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Witkacy's Paintings as Frozen Drama

In an enthusiastic article about Witkacy's drama published in 1928 in the French-language journal *Pologne Littéraire*, Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński observed that Witkacy's "painting and theatre become a unity. The paintings of Witkacy are theatre frozen on canvas, theatre of life so intense that the artist must externalize his excess energy through the lungs of an actor, transposing them to the human voice; at the same time he repeatedly transforms his theatre into a series of motionless pictures, which amazingly recreate the dream of life."¹

Unfortunately, Boy said nothing more to enlighten us as to how exactly Witkacy's "motionless painting" was "theatre frozen on canvas" or how the artist "recreated the dream of life." Yet it seems that there is nothing to stop us comparing Witkacy's oil paintings and pastel compositions with his dramas written, during the years 1918–1925 (with the exception of *The Shoemakers*). As we can find many characters and situations that co-exist in Witkacy's dramas and in his paintings, we can safely assume Boy-Żeleński's quote as being plausible.

The best example of such a phenomena is in *Fantasy-Fairytale* (pic. 1), a large oil painting executed between 1920 and 1921 depicting the first scene with Edgar Walpor from *The Water Hen* (Witkacy's drama from 1921) on the left of the canvas and four monsters who play important roles in *Janulka, Daughter of Fizdejko* (a drama from 1923) on the right.

¹ T. Boy-Żeleński: *La Théâtre de Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz*, "La Pologne Littéraire" 1928, nr 18.

In the stage directions in *The Water Hen* it reads: "HE stands to the left, dressed in the style of the three bound men in the illustrated edition of *Robinson Crusoe*. Three cornered hat, boots with very wide tops turned down (eighteenth-century style). He's holding a double-barrelled shot gun of the worst make [...] To the left, a red sunset."²

Similarly in *Fantasy-Fairy tale*, we have a man dressed as was described above, with the simple difference of having a sword at his side, rather than a gun. Additionally, the sunset is on the right side of the canvas. Here we can also see four bizarre creatures with birds' heads and animals' legs, two of which have peculiar pink and blue crinolines covering the lower parts of their bodies. These details reflect a further drama by Witkacy – *Janulka, Daughter of Fizdejko* written in 1923. And indeed on the list of the *dramatis personae* we find: "Two Characters Without Legs – on stands which stretch as though made of flabby guts. Bird faces with short, hooked beaks like bullfinches. Covered with variegated plumage (red, green and violet colors). One without a right arm, the other without a left."³ In Act III of the drama these creatures discard their crinoline skirts and change into two-legged men.

Another example can be taken from a pastel composition from 1920 (pic. 2) depicting two men – one of them digging a grave, and the other observing. Analogously, the opening scene of the Witkacy's 1921 drama *The Anonymous Work*, takes place in: "An almost entirely flat field on the outskirts of the capital of Centuria. Day begins to break. In the background the glow of the distant city. [...] The field is covered by bushes with dark-green leaves and fluffy, light-blue flowers. In addition, high greenish-yellow grass with bronze tufts is growing everywhere. There are no trees. In places the earth shows through, cherry red in color. [...] To the right, we can see TWO GRAVEDIGGERS in gray-blue blouses and trousers of the same color are working, waist-deep in a freshly dug grave. [...] In the middle of the stage, near one of the rocks, stands MANFRED COUNT GIERS. He has long hair, and quite a long beard and mustache. No hat. He is wearing the same kind of blouse as the GRAVEDIGGERS, fastened around the waist by a black belt with a large gold buckle. Wide crimson pants. [...] Black patent-leather shoes with violet pompons. His face is turned toward the audience. He is leaning on a tall black cane with a gold knob."⁴

² S. I. Witkiewicz: *The Madman and the Nun and Other Plays*, translated and edited by D. C. Gerould and C. S. Durer with a Foreword by J. Kott, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London 1968, p. 45.

³ *The Witkiewicz Reader*, edited, translated and with an introduction by D. Gerould, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois 1992, p. 156.

⁴ S. I. Witkiewicz: *Seven Plays*, translated and edited by D. Gerould, M. E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, New York 2004, p. 175.

Such a similarity between two works of the same artist cannot possibly be accidental. Too many of the details are the same: the colours of the ground, the flowers and the clothing, the brightness of the distant city, the appearance of the central character in the scene.

It is important to note that both the compositions that I have described were executed either during the same period or somewhat earlier than when the related dramas were written: *Fantasy Fairytale* was painted in 1921–1922, while *Water Hen* dates from 1921 and *Janulka* dates from 1923; the pastel composition was however completed one year before *The Anonymous Work* was written.

It can be concluded thus, that the marked similarities between the paintings and the dramas suggest that Witkacy, as a painter, first imagined the scenes and characters and painted them; only subsequently did he invent the roles and actions and put pen to paper to create the dramas.

So far I have presented the most evident examples from the mature period of Witkacy's *oeuvre*, but the beginnings of the whole process are of equal interest. Before the First World War Witkacy executed many bizarre charcoal compositions called "monsters" by his father, Stanisław Witkiewicz, because of their ugliness, darkness and the rough style of drawing. The direct inspiration for the name came from the title of Francisco Goya's engraving, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (pic. 3).

Most of Witkacy's "monsters" are lost; we know them mainly from photographs⁵ but some of them fortunately survived. I discovered a 1906 work in a private collection in Krakow in the late 1980s while preparing a large Witkacy's exhibition at the National Museum in Warsaw. *The Demonic Composition* (1906) (pic. 4) depicts a mysterious scene – a man and a woman looking at a bizarre figure just visible through a slot between curtains. Importantly, the figure is carrying a torch. Professor Daniel Gerould suggested once that the composition may be connected with the play *Deliverance* by Stanisław Wyspiański produced in the Słowacki Theatre in Krakow precisely in 1906. I compared the charcoal by Witkacy to the scene from Wyspiański's drama where two characters, Konrad and the Muse, discuss the roles in the drama and identify the figure with a torch as Contemporary Poland. Not only was the similarity striking, but it seemed to suggest a very exciting idea of what the origins of Witkacy the dramatist could have been. The scene from *Deliverance* must have impressed the young 21-year-old

⁵ The photographs were published in: W. Sztaba: *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. Zaginione obrazy i rysunki sprzed roku 1914: według oryginalnych fotografii ze zbiorów Konstantego Puzyna* (*The Lost Paintings and Drawings from the Period before 1914 from the Collection of Konstanty Puzyna*), Oficyna Wydawnicza Auriga, Warszawa 1985.

Witkacy so much that he not only depicted it in his own artistic composition drawn in charcoal, but he may well have also discovered inspiration in the theatre.

The next inspiration was Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In 1907 Witkacy painted a garden scene *Gravedigger's Monologue* (1916) (pic. 5) with Hamlet dressed in a white shirt and black pants and Ophelia in a long pink robe with a flower in her hair. This most likely depicts the scene of Ophelia's madness. The composition is in a private collection, probably in Krakow. Nine years later, in 1916 (perhaps because of the 400th anniversary of the Shakespeare's death), Witkacy returned to the drama depicting Hamlet's famous soliloquy in the cemetery [V, i]. Correspondingly, a pastel composition in the National Museum in Krakow presents a man in the centre with two gravediggers on each side, skulls and shinbones at his feet and a spectral figure in a black dress rising up behind him – evidently Ophelia's ghost.

The similarity between this composition and the later one also depicting two gravediggers suggests that the scene of Hamlet's monologue could have been an inspiration for Witkacy's *The Anonymous Work*.

In the same year, 1916, Witkacy also completed another pastel composition, "freezing" another stage scene – not from the theatre this time, but from the ballet. *Composition with Swans* (from the Castle Museum in Lublin) is evidently connected to *Swan Lake* by Piotr Tchaikovsky. We should remember that in 1916 Witkacy was in St. Petersburg so it would not be strange that the famous ballet inspired him at that time.

Returning to comparisons to Witkacy's own dramas, in 1911 he painted an exotic landscape *Landscape Scene* (pic. 6) depicting a bay with blue sea and a house. A lemon tree is on the shore as well as a couple with a cat between them. The woman is giving the cat something to eat. The scene may easily be taken at face value, but when we read *The Water Hen* we come across one of its characters, the Father who says: "Don't you remember when the three of us lived in the little house on the other side of the bay at Stockfish Beach? Remember her mania for feeding lemons to my ginger cat?"⁶ It is quite obvious that the landscape depicts the idea used by Witkacy 10 years later in the drama.

The mixing of characters and situations in his paintings and his dramas was a regular occurrence for the artist. The best example of a wonderful mixture of paintings, dramas and reality is a lost portrait of Eugenia Dunin-Borkowska from 1912, which presents a character sitting on a sofa with strange scenes depicted on the wall behind her. Until earlier compositions,

⁶ S. I. Witkiewicz: *The Madman and the Nun and Other Plays*, op. cit., p. 52.

Scene in a Garden (1906) (pic. 7) *Hamlet and Ophelia in the Garden*, and *The Landscape with the Red Cat*, were discovered in private collections in Krakow and Warsaw it was assumed that Witkacy had deliberately created a strange background to make the portrait more bizarre; while in fact he had simply put two of his own paintings on the wall above the sofa in Borowska's living room. I think that both interpretations are in fact correct. Witkacy did create his own new reality by using elements taken equally from real life and from the reality of art. What is more, the sitter for the portrait was an actress, so perhaps his depiction of her with two paintings in the background presenting important scenes with great female roles in brilliant dramas could have additional significance and could be said to create a quite new reality.

Witkacy also mixed real life with art – he depicted it in his paintings and in his novels as well, the best example of which could be an oil composition from 1922 *Composition with a Woman (Jadwiga Janczewska's Suicide)* (pic. 8). The painting depicts the suicide of Witkacy's fiancée, who went to the Tatra mountains and shot herself in February 1914. An analogous scene can be found in his novel *Farewell to the Autumn* (written in 1925 and first published in 1927), where the wife of the protagonist, commits suicide in a very similar way.

All of this introduces us directly to the world of Witkacy's characteristic imagination, where everything seems to be fluid, but in fact is highly organized. His ideas penetrate one another, supplementing and complementing the others. Daniel Gerould, in his book *Witkacy as an Imaginative Writer*, invented a very useful term: "a unified world of imagination," for describing the situation in which various characters appear in various literary works by Witkacy (mainly in the dramas but also in the novels). The phenomena could also be extended to Witkacy's paintings where characters and situations from his own and other authors' works meet and create a great frozen theatre of art and life.

It is an interesting supposition, that if he were living now, Witkacy would likely be a great filmmaker, similar perhaps to David Lynch, whose films *Mullholand Drive* or *Inland Empire*, are, in my opinion, incredibly "Witkacian" given their rapidly changing characters and loopy plots.

To conclude, I would like to close with an anecdote. A while ago I had a dream... One morning I arrived at the National Museum in Warsaw where I was working, and I looked at Witkacy's *Fantasy Fairytale* hanging on the wall. I reached out to the painting and touched it. First the left side – where the figure of a man is depicted. The painting at once came to life – Edgar Walpor moved and shot the Water Hen. Then I touched the right side – now

alive, the monsters began to move and change into men, as in Witkacy's drama. But what next? What would happen if all his characters really met? I'm afraid that only Witkacy could answer that question.

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Abstract

In this article the author applies Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński's claim that Witkacy's paintings are "theatre frozen on canvas" by examining the many characters who coexist in both his paintings and dramas. This is evident not only in the content of his later drawings and paintings when he was most productive with his dramatic literary output, but also in the subject matter of earlier art pieces before he even began the fruitful period of his dramatic works. Moreover, some of the images in his artwork reflect his own real life experiences. The author borrowing a phrase from Daniel Gerould claims that Witkacy creates a "unified world of imagination" in which various characters appear in multiple literary and art works.

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