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Futurism and Witkiewicz: Variety, Separation and Coherence in a Theatre of Pure Form

In this essay I want to explore the theoretical and dramaturgical relationship between Witkiewicz and the Italian Futurists, and in particular those elements that are predicated on binaries of separation and unity, singularity and plurality. In so doing I aim to identify Futurist precursors and influences and similarities and differences in Witkiewicz's development of models and practices.

Witkiewicz was well aware of the Futurists' work and declared that it conformed closely to his theory of *Pure Form in the Theatre*; however, he disliked their 'futurization of life'¹ and was hostile to what he perceived as the mechanisation of society and the threat to the individual. The Futurists of course looked forward to mechanisation and celebrated the human-machine interface, elevating it to an almost mythical status. Living in a time of accelerated invention and with huge developments in transport and communications, the Futurists extolled the force of the machine, its dyna-

¹ S.I. Witkiewicz: *Pure Form in the Theater*, [in:] *The Witkiewicz Reader*, ed. D. Gerould, London 1993, p. 152.

mism, power and speed, and in particular its ability to overcome the limitations of time and space.² This is made clear in their 1909 *Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*, with, as its centrepiece, a car race through the streets of Milan, passenger and vehicle transformed and mythologised, whose crisis point and anarcho-nirvana is the driver's near-collision with a bicycle.³ Witkiewicz on his part dislikes the confluence of human and machine, writing as he does of 'the gray soulless atmosphere of socially disciplined automatons.'⁴

In spite of these obvious philosophical differences, there are clear similarities between Witkiewicz's work and what the Futurists set out to achieve. This can be seen in the Futurists' *Variety Theatre Manifesto* (1913) and *Synthetic Theatre Manifesto* (1915); as well as in their very short plays or *sintesi* (sometimes only a minute or two long) that were written and performed from 1915 onwards. These similarities fall into three broad categories, though there is obviously overlap between them: the alteration of normal time and space; the disconnection of reality and identity; and the sense of the alogical.

The Alteration of Normal Time and Space

The Futurists' interest in the alteration of normal time and space is closely related to a desire for speed. With this speed, according to the *Variety Theatre Manifesto*, come new conceptions of time and space, as well as of perspective and proportion. The advent of the car (alongside the aeroplane and advancements in train travel) brings a shift of perspective: the landscape we travel through becomes 'a moving thing'. Danius points us to a precursor of the first manifesto, Proust's 1907 account of a car journey in Normandy, where the window becomes a framing device. Whilst it is the car that moves, the perspective of the passenger is such that it seems the surroundings themselves are coming to life and rushing towards the car.⁵

So speed and acceleration open up new perspectives and change our perception in an hallucinatory way. For Proust it is not the passenger but the church steeple that moves, as if animated. But these new perspectives are derived from other sources too, beyond travel and speed. From the world of

² See G. Berghaus: *Italian Futurist Theatre*, Oxford 1998, p. 3.

³ The driver was Marinetti himself. See F. T. Marinetti: *Selected Writings*, ed. R. W. Flint, London 1972, p. 39.

⁴ S. I. Witkiewicz: *Pure Form in the Theater*, op. cit., p. 151.

⁵ S. Danius: *The Aesthetics of the Windshield: Proust and the Modernist Rhetoric of Speed*, "Modernism/Modernity", 8.1 (2001), p. 113.

art, for example, there is the influence of cubism, and from the world of philosophy the influence of Bergson, who introduced the idea of a subjectivisation of time in his 1910 *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, predicated as it is on internal and external states of consciousness. His notion of the *durée* or duration allows for a simultaneity of past and present internal states. With this, notions of truth, consciousness and reality become negotiable.⁶ This clearly subverts the idea of a single, immutable consciousness or truth and seems to be akin to Pandeus' view in Witkiewicz's *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes*, where he speaks of 'the dual comprehension of the uniqueness and identity of each moment'.⁷

Bergson's approach allows for a malleability, where one's sense of time can be altered by acceleration or slowing down.⁸ In the Futurist *Sempronio's Lunch*, by Corra and Settimelli, a meal time is telescoped into five short scenes where a man ages rapidly from 5 to 90; in their *Traditionalism* a whole lifetime is compressed into two minutes. Likewise in Witkiewicz's *The Water Hen*, Elizabeth's arrival is introduced to Tadzio as though she had visited only five minutes earlier and he responds in a similar vein – in spite of the ten year gap between visits:

What? (Remembers) Oh! Show her in. Hurry up. I behaved so badly then.⁹

This subjective view of time also has an effect on the physical space that characters occupy. It leads not only to simultaneous action on stage, where two worlds sit next to each other, each unaware of the other's existence; but it also leads to moments of overlap, where these two worlds collide. In the *Synthetic Theatre Manifesto* The Futurists term this 'interpenetration'¹⁰ or 'compenetration'¹¹ and it plainly echoes Bergson's own 'interpenetration of

⁶ H. Bergson: *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson, London 1910, p. 107.

⁷ S. I. Witkiewicz: *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes*, [in:] idem: *Seven Plays*, ed. D. Gerould, New York 2004, p. 310.

⁸ See M. A. Gillies: *Henri Bergson and British Modernism*, Montreal 1996), p. 12: "This explains that common experience of having time collapse or expand when an individual is under some stress; or of having time seem to fly when we want to prolong some particular experience, yet crawl when we would prefer to see the experience finished."

⁹ S. I. Witkiewicz: *The Water Hen*, [in:] idem: *The Madman and the Nun and The Crazy Locomotive. Three Plays (including The Water Hen)*, ed. D. Gerould, New York 1989, p. 70.

¹⁰ F. T. Marinetti: *The Futurist Synthetic Theater*, [in:] idem: *Selected Writings*, ed. R. W. Flint, London 1972, p. 127.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 128.

conscious states'.¹² This precedes Witkiewicz's idea of a plurality of realities. A Futurist example of interpenetration can be found in the *sintesi Simultaneità* by Marinetti where there seem to be two distinct worlds, one of a family in a sitting room and the other of a coquette at her dressing table, in a completely different world.¹³ When the family are asleep or otherwise occupied, the coquette without warning crosses into their space, goes to their table, hurls their homework and sewing to the floor and returns unnoticed to her own business at the dressing table in her own world.

This interpenetration, the displacement of one world – of one space, and all it connotes – by another, also occurs in *The Water Hen*, where the opening scene's pole, field and mound are replaced by a barracks. It is more than a simple set change, as the characters continue with the scene as before and are initially unaware of their new environment. It is only some time later that Edgar notices the change, having ironically just remarked that 'nothing happens' and 'there's no change.'¹⁴ The opening setting is returned to later, bringing with it a reprise of the original context – Edgar shooting the Water Hen. This is clearly a form of simultaneity. However, it does differ from the Futurist example in that in *Simultaneità* the worlds of coquette and family are initially separate and here, the two worlds of mound and barracks collide and coalesce; and there is also a period where Edgar and Tadzio might be in both spaces at once or in no space at all. The scenographies do not co-exist at the same time.

The scenography in Act Three of *The Beelzebub Sonata* is entirely simultaneous and meets the Futurist notions of such. The division is of two apparently separate worlds: Baroness Jackals' salon in her castle on the outskirts of Mordovar, presented on stage on a narrow strip running alongside the footlights; and Baleastadar's Hell which will later be revealed behind the upstage curtain. We first sense that something is amiss when Hilda enters the salon through this curtain – it is not a normal entrance point as the stage directions indicate that the doors are on the left and the right. When the curtain opens moments later, hell is revealed, with the characters of Bealeastadar and Istvan present. The stage directions indicate that the salon on the forestage remains as it is, instead of being subsumed within the deep red hell. Yet both sets of characters co-exist: and while De Estrada from the salon is nervous, he does not query the sudden intrusion of this other world, any

¹² H. Bergson: *Time and Free Will...*, op. cit., p. 107

¹³ T. F. Marinetti, E. Settimelli and B. Corra: *Il Teatro Futurista Sintetico*, Milan 1915, p. 21.

¹⁴ S. I. Witkiewicz: *The Water Hen...*, op. cit., p. 49.

more than the other characters do. The two worlds are at once unified and distinct.

There are nonetheless boundaries between these places and as Witkiewicz writes in the stage directions, there is a 'threshold of hell.'¹⁵ At first sight the scene seems like a medieval morality play, as characters consciously choose to enter the space and become Baleastadar's subjects or choose to remain outside, and thus escape his control. But when Jackals and Hilda enter hell, and Jackals shoots Hilda before turning the gun on himself, his death brings about the immediate suicide of his mother in the salon, as if one causes the other. The two spaces, salon and hell, are joined not only by virtue of the spatial interpenetration, but also by what might be called a psychic interpenetration. The coquette's intrusion into the living room in Marinetti's *Simultaneity* (impossible in terms of the normal laws of space and time) is also symbolic of a metaphysical perforation, in Marinetti's own words 'a synthesis of sensations'.¹⁶ In both cases the intrusion results in disorder, whilst uniting the dramatic space.

This simultaneity, of spatial and psychic overlap, may be said to be an example of dramatic *brisure*, a term that springs from the work of the artist Delaunay and indicates a disruption of time, space and causality.¹⁷

Just as in *Simultaneity* there are two separate worlds that bleed into one, but with neither fully yielding to the other, so too are there two worlds in *The Beelzebub Sonata*, a bleeding together of salon and hell, each retaining their separateness. They are at once unified and distinct. We see one through the other, as with the point of *brisure* on Delaunay's canvas.¹⁸

The Disconnection of Reality and Identity

Allied to the alteration of time and space is of course the reappraisal of reality as well as identity. When these norms are altered, the stability of character, relationship and self becomes vulnerable and open to question. The contexts that one has taken for granted become unreliable. New facets of identity are revealed and this can cause disturbance and surprise: sometimes this is shown by surprise or confusion in the characters but sometimes the surprise is ours, as audience. We may even be surprised that the charac-

¹⁵ Idem: *The Beelzebub Sonata*, [in:] idem: *Seven Plays*, op. cit., 2004, p. 377.

¹⁶ F. T. Marinetti, E. Settimelli and B. Corra, op. cit., p. 21.

¹⁷ See S. A. Buckberrough: *Robert Delaunay: the Discovery of Simultaneity*, Ann Arbor, Michigan 1982, p. 25.

¹⁸ Delaunay's 1909 *Self Portrait*.

ters are not surprised – and that may be surprising in itself. A character and a situation become disconnected from that which has gone before. Reality and identity seem to be no sooner established in a particular form than they are revised or entirely changed (indeed, the one reliable element in a character's life is transformation). Sudden transformations called for in the *Variety Theatre Manifesto*, influenced in part by the skill of the Italian quick-change artist and the architecture of the variety format, are key to narrative and character. This can also be said to be a characteristic of Witkiewicz's plays, albeit in a very different context. The Futurist play *Alternation of Character* by Ginna and Corra highlights this sense of transformation, of disconnection of identity and relationships: a husband and wife switch, line-by-line, from declarations of love to declarations of hatred in rapid succession. Their emotional states are keenly felt but are in a state of turmoil and it is impossible for audience and character to discover or establish reliable connections between statement and response. Identity begins to founder. And it is not just emotional cogency that is hard to divine: the characters too become uncertain about their consciousness and the reliability of their personal narratives. So in Cangiullo's *First Class Fantasy* a traveller in a railway waiting room is confronted by the sudden apparition of a quick change artist, Fregoli, performing his act.¹⁹ When the traveller wakes from sleep we are uncertain as to whether he is waking f r o m a dream or waking i n t o a dream, and whether the companion he was speaking to was imaginary or real.

This sense of disconnectedness, with past events, with the present, with friends, relatives, spouses and lovers, this sense of the tenuous, pervades the work of Witkiewicz too. The feeling and tone of living in a dream, sometimes with moments of torpor, is never far away. In *The Water Hen* Tadzio sees his existence as a series of dreams from which he fears to be awoken. In *The Beelzebub Sonata*, De Estrada gives the clear impression of being very much a stranger in his own narrative:

De Estrada: Now I see that none of this makes any sense. Once in Mordovar, as soon as I left the station, I went straight to a house totally unknown to me, and then with this young lady here, whom I saw for the first time in my life, I came here to this cabaret in an abandoned mine.²⁰

¹⁹ See Vela Latina, Anno 111, No. 51, 23/31, Dicembre 1915, Napoli, [in:] *Vela Latina: Pagine Futuriste 1915–1916* (Firenze: S.P.E.S. – Salimbeni, 1979), p. 22.

²⁰ S. I. Witkiewicz: *The Beelzebub Sonata*, op. cit., 2004, p. 359.

The clear sense that he has no control over his life (and little understanding of it) mirrors that of the situation in Folgore's play, *Shadows + Puppets + Men*, where three characters who claim to have never met before appear together at a country house:

Blue: Gentlemen I don't know how I find myself in your company!...

Maxim: It's a ridiculous situation. I can't understand. I got off the transatlantic liner this morning after three years of travel.

Blue: Me too. But I don't know you.

Job: Curious. The three of us to have travelled aboard a liner and never met.²¹

However, we have already seen that they have met each other earlier: it is just that they seem to have no recollection of this. They have been disconnected from the reality already established and are now uncertain as to their relationship. This flavour of fatalism, of the human as an instrument of forces beyond their control, contradicts Futurist notions of will and control and foreshadows Witkiewicz and the theatre of the Absurd.

However, it is not the case that reality is purely determined by the subjectivity of the characters. The disconnection between different states of reality (and the commensurate uncertainty of identity that this engenders) is clearly demonstrated to the audience. In Chiti's *Constructions* we see a man being knifed to death only to return to life and fall into good-humoured badinage with his murderer, as the directions note, 'one of those usual discussions where a real dead person talks to a real murderer. One of those incoherent discussions where, without knowing, life experiments with its own surprising geniality.'²² Their conversation is polite, rational, and even logical given that the situation confounds our understanding. Audience perceptions of life and death are similarly under scrutiny in *Tumor Brainiowicz* when the audience sees Gamboline throw the baby Isidore out of the window. A few moments later Balantine tells the distressed Gamboline that the baby is not dead at all, and Iza reassures her uncomprehending mother that it was only a dream. The audience are as uncertain as the characters and cannot tell where (if anywhere) reality lies. Similarly, in *Metaphysics of a Two Headed Calf*, we see Patricianello's mother and Mikulini die in Act Two only to be told by Parvis in Act Three that he has seen them driving around town.

²¹ F. T. Marinetti et al., op. cit., p. 29.

²² Ibidem, p. 25.

Patricianello's response to this may be surprisingly cool ('Ten mothers, a hundred Mikulinis can come here') but it is matched by his mother's own indifferent response at seeing him when she does indeed reappear:

Patricianello: Mother, Mother! It's me!

Mother: Well, what of it? Stay there on the ground with your Mirabella. Don't let me bother you.²³

As far as she's concerned, he barely exists for her. To all intents and purposes they are dead to each other. Their current identities have little bearing on what has gone before-though one cannot ignore Patricianello's sense of excitement and how this is at variance with his earlier indifference. These disconnections in relationships, often surprisingly sudden, may not be as absurdly depicted as they are in *Alternation of Character* (the grotesqueness of which is aided and abetted by the play's brevity), but are nonetheless a notable part of the warp and weft of Witkiewicz's drama.

Shifts of familial identity may seem to be casual and capricious and at times accepted with indifference by those involved. These can be seen through the prism of the Bergsonian view of time in which case all realities are true (in Chwistek's terms, a plurality of realities). In Witkiewicz's drama, relationships often exist on different footings in different contexts and a sense of linear continuity is therefore absent. In *The Water Hen* Edgar may be the Water Hen's lover but to her he also seemed to be like her child and her father.²⁴ Sudden revelation of a character's relationship to another may be surprising to the audience but as with the apparent mortality (or not) of the baby Isidore or Patricianello's mother, the other characters' response to the revelation, loss or gain of a family relationship may also be surprising. This is demonstrated when the young Tadzio appears (from virtually nowhere), and the Water Hen introduces him as Edgar's son.²⁵ Edgar's reaction is more one of frustration as yet another layer of reality is revealed: 'For all I know I might even be your father.' He adds, with brutal indifference, 'although I can't stand children' which savagely undercuts the child's sense of identity and (emotional) reality.²⁶ But even this is provisional, with transformation an ever present condition: thus when Edgar later discovers

²³ S. I. Witkiewicz: *Metaphysics of a Two-Headed Calf*, [in:] *The Winter Repertory 7: Tropical Madness, Four Plays*, ed. D. Gerould, New York 1972, p. 226.

²⁴ S. I. Witkiewicz: *The Water Hen*, op. cit., p. 46.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 48.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 62.

Tadzio is also the Water Hen's son, he experiences a feeling of shock and surprise. Edgar is at once disgusted by and 'insanely attached' to the boy.²⁷ He inhabits a contradiction of states, an 'alternation' of character and identity, which he has the awareness to recognise, yet is powerless to alter.

While indifference in relationships plays a part in the Futurist *sintesi* (and this disconnection is heightened and schematised as much by the brevity of the form as by the creators' political outlook), it is a given, and does not impinge on our initial understanding of the character's identity: we generally know where we are from the outset, whether this is an ageing couple in *Traditionism*, a young couple in Pratella's *Night*, or the mechanistic paternalism of Cangiullo's *Of all the Colours*. In Witkiewicz's plays, such indifference has an altogether different impact, in that it is invariably introduced in such a manner as to challenge and subvert our existing understanding of the characters' identity. In *Along the Cliffs of the Absurd*, Piggykins' reaction to being told that Wahazar is her father is that she thought it was 'pure chance' that she 'loved him so much.'²⁸ Her rationalisation, as well as her indifference to his being taken to the lab for the necessary transplants to take place, nonetheless amaze her mother, whose surprise is akin to our own surprise at the emotional disconnection between daughter and new-found father. Other examples abound, underscoring the fragility of what and who characters believe themselves to be, in relationship to what we as audience have taken to be their significant others. The Gravedigger in *The Anonymous Work*, disinterested in the fact that he may be the father of Prince Padoval (and anyway unsure which children he does have); Claudina offering herself as a daughter to the Professor as a sort of surrogate (while his son Plasmonick is in prison for fifteen years); or the same character offering to look after Rosa's little girl, Sophie (who Rosa has just realised she herself had forgotten all about): each demonstrates relationships to be quixotic, casually abandoned, casually adopted. In *The Cuttlefish*, Rockoffer has no memory of his mother, in *The Beelzebub Sonata* Istvan is informed by Rio Bamba that he is in fact his uncle, while in *Metaphysics of a Two Headed Calf* Patricianello believes it is possible to have two mothers, one dead and one from his dream.²⁹ Even little Tadzio in *The Water Hen* has to check with Lady Nevermore why Edgar is his father: 'Mama, I forgot why He's my papa.' The response is disarmingly offhand: 'It doesn't make any difference if you have.'³⁰

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 65.

²⁸ Idem: *Along the Cliffs of the Absurd*, [in:] *The Winter Repertory 7: Tropical Madness, Four Plays*, ed. D. Gerould, New York 1972, p. 168.

²⁹ Idem: *Metaphysics of a Two-Headed Calf*, op. cit., p. 207.

³⁰ Idem: *The Water Hen*, op. cit., p. 58.

In Witkiewicz's work, relationships seem to be tenuous and arrived at by chance; embarked on, surrendered and rebuffed at times with a staggering ease at once perplexing and funny. In pyrotechnical terms, Futurist surprise in the short-burn *sintesi* is generally a one-off event, a reversal usually occurring at the finale like the punchline of a joke.³¹ With Witkiewicz, the firework is of a very different order, its form and duration permitting a series of surprises, whereby we are constantly reminded of the existence of more than one plane of reality and simultaneous worlds.

The Futurists' distrust of conventional representations of reality and identity stems from their hostility to passéist theatre, and this includes a deep antipathy to that which is comprehensible and predictable, to the play where 'the audience understands in the finest detail the how and why of everything that takes place on the stage, above all that it knows by the last act how the protagonists will end up.'³² This approach is mirrored by Witkiewicz in *Pure Form in the Theatre* where he views realistic expression as synonymous with a rationalistic utilitarianism in which art should have purpose, meaning and solution:

We turn away in disgust from the work under discussion, swearing more or less politely and repeating triumphantly, "I don't understand". We do not want to grasp the simple truth that a work of Art does not express anything in the sense in which we have grown accustomed to use the word in real life.³³

Yet however similar to the Futurists' instinct to confound an audience's expectations of form, Witkiewicz's treatment of relationship is very different. The format of the *sintesi*, which have brevity at their heart, mitigates for the most part against the establishment of emotional scenarios and therefore against any significant subsequent subversion of same. Relationships between lovers or husbands and wives are largely givens and frequently (though not always) shaped by chauvinistic conceptions of women as femmes fatales or stultifiers (*Parallelipiped*, *The Big Problem*, *The Bachelor Pad*, *Towards the Conquest*, *The Green Plums*) or alternatively as objects to be used or humiliated (*Devourer of Women*, *Of All the Colours*, *The*

³¹ Such as the 'properly' behaved lady visitor turned seductress in Boccioni's *The Bachelor Pad*, the lover in Boccioni's *The Body That Rises* being sucked up the outside of the building by his girlfriend so the landlady does not see him using the lift and the soldiers in Marinetti's *The Communicating Vases* obstructed by the wings of the theatre and falling back in surprise.

³² F. T. Marinetti: *The Futurist Synthetic Theater*, op. cit., p. 125. See G. Berghaus, op. cit., p. 19 for the theatrical conventions against which Futurists were writing.

³³ S. I. Witkiewicz: *Pure Form in the Theater*, op. cit., p. 149.

Womaniser and the Four Seasons, Call-Up Council, Parallels, The Contract, Woman + Friends = Front, The Invulnerable). Romantic love sans emasculation and objectification is generally ignored or disavowed (though there are exceptions in such pieces as *The Displeasure of the Apron, The Little Theatre of Love* and *Moonlight*).

These concerns may be present in Witkiewicz, but given his larger canvas there is opportunity for more complex developments. Here the relationships of partners and lovers are subject to surprising moments of disconnection, where past events and feelings that audience and/or character have relied upon are swept aside. This can leave characters out of kilter with each other, with one feeling the same as they had before, and the other occupying an entirely different emotional space. This is more than the travails of unrequited love, as the connections and disconnections are frequently allied to characters who are at times fully aware of their impotence and vulnerability. As Rockoffer says in *The Cuttlefish*, after suddenly deciding to break off his engagement with Ella, 'You'll have to pardon me, but unknown perspectives are opening up before me.'³⁴ This may indeed be the case, but only a dozen lines before he declared to Ella, 'now I really love you for the first time.' The speed of the formation of these relationships as well as their fracture is remarkable; and although like the Futurists in their reversals, they are unlike them in that relationships are contingent on a presentation of love that might be said to be 'character-led' – even if that character is driven by forces and perspectives apparently outside of their control. In *The Water Hen*, Lady Nevermore's sudden announcement that she is to be Edgar's wife causes Edgar a mild hesitation but he falls in with his new life more or less immediately.

Similar emotional transformation is seen in *The Anonymous Work*. No sooner has Rosa's Tzinger been strung up by the crowd than she awakes from what she calls 'a horrible nightmare,' says she does not love him any more, and declares her love for Plasmonick instead.³⁵ He, however, wakes from a nightmare of his own and declares that he no longer loves her. He takes a razor to Rosa's throat and kills the person he professed to love on the spot. Mirabella's connection with Patricianello is ruptured with similar speed in *Metaphysics of a Two Headed Calf*. As he is gagged and bundled into the car, she is clearly distraught at being left without him but within a moment of the shadowy figure nearby revealing himself, she is immediately captivated by this apparent replacement:

³⁴ Idem: *The Cuttlefish*, [in:] idem: *Seven Plays* ed. D. Gerould, New York 2004, p. 267.

³⁵ Idem: *The Anonymous Work*, [in:] idem: *Seven Plays*, op. cit., p. 232.

Mirabella: Will you love me?

Figure: Naturally I will.³⁶

In *Tumor Brainiowicz*, Brainiowicz's decision to divorce Gamboline is also extremely sudden, at odds with the subject and tone of their preceding dialogue, and Gamboline meets it with similar indifference. These sudden moments of emotional disconnection confound the audience's expectation.

Context is everything and characters are not always simply disconnected from reality. They can also be aware of the existence of multiple realities. For every character emotionally disconnected there is another that is bewildered by change. The multiple realities can add to the confusion, compounded by the fact that disconnections are not necessarily absolute, in love as much as in anything else: as Brainiowicz says to Iza, 'If it weren't for this insane heat and my new thought about an nth-class of tumors, I don't know if I wouldn't fall in love with you all over again.'³⁷

While characters may accept the general philosophical idea that there is an uncertainty of self, they are at other times far less sanguine about the impact it has on their own particular lives and their feelings fluctuate accordingly. In *The Water Hen* Edgar is at times quite relaxed about this state of affairs – 'I should have been somebody, but I never knew what, or rather who. I don't even know whether I actually exist [...]'³⁸ However, in *The Cuttlefish* Rockoffer is terrified by a similar uncertainty. Tumor Brainiowicz, who wonders if he exists at all, suffers from despair and anguish. Yet for all the giddy sense of paralysis, Edgar himself and Price in *Tropical Madness* are both enervated by the possibilities that uncertainty offers: the opportunity for a fresh start and new adventures.

The Sense of the Alogical

The alogical is a further characteristic which the Futurists and Witkiewicz share. In the *Synthetic Theatre Manifesto* the Futurists suggest that the autonomous and the unreal are part of the alogical, indicating a theatrical form that makes sense entirely within its own terms. As Kirby writes:

³⁶ Idem: *Metaphysics of a Two-Headed Calf*, op. cit., p. 234.

³⁷ Idem: *Tumor Brainiowicz*, [in:] idem: *Seven Plays*, op. cit., p. 74.

³⁸ Idem: *The Water Hen*, op. cit., p. 49.

The acrobat and juggler do not aid in the development of a narrative or pretend to be anywhere other than where they really are. Nor do they generally embody abstract ideas and concepts: the trapeze artiste flies without representing flight.³⁹

The allogical evidently stems from variety entertainment, a populist form offering short, fast, discrete scenarios where psychological analyses on the part of the audience is unnecessary. In this context, there are no anxieties about a lack of narrative progression and continuity. We do not ask what a sword-swallower or a contortionist 'means' – they just 'are' and we appreciate them (or not) on their own terms. If there is coherence it is not contingent on what precedes or follows but on the here-and-now territory of the act itself. Whereas conventional theatrical semiotics normally depends on connotations and meanings, the Futurists' allogical performance, like the variety show, depends on attention being paid to denotation rather than representation. The act of the trapeze artiste, whose body is the site of performance, each flex and release of muscle and limb an immediate and unmediated display of physical virtuosity, needs no explanation or narrative development in order to engage the audience.⁴⁰

Allogicality is put into practice in the *sintesi* themselves, most obviously in pieces where language is abstract (Chiti and Settimelli's *Wandering Madmen*, Depero's *Colours*), non-existent (Cangiullo's *Detonation* and *Not a Soul*, Marinetti's *Public Gardens* and *The Officer's Room*, Marinetti and Corra's *Hands*) or, at the very least, secondary to physical performance (Marinetti's *Bottom Halves*). Between them these *sintesi* show a range of allogical elements, whether absurd, autonomous or unreal. Futurism, however, is a broad church, one where theory is not always followed-up in practice and where there is a tension between the allogical, with its subversion of aesthetic expectation, and the political and cultural concerns of the movement itself. And, as many of the *sintesi* are in fact aiming for clear political and social meaning, the signs pointing indexically to such issues as war, gender, pacifism and bourgeois and academic inertia, allogicality is regularly and necessarily ignored.

Witkiewicz, whose political and cultural outlook is obviously different, achieves a more consistent sense of Futurist allogicality ('A theatrical work in Pure Form is self-contained, autonomous, and in this sense absolute'), and does so in a more sustained fashion.⁴¹ Instead of the variety format of the

³⁹ M. Kirby: *Futurist Performance*, New York 1971, p. 22.

⁴⁰ A fine example of this could be seen in the Rebecca Leonard's aerialist/trapeze artiste's act in the Futurist show *ScrABrrRrraaNNG*, Glen Morris Studio, Toronto, November 6th to November 8th, 2008.

⁴¹ S. I. Witkiewicz: *Pure Form in the Theater*, op. cit., p. 151.

sintesi, with its overt disconnections and blanks (and with its equally overt recognition of audience and frequent willingness to involve and implicate them in the theatrical moment), Witkiewicz presents an audience with alogi-
cality within a more conventional theatrical form.⁴² It is a form that offers a sense of narrative continuity and development, but, as we have seen in discussion of time, space, reality and identity, it is also a form that questions its own reliability, logic and coherence. Compared to the discrete alogicality of the trapeze artiste, Witkiewicz's scenes point us to meanings and understandings, only for these to vanish as the narrative road continues. This is less a sleight of hand, a Futurist trick, a plan of deception where the writer 'outwits' the audience (and tells them so), than it is an expression of a plurality of separate alogical realities that coexist. This provisionality clearly affects the characters themselves:

Their past experiences can in no way concern us, unless they are formally linked with the present, and the same is even more true for their future.⁴³

Like the trapeze artiste, the Witkiewicz scenes 'just 'are' and we appreciate them on their own terms. If there is coherence it is not entirely contingent on what precedes or follows but on the 'here-and-now territory of the act itself.' It is this sense of the alogical that Witkiewicz has in mind when he writes that 'we should find ourselves in the world of Formal Beauty, which has its own sense, its own logic and its own TRUTH.' Witkiewicz has removed the alogical from the variety format, and re-presented it within a sustained form, where contiguity is present but often ephemeral.⁴⁴ In so doing, he asks very different questions about the human condition and also paradoxically provides a sense of coherence to the disparate, the surprising and the unreliable. The variety or plurality of meanings and perspectives that he expresses is unified not only by a pervasive atmosphere of dream, hallucination, unreality or displacement but also by the constant if ultimately fruitless attempt to make sense of things. In this Witkiewicz might be said to achieve what he deems to be 'the most profound principle of existence: unity in plurality.' It is an achievement that follows on in no small measure from the work of the Italian Futurists.

⁴² Bennett refers to the productive nature of breaks and Iser's blanks in performance. See S. Bennett: *Theatre Audiences*, London 1997, p. 44.

⁴³ S. I. Witkiewicz: *Pure Form in the Theater*, op. cit., p. 152.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

Abstract

This article will consider Witkacy's theatre plays alongside his contribution to dramatic theory with the *Theory of Pure Form*. In particular, it will examine the interplay between a sense of unity and a sense of the *alogical*, a term first used by the Italian Futurists. Focusing on *The Water Hen* but with reference to other plays as well as Futurist theoretical and dramatic counterparts, the article investigates 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. I suggest that his use of a series of arresting visual images and theatrical transformations unifies the scenes within a single dream-like world, bringing an order, however opaque, to the chaos.

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