

## **From Madman to Total Artist: Witkacy's Way to Fame**

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### **Abstract**

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885-1939) was an avant-garde Polish artist, as a painter inspired by cubism and expressionism, while as a writer and playwright he created art corresponding to surrealism and ahead of the theatre of the absurd. The reception of Witkiewicz's business (pseudonym: Witkacy) in Poland before World War II was significant, but critical. After 1945, political conditions in Poland and socialist realism in art did not favour Witkacy, who was treated as a socially harmful and decadent writer. Positive commentaries about his work began to be written in the seventies, noticing the value of his painting and literature in reference to European avant-garde art. Today, Witkacy is considered one of the most important Polish authors, present in the canon of Polish literature and contemporary culture contexts, while research on his works has achieved the rank of a sub-discipline: witkacology.

**Keywords:** Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Polish literature, European avant-garde in art

In the current cultural context, we can characterize Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885-1939) as one of the most prominent representatives of Polish artistic avant-garde movements of the beginning of the 20th century. Based on the history of the European painting, his works can be tied to cubist and expressionist painting-although Witkacy himself created a style he referred to as "Formism" (coined from the word "form"). While analyzing Witkacy's playwriting, it is noticeable that his type of artistic creation corresponds with phenomena related to the great theatre reform of the turn of the 19th and 20th century-works of Pirandello or Craig, as well as the visions of the surrealist theatre and the theatre of the absurd. Finally, looking at his prose, it would be quite justified to view it according to categories of the literature of exhaustion in the vein of John Barth or postmodern art with such phenomena as grotesque, intertextuality or catastrophism. Apart from all those activities, we should also mention the works he completed within his Portrait Company (which he deemed very important), a type of art which strived to be functional (not unlike the pop-art works of later years)-mostly without giving up highest aspirations of the Pure Form: values of colouring, artistic technique, directional tensions, artistic anti-psychology and anti-society gestures. On top of all that, Witkacy-from the second decade of the 20th century-additionally considered himself a philosopher and published a number of works in that field-building a system which might be referred to as "biological monadism."

All of the above constitutes the way in which Witkacy is currently perceived: however, it should be emphasized that it took several decades of his reception in Poland and all over the world before all those aspects of his artistic personality came to be recognized. Let us focus upon a few most significant moments of the whole process in order to fully realize the stages of Witkacy's image transformation from a negative one - an eccentric madman - into a positive one: a total multimedia artist.

### **Aura of a Drug Addict and a Womanizer (1918-1939)**

Witkacy and his art (painting, drama, prose, art criticism and philosophy) were not well received during their first stage of reception (from 1918 to 1939). Particularly misunderstood was the most prominent (for the artist himself) theory of the Pure Form which presumed the existence of painting and drama which inspire metaphysical feelings, but accomplish that aim not with means based on realism but on deformity-chaos and not order. According to Witkacy, art should not, therefore, refer in its expression to truths of society, psychology or even logic-instead, it should inspire the feeling of the uncanny, a deep wonder and a moment of experiencing a divine Absolute. Art works and plays by Witkacy following his pure form-based style, despite the fact they were presented in art galleries and experimental theatres, were met with skepticism. Painting critics were not sure whether to classify works of this artist within the current of dadaism or surrealism - and the theatre critics were hesitant whether to characterize his plays as examples of sophisticated psychologies or grotesque and pure nonsense. His novels (*Farewell to Autumn*, *Insatiability*) were also misunderstood and their readers only seemed to perceive them as autobiographical works with a specific way to interpret them-as they appeared to present the fates of fallen artists. Those readers were seemingly unable to see in those novels 'elements of literary game, civilizational pessimism or catastrophism.

Witkiewicz himself complicated all those attempts of his creative output's assessment with a blatantly eccentric lifestyle. Raised to follow the patterns of modernism, he used the lifestyle of an artistic genius to criticize the Polish society of the first decades of the 20th century-in addition, negatively evaluating the processes of massification and mechanization of the whole civilization of western Europe. Witkacy's social and public activities showed a distinct factor of a dandy lifestyle in them-an aesthete who assesses the social life with a studied contempt. In his private life, Witkacy tended to behave in a very provocative fashion (e.g., already married, he forced upon

his wife her consent regarding him being surrounded by lovers), he engaged in heated discussions on aesthetics or philosophy during public performances and in magazine publications. He was also known to experiment with stimulants (such as tobacco, alcohol, cocaine, ether or peyote), even publishing the first guide in Polish literature which explained their effects (*Narcotics*). Witkacy also famously applied Freud's psychoanalytic theory to evaluate Polish public life (*Unwashed souls*). In Polish reception between the First and Second World War, this eccentric aspect of Witkacy's personality overshadowed the philosophy he practiced with utmost seriousness. It is worth remembering that he read-in original versions-all of the most significant works in the field of philosophy as well as commented on accomplishments of German, English and French philosophy, even befriending Hans Cornelius. In a similar fashion, audience did not treat seriously his cultural prophetism when Witkacy warned European intellectual elites against authoritarianism of the fascist Germany or communist Russia. He was particularly afraid of communism, having had a short but direct contact with this movement when, during the First World War, Witkacy was an officer of the tsarist army and he saw the outbreak of the Bolshevik revolution.

### **Witkacy and the times of socialism (1945-1957)**

After the end of the Second World War, Poland got under military, political and civilizational control of the Soviet Union in which - in the dimension of art-the ruling trend was socialist realism. Although in Poland this current never achieved prominence equal to the one in the Soviet Union, the fact remained that at least until the 60's of the 20th century all avant-garde art-including Witkacy's plays, novels and philosophical works-could hardly be presented or interpreted in a free fashion. The reason behind it was that his works were thought to be an example of creation which was decadent, empty and one which had very little in common with class struggle or civilizational transformation. As a result, socialist critics hardly attempted to interpret Witkacy's creative output, having assumed there was no need to analyze the author's eccentric life style as his plays or painting were just a form of aesthetic manifestation of an artist who was as bored with life as unproductive (for socialist society). What is more, the socialist art criticism presumed that grotesque-filled paintings of great social revolutions, deformed portraits of authority figures or descriptions of the hopeless daily life are harmful for the recipient of the socialist culture who, after all, is in need of positive moral patterns. In view of all that, the works of Witkiewicz published in the years of 1945-1957 were limited to merely two plays: *The Little manor* and *The Shoemakers*, both supplemented with a negative commentary concerning their content and language. If it comes to scientific reception, it was limited to just one article which, in addition, was published outside

of Poland (Regamey) and several mentions in synthetic works on philosophy (Tatarkiewicz). Finally, in the area of artistic reception, it was only Stanisław Lem in his novel titled *Hospital of the Transfiguration* who-in the character of a poet named Sekułowicz depicted Witkacy's beliefs and lifestyle.

This style of realistic or sociological interpretation of Witkacy's creative output-one resulting from the Marxist approach-was also present in later years and the legend of the artist-madman continued to be more significant than actually studying his works. Apart from that, what proved to be an immensely important reason for the absence of Witkacy's art in Polish public life was the context of his suicide which he committed on 17 September of 1939 as a gesture of protest and despair against the Soviet Union's military attack directed at Poland. Polish art critics-choosing to ignore Witkacy's works-at the same time conveniently avoided the controversial issue of pre-war Polish-Russian relations: one which was definitely inconvenient for socialist authorities.

### **Witkacy goes out into Poland and the World (1957-1985)**

From the moment of political and cultural "thaw" in central Europe-inspired by Josef Stalin's death in 1953-and the moment aesthetic pressure was somewhat loosened in countries which remained under the influence of Soviet dominance: Witkacy's reception in Poland started to spread in a noticeable fashion. The fact was clearly illustrated by the publishing-in 1957-of a multi-author book titled *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. The man and the creator*. It compiled writings of philosophers (Tadeusz Kotarbiński), art historians (Mieczysław Wallis), theatre specialists (Stefan Szuman) and literature experts (Marian Piechal) who could finally write about Witkacy in a more uncensored and braver manner. In the following years, the author's works- which quickly became an important part of Polish literary world-started to be re-published: *Insatiability* (1957), writings on aesthetics titled *New forms in painting* (1959), plays (1962), novels (*The only way out* in 1968 and *622 Downfalls of Bungo* in 1972), writings on philosophy (1974-1975), journalistic commentaries (1975) and drawings (1977). The most significant rehabilitation of Witkacy's creative output was the act of publishing his plays in a publication collection of National Library, first edited by Marian Kwaśny (1974) and then by Jan Błoński (1983). This fact signified that he became a classic and an integral part of Polish cultural assets. Of course, he was still subject to various assessments but it was no longer possible to remove him from the circle of the most prominent Polish artists.

The most crucial factor, however, which led to this acceptance of Witkacy's creative output in Poland was the fact that circles in Western Europe (French, Italian, German, English and Slavic) developed an interest in the creator. Witkiewicz, translated into those languages, started to be recognized as a Polish avant-garde artist-together with Witold Gombrowicz and Brunon Schulz. Particularly, Witkacy's plays became a success on numerous European stages which, in turn, increased his reception in Poland, too. The first foreign translation of Witkacy's writings was a fragment of *Introduction to Pure Form in theatre* by a French Slavist named Eric Veaux (1963) who published it in "Pour L'art" magazine. In 1963, an almost identical fragment from the writings of the Polish artist appeared in Italian in "Sipario" magazine. In 1964, Yugoslavian anthology titled *Avangardna drama* published Witkacy's play called *Madman and Nun* (translation by Peter Vujčić). In 1965, Shurkamp publishing house published the first German collection of Witkacy's plays translated by Heinrich Kunstmann. As far as worldwide reception is concerned, Witkacy was lucky in that he was translated into English by Daniel Gerould and into Russian by Andrej Bazilewski-famous and respected translators. So far Witkiewicz has been translated into 24 languages including oriental ones such as Arabic and Japanese.

Despite all those positive circumstances regarding Witkacy's reception abroad-in Poland, the popularity of his writings was still slim at best. In the literary reception, the artist's figure appeared in a novel by Władysław Terlecki, *Wormwood star* (1968), which described the final few weeks of Witkacy's life. This situation was slowly changing with the publishing of more and more studies which valued his avant-garde solutions in the area of theatre, literature and painting. Particularly important for the Polish tradition were collective publications or thematic issues of magazines in which numerous authors using diverse methodologies of art analysis indicated how multi-dimensional Witkacy's creative output was (for example, "Pamiętnik Teatralny" 1969, *Studies on Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz*, 1972).

### **Witkacy as the Leader of the Polish Modern Art (1985 until now)**

The celebration of the 100th anniversary of Witkacy's birth-coinciding with the twilight of the socialist government in Poland-allowed the scientific community to analyze his work practically without any interference in linguistic, theatre and literature studies as well as those in the field of art history (e.g., monographic issue of "Pamiętnik Teatralny", 1985, vol. 1-4: a thematic issue of "Sztuka" 1985, vol. 2-3). This expanse of freedom of interpretation was further reinforced by

Witkacy's good reception outside Poland-no longer just in France, England, USA or Germany), but also in many more corners of the world. It became more and more apparent that a call voiced as early as in 1975 by Mieczysław Porębski about the necessity to create an interdisciplinary humanistic discipline called witkacology started to be implemented in practice.

The Polish critic of art wrote: "The full critical analysis of the creative output of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, who preferred to call himself Witkacy, would require creating a separate discipline and research method. It would be rather risky as it would have to combine the theory and history of visual arts, the theory and history of theatre and novel as well as cultural sociology and futurology up to logics, ontology and historiography. Such a discipline might be called witkacology." (Porębski 193)

From the 80's of the 20th century, Witkacy's works are already commonly available on the Polish market. His popularity was increased by the publishing of a five-volume edition of *Selected works* (1985) in which appeared all of his already available novels, plays and the majority of journalism. In the 90's, the artist's *Collected works* (1992-2019) were published which currently encompass 23 volumes and present in a philology-oriented edition not only his literature and plays, but also philosophy, aesthetics, correspondence and Witkacy's *varia*. It is also in the 90's of the 20th century that Witkacy's works were included in curricula of Polish languages classes of the secondary school level. This is why there are so many editions of *The little manor* and *Shoemakers* which are presented in school interpretations as play-writing of the highest quality. Academic reception is very diverse and it illustrates all the modern methods of working with cultural heritage. Within the current of witkacology we can find research in the following fields: biography (Degler, Micińska), art (Żakiewicz), literature (Symotiuk, Skwara), philosophy (Polit, Dombrowski), ethics (Kałowska), theatre (Rudzki) as well as many others. In 2016, a periodical called "Witkacy!" was created-one with academic ambitions operated by Witkacy's Institute (with Janusz Degler playing the most prominent role) and devoted to the creative output of this eminent artist.

During the last decades of reception in Poland, Witkacy's works became a distinguishing mark of an attractive art which competed with other phenomena of European and worldwide art. His plays are not only performed in avant-garde theatres, but also on every larger Polish stage. His paintings and drawings are not only present on pages of prestige art history albums but also among visual signs of pop culture. And this phenomenon is not limited to Poland, either. A very good example illustrating attractiveness of Witkacy's personality is a novel by a Swedish writer, Agneta Pleijel,

*Lord Nevermore* (2000), who described a real-life friendship of the famous anthropologist, Bronisław Malinowski, with Witkiewicz-while adding certain fictional facts. The novel was translated into French, German, English, Italian and Spanish and turned out to be a bestseller.

Another medium which played a significant role in promoting Witkacy's creative output was film. The first one was made as early as in 1966 in a convention of a short biographical and educational movie (directed by Stanisław Kokesz). The following years brought television versions of Witkacy's plays as well as documentaries concerning his creative activity. Feature movies constitute yet another group of artistic reception - suggestively presenting the universe of Witkacy's art. In 1984, a feature movie was shot titled *In an old manor house, or, the independence of triangles* (directed by Andrzej Kotkowski), and in 1989 another one was created - *Farewell to autumn*, based on a novel of the same title (directed by Mariusz Trelński). In 2003, a Polish-Lithuanian feature movie titled *Insatiability*-also based on a novel of the same title - was directed by Wiktor Grodecki, and -in 2007-a Polish-American animated film titled *Madame Tutli-Putli* was produced (directed by Chris Lavis and Maciej Szcerbowski-and nominated for an Oscar award). Then, in 2010, a movie was shot titled *Mystification* (directed by Jacek Koprowicz) which told a story of Witkacy's fake suicide and his further adventures after the Second World War. In 2013, an American short movie titled *There is Nothing Bad Which Could Not Turn into Something Worse* was produced-directed by Orli Nativ and based on Witkacy's play-*Madman and Nun*.

It is perhaps somewhat surprising that Witkacy also became popular among musicians. It could already be seen in 1977 when a musical spectacle called *Belzebub's Sonata* was created-on the basis of which a double-record album was published in 1987. Jerzy Chruściński, a composer of S. I. Witkiewicz's theatre in Zakopane, recorded six albums of classically composed and performed music for Witkacy's plays. An experimental classical music convention was used by a Scottish musician, Lindsay Davidson, who composed two mini-operas based on Witkacy's plays (2005). If it comes to other music genres, Bogdan Mizerski, a jazz musician, is consistent in finding his inspiration in Witkacy. He released music inspired by writings and paintings of the artist in his albums titled *Puć tu do mnie* (1985), *Witkac Song* (1996), *Assymetry/Dream* (2003) and *IP/Mystery of Being* (2011). As far as other jazzmen are concerned, one would have to mention Tomasz Stańko, a trumpeter, who-on the basis of *Narcotics*-prepared in 1986 a two-album record titled *Witkacy-Peyote*, which found its follow-up in a TV programme in 1994 with the participation of the jazzman himself and Polish actors: Marek Walczewski and Wojciech Pszoniak. Rhymed pieces

as well as fragments of Witkacy's prose and plays also appeared in repertoires of rock and alternative music bands. Examples can be found in the case of the following bands: Genezyp Kapen (mixture of hard rock, ska and reggae-1985), Los Lovers (alternative music-1991), Armia (post-punk-2003), Voo (rock-1998) and Michał Hnatiuk (noise- and trip-music-2013). Witkacy's works are also performed by singers engaged in commenting social reality (Jacek Kaczmarski-1980, Zbigniew Raj-1993), singing actors (Maria Peszek, Tomasz Karolak-2007) as well as stage singers (Maryla Rodowicz-2006).

All of the factors mentioned above indicate that during the last decades Witkacy's reception is simply impetuous. There are cyclical conferences focusing on his creative output and organized for the academic community (the Museum of the Middle Pomerania in Słupsk) as well as contests consisting in interpreting his works (Youth Culture House in Żnin and the Słupsk Culture Centre). In addition, many schools are created which choose Witkacy as their patron and monuments as well as memorial plaques devoted to the artist are constructed all over Poland.

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