhaps as a composer, but that does not interest us for the moment.

It is worth quoting Karłowicz himself at the outset, who after his Vienna concerts (1904, 1908) was completely surprised by the divergent opinions of critics and wrote: "[...] The reviews are so inconsistent with each other that a person unwittingly asks himself whether such criticisms should exist".<sup>1</sup> Karłowicz's comment is hardly surprising, since the Viennese press carried reviews like this: "Mystic or mystifier?", "Genius or talentless hack?".<sup>2</sup> It cannot be ruled out that Karłowicz would have similar doubts about critics and critical opinions today if he could read some of the current reviews of his photographic work.

In 2017, Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne (Polish Music Publishers) produced a film titled *Mieczysław Karłowicz – samotna wędrówka* ("Mieczysław Karłowicz – a Lonely Journey"), where photographers, musicologists, mountaineers and critics speak out. Attention is drawn to a statement by Justyna Nowicka, author of the book *Widok piękny bez zastrzeżeń. Fotografia tatrzańska Mieczysława Karłowicza* ("A Beautiful View Without Misgivings. Tatra Photography by Mieczysław Karłowicz") (Kraków 2016), in which, in an attempt to outline the historical background of Karłowicz's photographic work, Nowicka states that "photography of the 19th century had performed utilitarian tasks, simply documenting the world"<sup>3</sup> Was this really the case in the 19th century?

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted after: A. Chybiński, *Mieczysław Karłowicz (1876-1909). Kronika życia artysty i tatarnika*, 1949, p. 239.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 417.

<sup>3</sup> T. Knittel, *Mieczysław Karłowicz – samotna wędrówka* (film), 2017.



*\*Widok na część Wieleń, Łomnicę i Durny z Jastrzębiej Turni. 31 July 1906.*

All the photographs come from the archives of Centralny Ośrodek Turystyki Górskiej PTTK.

\*The captions have been preserved from the original, as provided by the Author (Mieczysław Karłowicz).

The second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century were periods when photography exploded – a period of rapid and dynamic development, and a turbulent time when photographers on both sides of the Atlantic were searching for photography's artistic identity and its status as an autonomous field of art. Photography had to fight and strive for this status, since the title of art was reserved mainly for painting. It is worth noting, however, that the seeds of art had been germinating in photography since the dawn of its history. As early as 1839 François Gouraud, Daguerre's agent, organised an exhibition of 30 daguerreotypes at an exclusive hotel on Broadway. The New York monthly magazine *The Knickerbocker* posted a review of this exhibition, calling the daguerreotypes

[...] the most remarkable objects of curiosity and admiration, in the arts, that we ever beheld. Their exquisite perfection – they noted – almost transcends the bounds of sober belief.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, at that time, photography was only in its infancy; ascribing to it the role of art could be considered pure heresy.

A detailed analysis of the history of photography at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries is beyond the scope of this article, but it would be difficult to review Mieczysław Karłowicz's photographic work correctly without knowing the context in which it functioned. Its immediate context, closest in time, was pictorialism. The beginnings of pictorialism should be sought in England around 1890, while the movement reached its apogee in the United States after 1902, when Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Clarence H. White, Gertrude Käsebier and Alfred Langdon Coburn left the Camera Club of New York and founded the Photo-Secession association. In France, there were parallel artists of such stature as Robert Demachy and Constant Puyo; in Austria, Hugo Henneberg, Hans Watzek and Heinrich Kühn; and in Poland, Józef Świtkowski and Henryk Mikolasch, among others. The pictorialists were inspired by Whistler's impressionist painting, as well as French symbolism; they began to use and refine such techniques as the gum bichromate, the oil print process, the bromoil process and the bromoil transfer process. The resulting image had the characteristic qualities of painterly softness and subtle blurring, and – perhaps most importantly – photography in this period had clear aspirations to become a full-fledged art. In the famous book *Camera Work. The Complete Photographs 1903-1917* (Köln 2013) Pam Roberts wrote:

The pictorialists believed that photography was not about the recording of documentary facts nor was it a vehicle for trying to recreate works of art [...], but was a means of creating a new, purely photographic reality. This was a reality that could only be made to exist in a photograph, experienced through the photographer's own personal vision and sublimated and brought into existence by his mastery of the specific technology.<sup>5</sup>

After World War I, Alfred Stieglitz abandoned pictorialism and turned his artistic pursuits in other directions. Thus, pictorialism lost its most ardent devotee, and in any case the vital forces of the movement were slowly beginning to burn out. It is assumed that around 1914 this trend in its original form ceased to exist. Today, however, different variations of it are re-emerging, such for example as the so-called new pictorialism.

<sup>4</sup> H. and A. Gernsheim, *A Concise History of Photography*, 1971, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> P. Roberts, "Alfred Stieglitz, 291 Gallery and Camera Work", in: *Camera Work. The Complete Photographs 1903-1917*, edited by Simone Philippi and Ute Kieseyer, 2013, p. 10.

After this introduction, I will return to the main topic of consideration, namely Mieczysław Karłowicz and his photographic passion. The first certain mention that the young Mieczysław was interested in photography comes from 1887, when as an 11-year-old boy he played with his friend Kazimierz Prószyński in the Karłowicz Warsaw apartment on Chmielna Street.<sup>6</sup> If one was to take 1890 as the date of the birth of pictorialism, the coincidence of dates is almost perfect. But, after all, it would be difficult to expect a child, even one as intelligent as Karłowicz, to be aware of the developing artistic currents in the world at the time he took his first photograph.

In the article *Sztuka fotografii Mieczysława Karłowicza* ("The Art of Photography by Mieczysław Karłowicz") (2017) Magdalena Skrejko summarizes the achievements of the now fully mature artist this way:

Karłowicz's attitude to pictorialism, which had been developing in Europe since the end of the 19th century, also comes to the forefront here – he did not practise pictorialism as a direction, and did not succumb to the prevailing fashion for picturesque photography, capturing blurred and hazy landscapes. It should be presumed that the composer, during his travels in Europe, became acquainted with the work of the pictorialists; perhaps he found practical information on the subject in the press and knew how to use it in his photography.<sup>7</sup>



Wyżni Staw Terjański. Between 25 June and 20 September 1906

<sup>6</sup> See: A. Chybiński, op. cit., p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> M. Skrejko, "Sztuka fotografii Mieczysława Karłowicza", in: *Music Theory*, 2017, no. 10, p. 49.

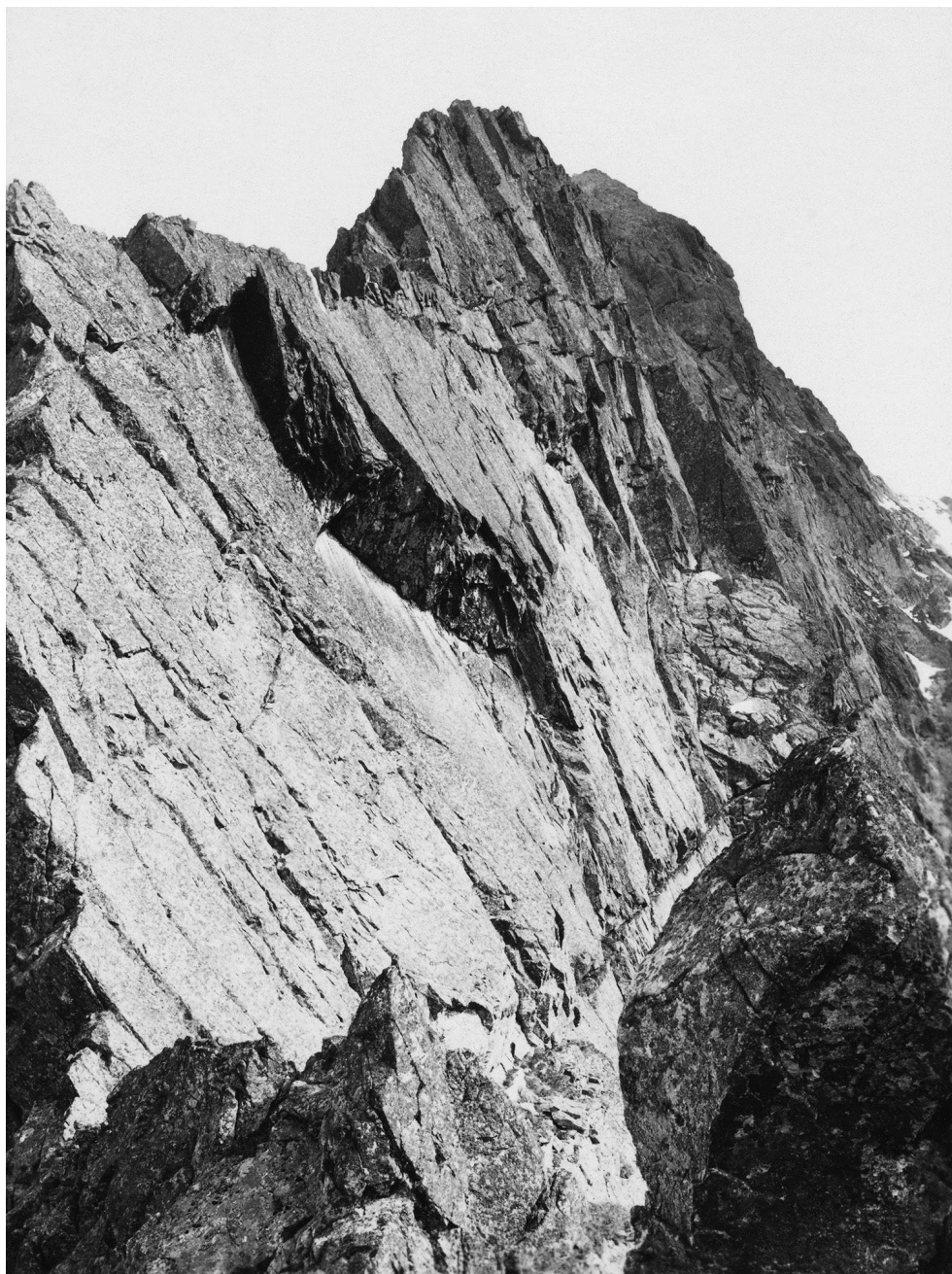
The beginning of this quote sounds exciting: here one gets the impression that Karłowicz had an educated, conscious attitude towards pictorialism, that perhaps he was contesting this direction, opposing to it his own vision and concept. The second part of this statement already loses a bit of its momentum and the first doubts begin to appear. The question arises, what was it 'really' like, or rather, what do the reliable sources, preserved to our time and related to Karłowicz's oeuvre say about it? Well, these sources include dozens of pages of serious discussions about the works of Richard Strauss, Wagner, Chopin, Debussy, Grieg, and the direction in which classical music would evolve. They are very factual, expert and interesting reflections by both Karłowicz himself and his acrimonious opponents, who disagreed with many of his theses. There are also deep reflections on the ideology of mountaineering, subsequent disputes and verbal skirmishes, and finally discussions on Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and literature, especially the poetry of Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer, with which Mieczysław was fascinated. You can also find discussions of Karłowicz's approach to women, his unhappy love life, and even the numerous health problems that haunted him throughout most of his life. Unfortunately, there is not a word about pictorialism, no mention of Karłowicz's contemporaries as photographers. Not even the names from the Zakopane-Tatra neighbourhood appear: Stanisław Bizański, Awit Szubert, Walery Eljasz-Radzikowski, Stanisław Krygowski. Moreover, there is no mention of prominent painters keen on Tatra themes: Wyczółkowski, Stanisławski, Weiss... They are not mentioned by Karłowicz or any of his friends or acquaintances. If one studies carefully about 1,500 pages of memoirs, letters and articles, one finds only a single conversation that seems to tentatively touch on the subject of pictorialism. This is a conversation between Karłowicz and Elżbieta Trenkler, conducted on the eve of Mieczysław's last, tragic ski tour, on 7 February 1909. The conversation, according to Trenkler's account, went like this:

He bought a new large camera in Warsaw. "But it must be immensely heavy?" "Naturally, but what to do – the enlargements are worth nothing, not sharp enough." I began to argue that when it comes to the artistic side, I prefer photographs less sharp, with more air, space. "Well, you will see; when I take the pictures, I will bring them to show you, you will see the difference."<sup>8</sup>

What conclusions can be drawn from this friendly conversation? It is possible that Trenkler came into contact with reproductions of works by pictorialists. She may have read some studies on the subject. Her comment unambiguously supports this. More interesting is Karłowicz's reaction. What does the sentence mean: "you will see the difference"? Can the thesis of Mieczysław's conscious rebellion against pictorialism be derived from it? This thesis seems extremely risky. Especially since, as we know, not even the slightest trace of Karłowicz's potential reflections on how he understood the role of photography remains. On the other hand, however, it is difficult to believe that a man who was well travelled, comprehensively educated, well-read and intelligent knew nothing about the dynamically developing tendencies in this field of art.

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted after: H. Anders, *Mieczysław Karłowicz w listach i wspomnieniach*, 1960, p. 608.



*Zamarla Turnia. The beginning of October 1907*

Therefore, one can make a working thesis that he read about and knew these trends, but they did not matter much to him. That is why he did not engage in any serious discussion with Trenkler, but disposed of it with a perfunctory sentence. He probably strived for the most perfect reproduction of details, because this way of depicting the mountain world was the closest to the photographed reality, and besides, it was also practical; as a mountaineer, Karłowicz was vitally interested in the sculpture of the Tatra walls, the layout of gullies, ribs, ledges and cracks. Such a realistic picture made it easier for him to plan expeditions, especially those which involved climbing. One may wonder whether Karłowicz's photographs have only documentary value. Absolutely not. It is worth giving the floor in this matter to Stefan Figlarowicz, who, on the 130th anniversary of the composer's birth, was the creator and curator of an exhibition of Karłowicz's photographs *Mieczysław Karłowicz. Tatrzańskie* ("Mieczysław Karłowicz. Tatra-Like"). The exhibition was presented in many Polish cities. Figlarowicz wrote:

Karłowicz's photographs, often liberating themselves from the rules of pictorialism, consist of intricate visual structures not yet explored by critics. The creative emotions oscillate between a perfect documentary and a dialogue with the rock wall and space, and also with scale: wall – man. It is a dialogue of a musician, translating subconsciously the experience of a composer into the practice of a photographer. He recognises the role of light, reads the score of the ridges, steep mountain paths and crags. He builds timbres only accessible after crossing a certain height... It is a pity that among those closest to him there was no artist or philosopher of the image with whom he could have dialogued about photographic creativity. Karłowicz's work contained within words and sound has long been discussed by musicologists and literary scholars. We should expect reflections from researchers reconciling what we already know about him with his photographic images.<sup>9</sup>

As you can see, it is rather impossible to escape from the thread of pictorialism... Another thesis appears about Karłowicz's alleged 'liberation' from the rules of pictorialism. The only problem is that Karłowicz was most likely never enslaved by these rules, and it is not even known whether he knew them. However, there is no point in repeating the same arguments. At most, one can add that if Karłowicz had treated photography as equal to music, he would have made at least one statement about the role of photography, its paths of development and its future. He would have done so with his characteristic brilliance, perspicacity, and perhaps also irony. He never did. As for translating the subconscious experiences of the composer into the photographer's practice, it is worth being cautious in making such judgments. On this principle, pareidolia (the phenomenon of finding known shapes in random structures, such as natural rock formations) or Freud's theory can be applied with equal success to the interpretation of hidden structures in photographic images.

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<sup>9</sup> S. Figlarowicz, "Pierwsza autorska wystawa Mieczysława Karłowicza", in: *Wierchy*, vol. 72, 2006 [published 2008], pp. 253-254.



Widok z dol. Rówienek w stronę Czeskich Stawów.  
Between 25 June and 20 September 1906

The mechanisms described above are related to the phenomenon of projection, which can be understood as giving the works of painters, photographers, graphic artists, as well as poets or writers our own content and meanings. This is not a completely illegitimate activity, but quite dangerous nonetheless. An example of such projection can be the opinion of Anna Król, expressed in the article *Tatry, sztuka i fotografia* ("Tatra Mountains, Art, and Photography") (2019), featured in an excellent book edited by Zbigniew Ładygin, *Mieczysław Karłowicz. Fotografie* ("Mieczysław Karłowicz. Photographs"). The author of the article writes:

Analysing the construction of space in Karłowicz's photographs, we find in them the principles of space construction present in Japanese woodcuts. These photographs focus the principles of Japanese aesthetics almost as if through a lens. [...] Characteristic framing, close-ups, cut-outs instead of the whole, backstage shots or the deliberate use of empty space as a means of artistic expression can be found in many of his photographs [...].<sup>10</sup>

To confirm her thesis, Anna Król recalls Stanisław Witkiewicz's letter to his son dated 14 May 1904. In it, Witkiewicz wrote: "Yesterday Mr Karłowicz, a musician, was here"<sup>11</sup>, referring to a meeting attended by, among others, Felix Manggha Jasieński – a collector and lover of Japanese art, an incredibly colourful character. Jasieński brought a collection of Japanese woodcuts to the meeting. Anna Król comments on this fact:

These fascinating landscape compositions by Hiroshige were analysed and commented on in detail. Karłowicz most probably took part in just such a discussion held at the place of the artists' mentor, Stanisław Witkiewicz.<sup>12</sup>

It is worth noting that the wording here is conjectural ("Karłowicz probably took part....", "Well, it is utterly unthinkable that such a passionate photographer as Karłowicz"...)<sup>13</sup>, which is common in critical texts on Mieczysław Karłowicz's photography. And yet Jan Sunderland, whom Anna Król also quotes, wrote explicitly: "I have not been able to positively determine whether Karłowicz was familiar with his contemporary art photography"<sup>14</sup>, let alone talk about the inspiration of Japanese art. What seems "the deliberate use of empty space as a means of artistic expression" is rather, in my opinion, the imperfection of the light-sensitive material, which was not able to render details in lights and shadows equally, and Karłowicz – one can presume with great probability – did not know how to deal with it. Just look at the photograph depicting Sucha Przełęcz and Suche Czuby, taken by Karłowicz around 12 October 1907. Half of the frame is empty space, devoid of any details. Every photographer knows that even fog usually has its own texture, which is created by the refraction of sunlight in it. Sometimes it is a whole palette of halftones and shades, and it is not at all easy to bring out this subtle play of light using photographic techniques. The effect of 'blown out' details in the lights was the bane of photographers for decades. Nowadays you can deal with this problem quite easily, but in 1907 it was very difficult.

<sup>10</sup> A. Król, "Tatry, sztuka, fotografia", in: *Mieczysław Karłowicz. Fotografie*, 2019, p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> S. Witkiewicz, *Listy do syna*, compiled by B. Danek-Wojnowska and A. Micińska, 1969, p. 198.

<sup>12</sup> A. Król, op. cit., p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> J. Sunderland, *Zarys dziejów fotografii tatrzańskiej w Polsce od początków do I wojny światowej (na prawach rękopisu)*, 1953 [published 2010], p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



*Dolina Staroleśna z przełęczy pomiędzy Rogiem nad Rówienkami a Graniastą Turnią.  
Between 25 June and 20 September 1906 (1)*

I will repeat once again: if Karłowicz had wanted to join the current of Polish or world photography on the same terms as he did with music, there would be ample proof of this fact in the sources. However, there is none. And one should not be deceived by the words he expressed to Helena Eger in a letter written on 24 February 1907:

I do not know if I will ever live to see popularity as a composer, probably not. But as a mountaineer-photographer, I've already gained recognition: they storm me for prints of my photos, and the Towarzystwo Tatrzańskie (The Tatra Society) has requested a whole series of photos for this year's *Memoir*. In view of such unexpected success, it is not at all out of the question that I will change my profession and, having locked my Muse in a chest of drawers, I will switch to a professional tourist-photographer.<sup>15</sup>

This is a mixture of irony and sarcasm so characteristic of Karłowicz, a bit of coquetry, and perhaps above all bitterness related to the disastrous relations prevailing in the musical world of Warsaw, which only on 22 January 1909 appreciated and enthusiastically welcomed Karłowicz's musical genius. How late! Less than three weeks before the composer's death.

It is worth going back to Anna Król's article from the book *Mieczysław Karłowicz. Fotografie* ("Mieczysław Karłowicz. Photographs"). The author quotes Zygmunt Klemensiewicz, who made a clear division between 'mountaineers' and 'photographers', claiming that "one and the same person can act in both roles, however, not simultaneously".<sup>16</sup> Anna Król, arguing with Klemensiewicz's view, enters the ground of philosophy of photography, while it seems that Klemensiewicz's thought was straightforward and practical. During the times he wrote about, using heavy photographic equipment, especially carrying a tripod, was very difficult, even impossible, on climbing routes (not tourist ones). Even today, no one in their right mind would drag a large-format camera along with a tripod behind them on a rope. Reading Karłowicz's description of his famous climb of the Ostry Szczyt in 1907, one of the most difficult routes in the Tatra Mountains at the time, one will not find a word about the fact that he had a camera with him. Why is Klemensiewicz's reflection important in the context of pondering Karłowicz the photographer? Because in order to understand the soul of the photographer in Karłowicz, it is necessary to ask what was the most important goal of his expeditions. Did he plan these expeditions in terms of photography? Did he wonder what the light would be like? Did he wait patiently for hours until it perfectly modelled the texture of the rock walls, played with reflections on the surface of the lakes, as Ansel Adams later did in Yosemite? Was he on the lookout for autumn mists drifting through the valleys at dawn? What sources tell us anything about this? There are no such sources. The purpose of Karłowicz's Tatra expeditions was to experience the beauty of the mountain world in a peculiar melding of All-Being – a pantheistic ritual of union between man and the universe. This union was a peculiar catharsis, which gave Karłowicz strength and joy. In this way of feeling, the author of the symphonic poem *Powracające fale* ("Returning Waves") was a child of his era.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted after: A. Chybiński, op. cit., p. 300.

<sup>16</sup> Z. Klemensiewicz, *Zasady taternictwa*, 1913, pp. 181-182.

I think that during his solitary expeditions he experienced extremely rare moments of unadulterated happiness in his life – a thesis that is easy to prove based on the sources. So it was not photography that was the main purpose of these expeditions, not even music, but an intimate, personal experience of beauty and some specific form of existence that does not ‘chafe’ or bring suffering. This, of course, does not diminish Mieczysław’s photographic passion – it was sincere and authentic.

It should also be remembered that Karłowicz was a perfectionist and a man with very high aspirations. He was not interested in mediocrity, especially in the field that was most important to him – music. But not only. He may have been familiar with the works of the most prominent photographers and realised how much time and work he would have to put into perfecting his craft in order to establish a full artistic dialogue with them. The flagship works of Edward Steichen, reproductions of which Karłowicz may have seen, were created successively in the years: 1897 – *The Lady in the Doorway*; 1898 – *Wood Interior*; 1903 – *Self-portrait*; 1904 – *The Pond – Moonlight and Flatiron Building*. It is worth bearing in mind that an atmosphere of fascination with art was the daily bread in the Karłowicz home, hence it can be assumed that Mieczysław was familiar with reproductions of works not only by Steichen, but also by other fine-art photographers, although irrefutable evidence of this is lacking. Most of the works that counted at the time were created using 19th-century pictorial techniques, incredibly labour- and time-consuming. Time was what Karłowicz did not have, as he was busy composing his symphonic works, and it was these that secured his lasting position in the Polish music and culture.

There is, of course, a temptation for an alternative interpretation of Mieczysław Karłowicz’s photographic work, but unfortunately there is no solid basis to support this interpretation with evidence. We can assume for a moment that Karłowicz was well acquainted with all the achievements of artistic photography from its beginnings, that he carefully studied the works and texts of the pictorialists, and that he concluded that photography had its own means of expression, its own language, and that it did not have to resemble painting at all. It was this direction that the founders of Group f/64 followed in 1932: Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Willard van Dyke, Imogen Cunningham and others – proponents of the so-called pure photography or straight photography, in which perfect sharpness and high image resolution, as well as high dynamic range, played a primary role. This direction began to develop as early as 1904 and stood in opposition to pictorialism. At this point, however, we leave the relatively safe ground of hard facts and sail into the murky waters of wishful thinking. Let me repeat just in case: at the present time, we are not aware of the existence of any written sources that would confirm the above working hypotheses about the author of *Koncert skrzypcowy* (“*Concerto in A major* for violin and orchestra”).



*Dolina Staroleśna z przełęczy pomiędzy Rogiem nad Rówienkami a Graniastą Turnią.*  
Between 25 June and 20 September 1906 (2)



Widok z Durnego na Gierlacha, szcz. Staroleśniański, szcz. Żółty, Mały Lodowy i dol. Pięciu Stawów Węgarskich. 1 September 1906

There is also a third way: one can suppose that his artistic intuition prompted Karłowicz in which direction to go, even if he did not passionately study the photographic literature or know all the important works. Perhaps the optimal method of research in this case is deep immersion in Karłowicz's best photographic works, quiet contemplation of their ascetic, graphic rhythms, contrasts of the whiteness of the snow and the blackness of the rocks, space painted with sparing means – a subtle play of shades of grey. Perhaps then, when an attentive observer sees in these rhythms of vertical worlds pure beauty and a certain classical canon of mountain photography, it will no longer matter whether the author of these works consciously contested pictorialism or only listened to the voice of his intuition. It must also be admitted that at the beginning of the 20th century, photography was still a young phenomenon – having existed for only a short time in comparison with painting or music, and Karłowicz was one of the pioneers of Tatra photography, especially of its mountaineering variety. Here it is worth noting a paradox. The mountaineering nature of this photography is not that Karłowicz dragged his photographic equipment on a rope through vertical chimneys or cracks, then fastened his camera to a tripod on a rock shelf and photographed from there. Mountaineering here is about a kind of aesthetics: emphasising scale, capturing the airiness of perspective, conveying depth, multi-planarity and three-dimensionality of rock massifs, such as in the photograph taken on 1 September 1906 from the Durny Szczyt towards Gierlach. Paradoxically, a mountaineer climbing a big wall, aside from the additional burden of photographic equipment, has very limited and slow-changing views, not to mention the fact that he has much more important problems to solve than taking photographs. Most of Karłowicz's photographs were taken on routes and trails that would be considered touristic today, and even in Karłowicz's time they were not of the 'ultimate mountaineering challenge' type. During an hours-long trek through valleys and passes, as well as during easy ridge climbing, the photographer has a great wealth of motifs and an ever-changing perspective; a mountaineer in a wall can struggle all day to overcome 300 meters of vertical rock, depending on the difficulty of the route and the prevailing conditions. However, it should be clearly emphasised that Karłowicz was characterised by the mentality of a mountaineer, not a tourist. He set out on very long and far-from-easy expeditions (often alone) and was constantly insatiable: the very next day, after the aforementioned demanding climb on the south face of the Ostry Szczyt, he went with his climbing partner and guide Józef Gąsienica Tomkowy to the Dolina Czarna Jaworowa, and then they climbed the Kołowy and Czarny Szczyt.



*Szczyt Kołowy (z Jastrzębiej Turni). 31 July 1906*

Very interesting in Karłowicz is the combination of qualities seemingly impossible to combine: the need for solitude in the mountains on the one hand, and social instinct on the other. This is what he wrote to Roman Kordys after the aforementioned climb of the Ostry Szczyt: “[...] I climbed the Ostry Szczyt by the south wall (you probably do not doubt that it shines with a whole row of swastikas from the bottom to the top!)”<sup>17</sup>. Swastika<sup>18</sup> was Karłowicz’s favourite Proto-Slavic fire sign of rather complex origin and symbolism, with which he marked his new routes in the Tatra Mountains. On the one hand, of course, it was a confirmation of his presence on a particular route, but on the other hand, it made it easier for his successors to repeat it. This did not apply only to climbing routes: as early as 1892, he marked with green paint a beautiful trail from the Dolina Kościeliska through the Hala Stoły to Kominiarski Wierch. This is a classic example of altruism and willingness to share the experience with other people. It’s worth mentioning for a reason: after all, photography also served in his case as a bridge between solitude, deep contemplation of the mountain world and the need to share his delight with others. Karłowicz generously gave his photographic works to befriended private individuals (in 1907 Chmielowski received as many as 92 works) and for publication in the *Pamiętnik Towarzystwa Tatrzańskiego* (“The Memoir of the Tatra Society”) and in the *Taternik*.

At this point it is worth recalling what Karłowicz’s attitude to mountaineering was and what it implied – also for his photographic activities. In 1908 he wrote:

For me, the ideal type of tourist would be one who, when setting off to the mountains with a clearly defined desire to seek impressions that are primarily aesthetic, would at the same time possess such a strong will, courage and training that any difficulties would become for him only an enrichment of the expedition.<sup>19</sup>

It must be remembered, of course, that in this view the word ‘tourist’ is in fact synonymous with the term ‘mountaineer,’ which was very characteristic of the Tatra literature at the turn of the 19th century, and dangerous for many contemporary commentators and journalists with little knowledge of the subject. Karłowicz was clear: he took the position of a staunch supporter of the purely aesthetic trend in mountaineering, in contrast to the ‘gymnastic-competitive’<sup>20</sup> direction, which was developing dynamically at that time. Such an attitude had implications for both the mountaineering activities of the creator of the *Smutna opowieść* (“The Sorrowful Tale”) as well as his approach to photography. However, it is good to be aware that the author of this ambitious manifesto himself was not able to fully realise his goals. After all, isn’t climbing the south face of the Ostry Szczyt an athletic struggle against the difficulties and limitations of one’s own body and psyche?

<sup>17</sup> Quoted after: A. Chybiński, op. cit., p. 344.

<sup>18</sup> See: Z. Radwańska-Paryska, W.H. Paryski, *Wielka encyklopedia tatrzańska*, 1995, p. 1172.

<sup>19</sup> M. Karłowicz, “W jesiennym słońcu”, in: *Taternik*, 1908, no. 3, p. 44.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

I have already mentioned the mystical experiences that Karłowicz had in the Tatra Mountains; now I will emphasise again that a *sine qua non* of those experiences was of an aesthetic nature. In this context, practising Tatra photography is a logical consequence of the adopted programme: an attempt to record and preserve aesthetic experiences with the help of a camera and light-sensitive material – a creative attempt through the very choice of frame, perspective, lighting, as well as technical means, such as the use of filters and the subsequent toning of prints, which Karłowicz wrote about on many occasions. What can be seen here is a perfect consistency of approach to hiking and mountaineering on the one hand, and creative-documentary photography on the other.

Let me return for a moment to Karłowicz's mountaineering ideology and its reception by his contemporaries. Such a 'programme' was, in a sense, like stirring up a hornet's nest: Chmielowski, Klemensiewicz, Kordys, Maślanka, and others could not accept it. For them, at the core of mountaineering were sporting goals, not aesthetic. For Zaruski, on the other hand, they were mainly social goals.

Around 1934, the excellent texts of Jan Alfred Szczepański began to appear, in which the author made the final and deepest reckoning with Karłowicz's ideology and its deconstruction. In his articles, Szczepański emphasised the value of a sporting (in the best sense of the word) approach to mountaineering, the "conquering of metaphysics"<sup>21</sup> and "overcoming the romantic sentiments".<sup>22</sup> At the same time, he stressed that

[Karłowicz] remained [...] the ideal of the mountain tourist, i.e. a man who – without looking at any sport or non-sport programmes – knows how to extract from the mountains the maximum of impressions they can give, and for whom these impressions become an essential part of life, processed wonderfully in his own work.<sup>23</sup>

Echoes of this discussion lasted for a very long time – for example, in 1958 Szczepański published another of his articles in the *Taternik* titled *Jeszcze o ideologii taternickiej Karłowicza* ("More About Karłowicz's Mountaineering Ideology"). When reading some of Szczepański's statements, however, one should be vigilant, because there were times when, while criticising one ideology, he quite seamlessly replaced it with another, namely, explicitly promoting the Marxist-Leninist paradigm of thinking, which – especially in the mountain context – had the flavour of absolute farce and the grotesque. However, these are, fortunately, only episodes that did not manage to bring Jan Alfred Szczepański's valuable oeuvre to naught, or plunge the writer into the depths of socialist realism.

<sup>21</sup> J.A. Szczepański, "Taternictwo 1910-1932. Próba bilansu. Część druga: Przekrój w głąb", in: *Taternik* 19, 1934, vol. 1, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> J.A. Szczepański, "Ideal turysty górskiego", in: *Gazeta Polska* 6, 1934, no. 39, p. 3.



*W Kasprowej Dolinie. Before 5 November 1908*

Returning to the main thread: the fact that 49 years after the death of the mountain-er-composer-photographer there were still discussions on his aesthetic ideology of mountaineering is very telling and testifies to the great influence that Karłowicz had, and not only on his generation of mountaineers. Also very pertinent are the observations of Zdzisław Dąbrowski, who emphasised, in the context of Karłowicz's ideology, that "the mountaineer of the highest type, physically and intellectually, is both athletically and aesthetically harmonised, and never one-sided".<sup>24</sup> Adolf Chybiński, on the other hand, claimed that Karłowicz "compared (but only compared) mountaineering in spirit with artistry. And this was the starting point of his ideology".<sup>25</sup>

Looking from the perspective of those who differed in many respects and who spoke out more than once, decades after Karłowicz's death, one can see again that his artistic and aesthetic perception of the world left its mark on every field he was involved in. It was no different in the case of photography.

One of the leading mountaineers of the 1906-1914 period, Gyula Komarnicki, had an interesting perspective on Karłowicz's photographic work, writing about it this way:

He [...] always had a camera with him, and this is how his beautiful photographic images were created one after another, in which his artistic savvy was also revealed. He was able – better than many others – to recognise with his artistic eye in the landscapes those fragments that should be captured within the framework of small images, in order to show in artistic order the chaos of mountains, valleys and rocks. He was able to breathe so much indescribable poetry of the Tatra Mountains into these photographs that whenever I look at them, I have the impression of reality before me. – What Sella was to the world of glaciers, what Witzmann or Benesch were to the Dolomites, and Melner was to the Innsbruck Alps, Karłowicz was to our Tatra Mountains. These unsurpassed images were enough to arouse, in all hearts in which love for the Tatra Mountains lives, the sincerest feeling of appreciation.<sup>26</sup>

Sunderland, who cited this opinion, did not entirely agree with it. He wrote:

Thus, Karłowicz was a skilled, sensitive photographer with artistic intuition; he created many photographic works that were valuable and oftentimes beautiful. He probably found in photography a partial outlet for the same energy he otherwise put into musical compositions, and at the same time a respite after working on them; he practised an artistic 'crop rotation' through photography. However, a complete artist-photographer, aware of the artistic goals of this art, he was not yet. The level of Sella – contrary to Komarniczky's opinion – he did not reach. The thought occurs whether his premature death was not primarily at fault here. If this sensitivity, this enthusiasm and this diligence could have brewed longer in this cauldron of artistic creativity, which was Mieczysław Karłowicz, if, especially to the above-mentioned factors of creativity had come some more permanent contact with the life and development of artistic photography, then who knows what kind of photographic work the artist could have created, who knows if some 'School of Karłowicz' could not have taken over the reign of photography in the areas from Osobita to Czuba Rakuska, from Sarnia Skała to Kończysta and Solisko?<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Z. Dąbrowski, "O taternictwie M. Karłowicza", in: *Kurier Poranny* 58, 1934, no. 42, p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> A. Chybiński, op. cit., p. 496.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted after: J. Sunderland, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>27</sup> J. Sunderland, op. cit., p. 35.

It is also worth noting that Karłowicz did not manage to develop the habit of thinking in cycles, which is so useful in the work of a photographer. He did not work out any subjects on a planned basis; he photographed spontaneously whatever he happened to see: once it was a monumental panorama of the Widły, Łomnica and Durny Szczyt from the Jastrzębia Turnia, another time the Brocken spectre, or 'a lone resident of the Dolina Batyżowiecka' – a lizard that suddenly crawled out from under the boulders between the legs of the tripod on which the camera was set. Again, it can be said that Karłowicz the photographer was interested in everything, that he was open-minded and flexible, but also that his actions were guided by pure coincidence, that there was no intention or concept or consciousness of artistic purpose there. It is also interesting to note how Karłowicz used the word 'art' regarding photography. On 1 May 1906, he wrote a letter to Stanisław Szumowski, which reads: "As I prepare for the Zakopane season, I'm getting a little more skilled in the art of photography with my new camera".<sup>28</sup> This statement does not resemble Karłowicz's description of the creative process, the final result of which was a symphonic poem *Odwieczne pieśni* ("Eternal Songs") or *Stanisław i Anna Oświecimowie* ("Stanisław and Anna Oświecim"). There is not a trace here of that peculiar trance full of the deepest experiences, concentration and even suffering... It is hard to resist the impression that, in spite of all, music and photography were two different worlds for Karłowicz, full of different meanings, located in a completely different place in the hierarchy of values.

Jan Skotnicki, in a letter sent to Adolf Chybiński about 25 years after Karłowicz's death, wrote as follows: "Karłowicz's religion was nature, and he bowed down before it and finally gave his life to it. Here lies the secret of his love for the Tatra Mountains".<sup>29</sup> Complementing this thought of Skotnicki's, we can add with full responsibility that music was also an integral part of this religion. Photography came close to this mystical circle, but only at times – this can be seen in Mieczysław's best photographs, which should find their rightful place in the history of Polish photography. However, one must resist the temptation to create a mythology around poor photographs that absolutely do not deserve to be called works of art. Karłowicz was an outstanding figure, a man of great stature – his work defends itself and needs no mythology. It also seems doubtful that this sensitive photographer would have wished some of his works to be presented to the public and distributed, and certainly would not have wanted anyone to read into them non-existent meanings. It should be remembered that Karłowicz had a critical, analytical mind and was gifted with outstanding intelligence. One should admire his excellent photographs, of which there is no shortage; the rest are better passed over.

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted after: H. Anders, op. cit., p. 255.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 593.

Returning to the question posed in the title of this article, it can be said that the photographic work of Mieczysław Karłowicz lived up to the extremes of evaluation that he faced also, or primarily, in the field of music. The creator of *Epizod na maskaradzie* ("An Episode at a Masquerade") was an outstanding composer for whom music was the most important medium of artistic expression, he was also a very good, sensitive photographer who left behind a valuable body of work. Unfortunately, part of this output did not survive World War II, hence the panorama of Karłowicz's photographic work is incomplete. At the time of his death, he was not yet 33 years old. He lacked time... We shall never know what his work would have been like if he had not died in an avalanche at the foot of the Mały Kościelec on 8 February 1909.