

Introduction: Homo Sovieticus and the Evolution of a Socio-Philosophical Approach to Witkacy

By Kevin Anthony Hayes

The Beginning

I think I would not be the first person to attribute profoundly serious life decisions to the influence of a teacher. The person of whom I am thinking here was to present me with a vivid account of the tragic history of the division and separation of Poland. Later in life, whilst a student of the Social Sciences, and of Sociology in particular, I was left with many questions about the nature of communism and indeed the operation of Marxist ideology throughout Russia and eastern Europe. Furthermore, when the events of the period of Polish contemporary history known as 'Martial Law' erupted I found myself both distressed and intrigued. I was to observe the period of Martial Law with rapt attention. It was only a number of years later, following many career twists and turns, when I had taken a serious interest in acting and theatre that I was to encounter Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz for the first time. This took place when I was cast to play Dr. Grun in a final year undergraduate student production of *The Madman and the Nun* whilst studying for a pedagogical qualification at the University of Reading. What astonished me most was the freshness of the language and the vitality of the dialogue, with the added spice of references to things belonging to the socio-philosophical realm. For me, a one time devotee of the Social Sciences, I was immediately drawn in, I was hooked. This was fascinating for me because the material with which I was dealing had its origins in Poland, a country locked away

behind the 'Iron Curtain.' Not only this, I was captivated by the spellbinding weirdness of everything I read by Witkacy. The College Company was later to be responsible for the U.K. premiere of *The Pragmatists*. I played Von Telek, in this earlier and indeed even stranger play. I was left with many questions. Later with the same group of people we created a theatre group called The Random Pact Theatre Company with which I was to stage two Mrozek pieces. After what seemed like a relatively short while later I obtained a British Council-Polish Ministry of Culture and Art Post-graduate Studentship. Over the space of two years I was thereby permitted to study both Acting and Directing at the P.W.S.T. (State Higher National Theatre School) of Warsaw and subsequently of Krakow too. As is well known these have subsequently been renamed Theatre Academies. I was therefore able to take a highly memorable journey from England to Poland by train, travelling across Europe and passing through the Berlin Wall. The main goal of the mission: to study Witkacy with the aim of promoting him in the English speaking world. The year was 1986.

What you see before you in this publication has its origins in a paper initially presented at the First International Conference devoted to Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz at the Actors' Centre in St. Petersburg in 1993. At this time I was asked by Professor Bohdan Michalski to present a paper at the Conference on Witkacy. When asked what I wanted to contribute I casually suggested the theme of HOMO SOVIETICUS.¹ The response of the Russian authorities led me to conclude that I had found something not so immediately apparent. I had been interested in the political elements of Witkacy's work for some time. It was a topic which had at that time only been explored in a cursory fashion in English. In the presentation and subsequent article I examined a number of Witkacy's plays using the paradigm provided by Michael Heller's provocative work, *The Screw in The Machine – The Making of Soviet Man*. I suggest that Witkacy's plays reflect the realities of Soviet life. More specifically, I argued that the dramas, *Maciej Korbowa and Bellatrix*, *They*, *Gybul Wahazar* and *The Anonymous Work*, *The Shoemakers*, are quite clearly to varying degrees concerned with the operation of Bolshevism and Totalitarianism. We are given to understand society as an all-powerful machine transforming and manipulating consciousness and truth. Parallels are also made between Witkacy's super tyrants and Lenin and Stalin. There were I felt many

¹ This paper was first presented in St. Petersburg at the first Russian international conference on Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz in 1993 and again at the conference entitled *Witkacy w Polsce i na świecie* (trans.) *Witkacy in Poland and the World* which took place in Szczecin in 1999. This essay was then published in the publication bearing the same title; *Witkacy w Polsce na świecie*, ed. M. Skwara, Szczecin 2001 and is reproduced here courtesy of the University of Szczecin.

more aspects of the political and philosophical aspects of Witkacy's work to be considered. Alas, it was not until 2007 that I really had chance to explore these to any great deal of depth. The conclusion of these considerations found expression in the form of Witkacy 2009 with a University of Westminster event which was framed so as to explore Witkacy as a Social & Political Visionary. I was so encouraged by both the support I received as well as the response I encountered to at once consider a subsequent conference in Washington D.C. This became Witkacy 2010, which explored Witkacy's depiction of the balance of forces between the individual and society.

The Individual and Society

Through "Homo Sovieticus" I made my way to the theoretical grounding for the present volume. I think it worthwhile and, in fact, necessary to summarize the socio-philosophical stance implicit not only in Witkacy's theoretical writings, but also in his dramatic literature. In the essay I examine Witkacy's view of the individual as a fragile malleable weak and defenceless creature destined by virtue of his own frailness to fail. According to this approach, the protagonist is by and large at odds with the social forces that surround him. The world at large is an alien domain from which it is better to retreat either temporarily or permanently. This is usually attained by a number of different means: drugs, sex in excess, maniacal work, suicide, incarceration or acceptance of execution. Alternatively, man maybe a potentate, a monster capable of the most sublime evil and possessed of the most incredible super-human powers. In some ways a little more like a deity or demi-god than a mortal. In this respect women, insofar as they feature other than as background female figures tend to be possessed of power in the sexual domain.

What then is the nature of society for Witkacy? What is the relationship between it and the individual? This, I feel, is one of Witkacy's primordial fascinations, which indeed I wished to subject to interrogation. For him social forces are of the greatest potency. I felt that his works should be viewed rather as very successful dramatisations of the operation of social forces by virtue of the fact that they seem to appear to impact so profoundly on the main characters of his plays, novels, and artworks. Along with the heroes of the works, the viewer is somehow obliged to experience a sense of hysterical powerlessness in the face of social forces. This for me, however chaotic in some of Witkacy's work seems, is entirely intentional. The key features of his work reveal him to be Anti-Utopian in his outlook with clear evidence of the influence of

Spengler. Whereas it is part of the nature of Utopian analysis to identify the major elements of society and to demonstrate how they act on one another if the best of all possible worlds are to be attained, Witkacy was rather intent on showing how the worst possible world was likely to come about. Witkacy was, dare one say, at pains to show how the most horrific social reality was to come into being. Furthermore, to paraphrase Spengler, history, steadily and objectively regarded, is seen to be without centre or ultimate point of reference. It is the story of an indefinite number of cultural configurations of which Europe is only one. It is simply another of "the flowers that grow with superb aimlessness in the field".² For Witkacy, there also seems to be the possibility of some kind of configuration, or organizational framework which exists to integrate all individuals. Yet for Witkacy, such a framework was rather an all-powerful machine, which would devour and destroy individuality and somehow extinguish the eternal flame of human spirituality with one puff of foul smelling breath. In general terms I think that we may safely assert that he concluded that such a state of affairs would be replaced by boredom, which would last for all eternity.

Witkacy: 21st Century Perspectives

Both the London and Washington events were designed both to celebrate and to commemorate the life and output of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, whom we clearly recognise as one of Poland's most colourful personalities. A figure who was profoundly talented and diverse; a dramatist, poet, novelist, painter, photographer, art theorist and philosopher. It is argued that the life and work of Witkacy has made a fundamental contribution to the existence, meaning and self expression of generations of Polish citizens and persons of a creative and reflective inclination throughout the world. His entire life was also dedicated to the promotion of new ideas and high ideals in the intellectual and artistic realm. This, of course, being the sphere of existence that makes us aware of both who we are and where we are in the cosmos. This as we know is as essential to life as the food before us on our tables.

The events also incorporated academic conferences which included presentations made by leading Witkacy scholars. Following the two conferences we now have a collection of papers which are primarily but not exclusively designed to take a socio-philosophical approach to Witkacy's

² O. Spengler, H. Werner, A. Helps, Ch. F. Atkinson: *The decline of the West*, New York 1962, p. 21.

work. It is therefore hoped that within the essays presented here the reader will be afforded the opportunity to experience deeper reflection and more meaningful conjecture and a greater degree of conclusiveness, than hithertofore. All of this is really courtesy of the exertions of some of the finest Witkacologists in the world. We are therefore proud to have such a wonderful mixture of perspectives from scholars who have written extensively on Witkacy to those who are at the beginning of their scholarly careers as well as those for whom he has been a leisurely pastime.

There have been only a couple of collections of essays in English on Witkacy. In 1973, *The Polish Review* published a special Witkacy edition (Volume XVIII, 1973, no. 1 and 2) based on the Witkiewicz Symposium. In 1985 the Polish Philosophical Quarterly, *Dialectics and Humanism*, produced a special volume devoted to Witkacy, including contributions from many of the leading Witkacy scholars from Poland. Since this time, there have been individual essays and chapters devoted to this multi talented artist, but there have been no collections devoted solely to Witkacy. This present collection, therefore, certainly is timely and provides a fresh perspective on Witkacy research.

It is therefore the purpose of this collection of papers to see in what way Witkacy might be viewed as relevant in socio-philosophical terms for the contemporary world whilst turning over some of the most important questions emerging from Witkacy's work. This collection of essays should be of interest to a number of groups of individuals. Those who know absolutely nothing about Witkacy might find this work a very good introduction, albeit that it is, set at quite a high level, so to speak. I think this work could certainly prove invaluable for those directly connected with the theatre; be it as an actor, director, producer or scenographer or indeed a lighting or sound technician. All I think will derive a closer sense of what Witkacy was trying to achieve. Needless to say, since so many of our contributors are teatrologists there will be much to both discover and discuss for both professionals and students alike here. The same I think to be true for practitioners and students alike in the realm of Polish literature. The collection is so diverse, interlinked and yet unified I can see the collection being of profound interest to social scientist and indeed historian alike. The contributions which concern Witkacy's Art, which usually are presented alongside so many other aspects of his thought and *ouvere*, will I trust prove of great interest to students and practitioners from the realm of art as well as art history.

The publication itself is divided into multiple sections. The first section, "The History of the Witkacy Movement", provides us with a number of essays that offer a unique viewpoint by detailing the many develop-

ments that led Witkacy to become not only an eternally celebrated national figure in Poland, but also an international phenomenon. In “Dedication to the Founding Mother and Fathers” Janusz Degler offers an historical perspective on many of the developments of Witkacy scholarship. Lech Sokół’s essay, “Daniel Charles Gerould (1928–2012) In Memoriam”, commemorates the life and work of Daniel Gerould, who sadly passed away in 2012. In his remarks Sokół provides not only much praise for Professor Gerould, but also details his contribution to the internationalization of Witkacy’s work. Anna Brochocka’s informative piece, “The History of the Witkacy Collection in Słupsk”, describes the activity of the Słupsk Museum in functional terms and reports on the 45-year presence of the Witkacy collection in Słupsk. Beata Zgodzińska in her article, “The Witkacy Collection and Exhibition at the Museum of Middle Pomerania in Słupsk”, adopts a different perspective and describes the development of the Witkacy Collection at the Słupsk Museum. It provides an account of the original acquisitions of 1965 and the subsequent additions to the collection. All in all this section provides an historical perspective on the Witkacy movement from its nascent stages right the way through to the present time which should serve as an invaluable record for both current and future researchers.

The second section, “Witkacy in the Realm of the Political”, highlights the insightful investigation of conspiracy in Witkacy’s work by the late Professor Daniel Gerould who was the keynote speaker of both Witkacy 2009 and Witkacy 2010. In this article, “Witkacy and Conspiracy Theories”, Gerould takes an historical overview of conspiracy theories and then examines how they have been paraded in the work of Witkacy. He also considers whether or not Witkacy actively considered them a reality for him on a personal level. The third section, “Witkacy and Polish Modernism”, contains two essays which examine Witkacy’s relationship with Modernism in Poland. In “Witkacy’s Paintings as Frozen Drama”, Anna Żakiewicz applies Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński’s claim that Witkacy’s paintings are “theatre frozen on canvas” by examining the many characters which seem to coexist in both his paintings and dramas. Małgorzata Vražić in her essay, “Witkiewicz-Father and Son: The Double Portrait”, examines the relationship between Witkacy and his father. While noting certain differences, Vražić ultimately stresses the similarities between both Witkiewicz’s because the two artists shared a common view on so many ideas and matters, e.g. the crisis of culture, the death of the *Polish Univer-sum*, the ideal of a high and pure art, authenticity in personal life as well as in the field of art.

The third section, “The Multifaceted Idea of Pure Form”, contains three essays which explore Witkacy’s famous Theory of Pure Form as it mani-

feats itself in various mediums. Michael Goddard in "Cinema, Insatiability and Impure Form: Witkacy on Film" discusses Cinema in relation to the work of Witkacy, in particularly its absence. He refers to Witkacy's Western contemporaries as being fascinated by this increasingly dominant 20th Century medium, which Witkacy seems to have ignored despite his interest and participation in a wide range of modern aesthetic practices including painting, photography, mass produced portraits, and theatre. Goddard also presents a very succinct account of how Witkacy's work has been transmuted into the medium of Film and Television. In "Witkiewicz's Theory of Pure Form and the Music of Morton Feldman" John Barlow examines Witkacy's idea that music is a pure art form and relates it to Witkacy's reflections on the aesthetic experience. Ultimately, Barlow applies the concept of pure form to the music of Morton Feldman. Gordon Ramsey's "Futurism and Witkiewicz: Variety, Separation and Coherence in a Theatre of Pure Form" investigates Witkacy's drama *The Water Hen*; he ultimately observes that the drama reveals on the one hand the interruption of narrative and linear progression, and uncertainty as to existence, identity and relationship; and on the other hand the persistent continuous underlying anxiety within the characters themselves and their sense of journey and destination.

The fourth section, "Between: Philosophy, History and Politics", examines Witkacy's philosophical work as it applies to history and politics. Agnieszka Marczyk in "The Witkacy – Cornelius Correspondence, or How to Cure Gout with Transcendental Philosophy" explores how Witkacy and Cornelius in their correspondence, discussed the body as an object of philosophical speculation and personal experience. She then briefly turns to the political elements in the personal letters, and in Cornelius' recollection of the friendship during later years. Paweł Polit also investigates lesser known textual philosophical revelations in "Philosophical Marginalia by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz". Based on the exhibition *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz – Philosophical Margins* held at the Centre for Contemporary Art at Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, in 2004, Polit examines Witkacy's marginal notes, which were humorous, personal, and at times artistic in nature. Polit reflects upon the connections between Witkacy's artistic concepts and his philosophical thinking. In "Cutting the Romantic's Throat: Witkacy's Nasty Nightmare" Bryce Lease tackles Witkacy's *The Anonymous Work*. He argues that through Plasmonick's ability to overcome his love for Rosa, Witkacy moved beyond the Romantic ideals, and in fact exposes the paradox of Romanticism: freedom and desire are exclusive; the metonymic nature of desire is always-already related directly to the subject's fundamental fantasy, that inaccessible kernel which anchors the subject to his social field. Mark Rudnicki in "The Profane and

the Sacred in *Insatiability*” argues that Bataille’s division of human time into profane and sacred time is applicable to Zip’s adventures as he follows sacred/erotic passions as opposed to the world of the profane/work to encounter the mystery of existence at intense moments of transgression.

The fifth section, “Questions of Identity in the Work of Witkacy”, investigates in fundamentally new ways the very important notion of identity in Witkacy’s dramatic literature. In her contribution, “Identity Traps in Witkacy’s Dramas”, Ewa Wąchocka takes a new approach to the notion of identity in Witkacy. Instead of linking Witkacy’s dramas to the modernist tradition, Wąchocka uses contemporary discourse, particularly that of Lacan, to make sense of Witkacy’s oeuvre. She argues that in Witkacy’s world individuals may experiment with their own sense of identity with relative freedom and with the concepts of the individual ego, derived from the realms of the Social Sciences. Dorota Niedziałkowska takes a very original approach to Witkacy’s activity in the realm of the self portrait in her essay, “Witkacy’s Self-Portraits as Manifestations of the Dandy Figure.” She examines Witkacy’s self-discrediting strategy, first noted by Grzegorz Grochowski. She critically draws attention to the way in which Witkacy assumes various roles that usually have controversial cultural connotations. These include feminine self-stylization, the role of megalomaniac, snob, or amateur. In “Witkacy and Ghelderode: Goethe’s Faust Transformed into a Grotesque Cabaret” Christine Kiebuzińska offers an analysis of Witkacy’s *Beelzebub Sonata* and Ghelderode’s *The Tragic Death of Doctor Faustus*. Kiebuzińska explores the deformation of any traces of the Faustian myth, as each playwright situates his play in a grotesque cabaret. Ultimately, both playwrights ridicule the potential of a twentieth-century Faust figure, and they also mock Naturalism in the theatre and in Witkacy’s play even the possibility of a theatre of Pure Form.

The sixth and final section, “Witkacy in Comparative Perspective”, provides an interesting consideration of Witkacy in relation to other writers. Marta Skwara offers an intriguing comparative analysis in her essay, “What is still not known about Witkacy’s Intertextuality? An Analysis of Witkacy and Słowacki”. Skwara notes Witkacy’s favourable commentary on Słowacki, yet she observes that little research has been done to explore the connection. Skwara compares Słowacki’s *Kordian* with Witkacy’s *John Mathew Charles the Furious* and finds profound similarities in the protagonists’ dilemmas and their self-referential statements. In addition, she presents an analysis of both Słowacki’s and Witkacy’s treatment of the motifs of ‘Violence’ ‘A Corpse’ ‘A Dream’ and ‘A Ghost.’ Greg Perkins concludes the volume with an interesting comparison of three great 20th

Century authors in his essay, "Eluding the Void: Art and Humour as Anodynes for Witkiewicz, Beckett and Faulkner". Perkins considers the extent to which art and humour acted as anodynes in the three writers' works; there is no question concerning the importance of both in their lives. Art, or engagement in the creative process, occupied the mainstay of their intellectual lives. Moreover, humour, particularly of the black variety, is a hallmark of the trio's entire oeuvre.

We are also very happy to feature the following: "Annex: Witkacy's Portraits and the Słupsk Collection". The images here are presented in black and white within the body of the text, and we have also included colour versions of the images of the portraits within the annex. It is considered remarkably important for this publication to have had the Słupsk Museum permit us include this selection of visual images from the Witkacy Collection in this volume.

Conclusion

I should like to conclude this introduction with a number of observations and reflections of a somewhat personal nature concerning the evolution of this publication. Initially, I had put a 'straw in the wind' by undertaking a workshop; *Absurdism in Polish Theatre* at the Riverside Studios in 2007. I was then fortunate to gain 'support' for this project from Polish Cultural Institute in London. This took the form of being able to feature the P.C.I. Logo on publicity material as well as be featured on the P.C.I. website. This for me was of huge symbolic significance. This support from the then Director of the P.C.I. Paweł Potoroczyn, suggested the possibility of further developments. Subsequently in September 2007 I then presented him with a one page document bearing the heading Witkacy 2009. In the form of a list I had set out everything that I thought should be included in an event which aimed to commemorate seventy years since the death of Witkacy. This initial list included performances, film viewings, an international conference, art contests, acting workshops and so on. In a sage and cautionary manner Paweł looked me directly in the eye whilst placing his hand across half the page, masking half the list as he did so, and suggested that if I were to complete even this much I would really have achieved something spectacular.

Throughout the past 25 years I have seriously endeavoured to work across cultural boundaries; I have acted, directed, produced and indeed translated and worked as a journalist in print, radio and television. Whilst bringing many things of English origin to Poland the reverse has been harder to achieve, and I have made many, attempts. I therefore saw

Witkacy 2009 as almost the last opportunity to achieve this and I felt that I was uniquely placed to effect this. In the past, the various theatre companies I had created somehow lacked the appropriate weight to develop sufficient momentum to make sufficient headway. In terms of major institutions I was certainly non-aligned so I needed a to create a formal entity that would have sufficient gravitas to achieve the desired effect. Witkacy had his Portrait Painting Firm and I would have what has now become The Witkacy Convention and Heritage Company Limited. I do not think we would be able to present this collection of essays without either this entity, the U.S.A. Interns, the Polish Volunteers, our supporting organisations and indeed our dear contributors and my fine Co-Editor Professor Mark Rudnicki.

So at last I am pleased to say that I feel that I have finally achieved what I set out to do more than 25 years ago. Strangely, many things have happened to me along the way and I have had some wonderful experiences and met some fascinating people. I have built strong relationships with leading members of the Witkacy Movement many of whom are contributors to the present volume. So in the end, it seems that I have accomplished much on that original list and perhaps much more. I am now very proud to see the result of these labours in written form in the present publication. My hope is that many more people are now familiar with the work of this fascinating thinker, writer, and artist. And so, it is with great pride I introduce such an incredible collection of essays!