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## Witkacy's Self-Portraits as Manifestations of the Dandy Figure<sup>1</sup>

It would seem that the history of art demonstrates that one of the most notable strategies of auto creation is dandyism. To illustrate this, it is enough to recollect the images of the young Albrecht Dürer *Self-Portrait at 22* (1493) or *Self-Portrait at 26* (1498). Here the painter appears in outstandingly sophisticated clothes, both with headgear and indeed a thistle. Similarly, young Gustave Courbet presents himself (1842) set against the background of a landscape, dressed as a Parisian Dandy, with long hair, pipe in hand, a walking stick, a book and a black dog. Clearly these are only two examples from the historically long tradition of the self-portrait,<sup>2</sup> which was to serve

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a modified version of the article *Autoportrety Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza – twarze dandysa. Strategia autokompromitacji*, [in:] *Przyszłość Witkacego*, ed. T. Pękała, Kraków 2010, p. 227–241. I presented different aspects of this subject (as *Autoportrety Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza – twarze dandysa. "Wyszlachetnienie podezriteľnoľ licznosti" kontra "Le vrai visage du maître"*) at the session *Witkacy: bliski czy daleki*, organized in September 17th to 19th, 2009 by the Museum of the Middle Pomerania, which is to be published separately.

<sup>2</sup> F. Ried: *Das Selbstporträt*, Berlin 1931; L. Goldscheider: *Fünfhundert Selbstporträts von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart. Plastik-Malerei-Graphik*, Wien 1936; E. Götz: *Selbstbildnisse niederlandischer Maler des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1971; E. L. Smith, S. Kelly: *The Self Portrait: A Modern View*, London 1987; J. L. Koerner: *The Moment of*

as a source of inspiration for Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939),<sup>3</sup> a brilliant artist, draftsman, painter, photographer, writer and philosopher. Some other models of auto creation, which may frequently be encountered, I should like to nominate as ‘provocation’ and ‘auto disgrace.’ In some senses within the range of self-discrediting strategies there are many variations of artistic provocation. We are thinking here of those emerging from nakedness (Albrecht Dürer, 1507 or Egon Schiele, 1911), the macabre (Caravaggio, *David with the Head of Goliath*, 1605–1606; Ludwig Kirchner with his cut off hand, 1915) or death (Arnold Böcklin *Portrait of Myself, with Death Playing a Violin*, 1908, James Ensor, *My Portrait* 1888).

For the purposes of this essay I have undertaken a study of Witkacy’s self-portraits to discuss the significance of dandyism for his artistic stance. Whilst remaining within the domain of dandyism, the artist chose a specific variation, namely that of a self-discrediting strategy, which to a certain extent renders Witkacy exceptional in this respect.

A list of the most celebrated dandies would surely include the following: George B. Brummel, George G. Byron, Alfred de Musset, Charles Baudelaire, Aubrey Beardsley and Oscar Wilde.<sup>4</sup> Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali and Andy Warhol were, in turn, described as the dandies of 20th century art. It must, however, be remembered that dandyism is viewed as being not only excessive care for refined elegance and a product of a particular social code of behaviour, it is also an attitude towards life, a “para artistic expression of personality that is conveyed through refined elegance, the cult of fashion and evanescence, indifference, nonchalance, eccentricity and scepticism.”<sup>5</sup> As an ideology, dandyism, on the one hand, seems to be connected with decadence and aestheticism. On the other hand, it is not limited to these concepts. As a form of struggle for a sense of individuality in life, preservation of

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*Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, Chicago–London 1993; J. Woods-Marsden: *Renaissance Self-portraiture. The visual construction of Identity and the Social Status of the Artist*, New Haven and London 1998; *Five Hundred Self-Portraits*, ed. J. Belle, London–New York, 2000. In polish for example: M. Wallis: *Autoportret*, Warszawa 1964; idem: *Autoportrety artystów polskich*, Warszawa 1966; A. Kowalczykowa: *Świadectwo autoportretu*, Warszawa 2008.

<sup>3</sup> B. Zgodzińska: *Recepcja schematów formalnych i tradycyjnych tematów sztuk plastycznych w obrazach i rysunkach Witkacego*, [in:] *Powroty do Witkacego. Materiały sesji naukowej poświęconej Stanisławowi Ignacemu Witkiewiczowi*, Słupsk, May 7–8, 2004, ed. J. Tarnowski, Słupsk 2006, p. 103–134.

<sup>4</sup> R. Okulicz-Kozaryn: *Mała historia dandyzmu*, Poznań 1995.

<sup>5</sup> G. Grochowski: *Dziwactwa i dzieła. Inspiracje dandyowskie w twórczości Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, [in:] *Osoba w literaturze i komunikacji literackiej*, eds. E. Balcerzan, W. Bolecki, Warszawa 2000, p. 133.

one's own world and one's authenticity, dandyism originates in the problem of existence. A *dandy* appreciates art and culture only in opposition to nature. The only dictate in this case is seen to be the shaping of *life* as a work of art and the only absolute value is beauty. What results from this belief is the cult of youth and narcissism. The dandy is also possessed of an inclination for satire and self-irony. For the dandy life is built on legend by the use of anecdote and the bewitchment of the audience through intellectual play. The need for auto creation becomes a force organizing his whole life – a dandy is an actor and a director at the same time.<sup>6</sup>

The topic of dandyism in Witkacy's oeuvre has also been discussed by Bożena Danek-Wojnowska, Wojciech Sztaba, Stefan Okołowicz, Anna Żakiewicz, Radosław Okulicz-Kozaryn, Jan Błoński and Jan Gondowicz.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Lech Sokół noted the special significance of dandyism in Witkacy's life and work: "Dandyism is one of the most important issues in both the biography of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz and his artistic creations such as; the visual arts, literary and dramatic work."<sup>8</sup> Grzegorz Grochowski has shown us that Witkacy's *Narcotics* is not only useful journalistic writing, but also steeped in the spirit of jocular provocation, constantly breaking the rule of decorum, inviting the readers to join a perverse game, auto ironic dandy text.<sup>9</sup> Grochowski also studied the influence of the dandy attitude on different aspects of this artist's activity.<sup>10</sup> The author characterizes some basic elements of Witkacy's dandyism: the self-discrediting strategy, intertextuality, the autobiographical theme, dilettantism, the domination of dis-

<sup>6</sup> B. Sadkowska: *Homo dandys*, „Miesięcznik Literacki” 1972, nr 8, p. 86.

<sup>7</sup> S. Witkiewicz: *Listy do syna*, eds. B. Danek-Wojnowska, A. Micińska, Warszawa 1969; W. Sztaba: *Gra ze sztuką. O twórczości Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, Kraków 1982; S. Okołowicz: *Przeciw Nicości*, [in:] E. Franczak, S. Okołowicz: *Przeciw Nicości. Fotografie Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, Kraków 1986, p. 11–46; A. Żakiewicz: *'Cierpienia ich muszą być brzydkie i dziwaczne'. O związkach młodościowej twórczości Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza z prozą Romana Jaworskiego*, [in:] *Przed wielkim jutrem. Sztuka 1905–1918*, ed. T. Hrankowska, Warszawa 1994, p. 285–300; R. Okulicz-Kozaryn: *Dziwna przyjaźń. O Romanie Jaworskim, Stanisławie Ignacym Witkiewiczu i dandysowskim ich pokrewieństwie*, [in:] *Fakty i interpretacja. Szkice z historii literatury i kultury polskiej*, ed. T. Lewandowski, Warszawa 1991, p. 326–345; J. Błoński: *Nerwowcy, dandysi, nadludzie*, [in:] idem: *Witkacy na zawsze*, Kraków 2003, p. 55–67; J. Gondowicz: *Upadek rozpatrywany jako jedna ze sztuk pięknych*, „Twórczość” 2006, nr 8, p. 88–104.

<sup>8</sup> L. Sokół: *Dandyizm u Witkacego: gra i metafizyka*, [in:] *Witkacy w Polsce i na świecie*, ed. M. Skwara, Szczecin 2001, p. 197.

<sup>9</sup> G. Grochowski: *Trudna sztuka mówienia głupstw. O 'Narkotykach' Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 1998, nr 3, p. 115–141.

<sup>10</sup> Idem: *Dziwactwa i dzieła...*, op. cit.

course over the world presented, the graphic importance of gesture and the collecting of odd things. Witkacy did not want to feel subordinate to any of his arts: in his novels, one can find philosophical debates, he insults his readers and his philosophical discourse consists of a number of frivolous pokes. The novel is denied the rank of art and the Portrait Company is limited to the role of a manufactory of portraits. Grochowski argues that dandyism is a consistent component of many works of the author of *The Only Way Out*<sup>11</sup> and that its impact on his artistic creation is far greater than previously thought.

Grochowski was primarily concerned rather with Witkacy's literary work and journalistic output. Whereas here it is intended to pursue this undertaking from the point of view of the History of Art and consider what we have already referred to as Witkacy's self-discrediting strategy in the realm of dandyism. It would appear that this self-discrediting strategy is based on the voluntary assumption of roles which normally have negative cultural connotations. In reference to this strategy, we can point to effeminate self-stylization and the acting out of roles such as those of a megalomaniac, a snob and a dilettante. Subsequently, I will endeavour to discuss the implementation of this 'strategy', and I will try to discuss this on the basis of a dozen or so examples which I find the most suitable for purpose of illustrating my argument.

Whereas, on the one hand, the specificity of the self-portrait relies on conventionalization, on the other hand, the challenging of this conventionalization enables the author to introduce certain visual games to the audience. Witkacy's collection of painted and sketched self-portraits consists of eighty two images,<sup>12</sup> within which one can find well-rounded representational portraits, psychological studies, hasty sketches drawn under the influence of drugs, as well as self-caricatures with humorous commentaries. This collection is rendered an even more interesting subject of investigation because of various transgressions of the conventions of the self-portrait. Nonchalant

<sup>11</sup> All titles (works of art, books, articles) translated by the author.

<sup>12</sup> The authors of the catalogue of paintings (*Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939). Katalog dzieł malarskich*, ed. I. Jakimowicz in cooperation with A. Żakiewicz, Warszawa 1990) have defined the collection of self-portraits as consisting of 74 works. There is also *An officer's portrait* from the year 1917 that is considered to be a self-portrait and *Self-Portrait with a Samovar* from February 17th, 1917 discovered in 1998. I also include in this set the collective self-portraits: *With her attendants*, *Battle-piece*, caricatures: *An astral tea*, *"Let me tickle your chin..."* and three self-portraying drawings from letters: a profile sent to Helena Czerwijowska on March 30th, 1913, *My portrait by my secretary* for his wife from July 25th, 1925 and *Stanisław's likeness* offered to Helena Maciakowa on May 6th, 1935.

disregarding of obligatory conventions seems to be clearly linking Witkacy with the stance of the dandy. An endeavour to undertake a fresh and more profound reading of self-representational art by Witkiewicz which includes auto-photographs and a series of faces is rendered realizable courtesy of the phenomenon of dandyism.

Among Witkacy's works, one can find numerous examples challenging the conventions of the self-portrait. This is particularly so with respect to the portrayal of male subjects with traditionally feminine characteristics. The feminine mask is easy to portray by means of a painting. In the pastels dated 1922 (*Witkacy en beau for his Mother* and *The Last Cigarette*) an oval mirror on legs placed in the atelier reflects Stanisław Ignacy's face. Feminisation is also evident in the depiction of the hands and facial features, most notably in the exaggerated form of lips. Further, in the representational self-portrait dated 1913, the effeminacy is evident in the form of a shiny thumb nail. In the decorative drawing from the years 1922–1924, depicting the model in an elegant, colourful, pinkish and green garment, a big vase with flowers serves to emphasize the hands, slender fingers and filed, shiny, pointy nails. In addition, one's attention is drawn also to a watch with a traditionally feminine thin strap. Further evidence is found in the self-portraits dated 1913, 1930, 1931 and 1938 where Witkacy enlarges his eyes and mouth and highlights the colour of his lips.

Another of Witkacy's challenges to the self-portrait convention is the use of long hair. The self-portrait from October 21st 1930 (pencil and crayon) shows a head slightly tilted forwards, captured *en trois quarts* in a very tight display frame with long, straight hair depicted through the use of parallel, gentle, wavy lines. Irena Jakimowicz describes the face as elderly, with flabby, unhinged features.<sup>13</sup> The eyes focused on a point somewhere ahead and the leaning of the head give the impression of melancholy, sadness and helplessness.

In a work bearing the date October 11th, 1927 Witkiewicz portrayed himself unequivocally as a woman in the work: *Self-portrait as a Woman*. Irena Jakimowicz claims that this representation is an extreme manifestation of searching for an opposite to one's personality.<sup>14</sup> The painting depicts a torso captured *en trois quarts* turned to the left on an abstract background. In constructing his feminine version, the painter makes himself much younger, his face slimmer and chin more prominent. His high forehead is

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<sup>13</sup> I. Jakimowicz: *O rozmaitym użytkowaniu lustra, czyli autoportrety Witkacego*, „Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie” 1987, nr XXXI, p. 499–531.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 519.

covered with smoothly combed hair and his ears with locks. Instead of the usual neatly shaped mouth, he draws himself with wide, full, dark lips, the artificiality of which would be noticeable even today in terms of a portrait of a woman. The huge, asymmetric, dark blue eyes look straight ahead giving little impression as to the thoughts of the subject. The orange and blue garment with a 'v'-neck décolletage reveals a long and slender neck. We know well that Witkiewicz was certainly capable of adding gentleness and charm to the face of a woman; however, this representation reveals no such qualities.

Effeminate self-stylizations were universal attributes of dandies. Baudelaire glorified lipstick before Witkacy's *Postscriptum* to *Unwashed Souls* praised rice flour as face powder. Jarry was famous for women's footwear, Duchamp created self-portraits dressed in feminine garments entitled *Rose Sélavy*. Characteristic features of the dandy's relation towards femininity were captured by Sartre: "a dandy – like a woman – does not work and does not occupy himself with useful actions, but is to be «looked at and fancied like a woman»."<sup>15</sup> In the article *O dandyzmie zakopiańskim* from 1921 Witkiewicz claimed that the woman endowed with instinct and the characteristic of acting before thinking is a role model for the Zakopane dandy – a "psychologically bisexual monster" that lives to bewilder himself. Therefore, "Zakopane dandyism is by principle assumed to be masculine."<sup>16</sup>

Witkiewicz, for example, described himself as a dilettante by placing a negative opinion of himself on his painting. The painter "when dissatisfied with the artistic level of his portrait [...] would add T.U. (failure or death of the artist's talent)."<sup>17</sup> The abbreviation appears to be constructed in a fashion analogical to the typology of the products of the Portrait Company (types A to D.) He believed that the self-portraits dated 1922 and 1929 should be self-criticized.

The role of a dilettante – especially a graphic artist or a painter who is amateurish in his work – is best to be portrayed by means of caricature. Witkiewicz uses this technique willingly – for example in his charcoal drawings *Remorse* (in the self-portrait with Irena Solska and Stanisław Witkiewicz, Witkacy stylizes himself as a pierrot), as well as in the drawings entitled *Les esprits de Messaline* (1928) and *Stanislaw's likeness* (1935). The exposure of an elongated nose, jutting chin, protruding ears or disheveled

<sup>15</sup> G. Grochowski: *Dziwactwa i dzieła...*, op. cit., p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *O dandyzmie zakopiańskim*, [in:] idem: *Bez kompromisu. Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne*, ed. J. Degler, Warszawa 1976, p. 506.

<sup>17</sup> B. Zgodzińska: *Witkacy in Słupsk: "The S. I. Witkiewicz Portrait Painting Firm"*, Słupsk 2010, p. 17.

hair appears also in official self-portraits, for instance in *Chromański puking at me* (1928). In this work, Chromański was depicted as a huge leech in the center of the composition and Witkacy himself below, as a humanoid figure raising its head. Additionally, in the drawing *An astral tea* (1928) Witkiewicz presents his friends as fantasy characters and himself as a worm with bearded face. In the portrait dated as January 13th/14th 1930 Witkacy presents himself with dragon's spikes on his neck.

Another example of Witkacy's use of hybrids is *Witkacy + Tymbcio* (1932), customarily described as the *Self-Portrait with a Scorpion's Tail*. A realistic study of the head with grayish hair and eyes looking at the viewer is combined with a bright tail resembling the body of a snake, or possibly a scorpion. The serpent human-like creature appears in the centre of an oval, among balls of varying sizes. From the back and near the cheeks the head is protected by a darker shell. The decoratively bent tail easily hold up the disproportionately large and heavy head. Such beings are a recurrent element of drug-induced visions. On the left, there is a caricature of Tymbcio drawn in a different convention. He is dressed in a baggy hooded robe, under which a long nose, an eye resembling a bead, teeth and a short beard can be seen. The genuine inspiration for this figure was Witkiewicz's friend Edmund Strążyński.<sup>18</sup> Tymbcio like a fakir reaches out his hand with claw-like nails, enchants and bewitches the dance of the head placed at the end of the tail. The "Cobra" reacts to his gestures with anxiety and raises its right eyebrow.

Frequently, when assuming the role of a megalomaniac, a dilettante and a snob a painting requires the addition of text to a painting. Witkiewicz often directly expresses his excessive self esteem not only in literature. The commentaries of the artist on his paintings underline his supposed ease in creating portraits and craftsmanship; for example, the charcoal self-portrait for Anna Oderfeld (1912) was "made in an hour" and on the self-portrait with a samovar (1917) Witkacy noted "please, don't bother me with talent." It is likely that such notes are in irony and should be treated as more of a mockery, as in the case of the drawing *Jas and Stas at Ineczka's* where the work is complemented with the note: "drawn with heels."

We are presented with yet another such example, when we continue our analysis with the self-portrait dated July 7th 1930 dedicated to Janusz de Beaurain – a pilot, engineer and son of the psychologist Karol do Beaurain,

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<sup>18</sup> T. Pawlak: *Mahatma – Tymbcio. O korespondencji Witkacego z Marią i Edmundem Strążyńskimi*, a presentation given at the session: *Witkacy: bliski czy daleki*, from September 17th to 19th, 2009 organized by the Museum of the Middle Pomerania.

who was to be involved in psychoanalytical activity with the youthful Witkiewicz in 1912. The painting presents the torso of young Witkiewicz captured *en trois quarts*, partially hidden behind a zigzagged surface that is traditionally interpreted as a curtain. Here the subject is squinting and smiles almost sardonically. The portrait is a caricature due to the enlargement of the eyes, nose and forehead as well as the overtly triangular face. The artist made several comments on the painting: he noted that he had not been drinking for two months, 'porter + tea,' and also added a sentence written in white crayon: 'A false friend / is a luxury / that even I / cannot afford' drawn from Witkacy's aphorisms.<sup>19</sup> An elaborate signature in the top part of the painting contains a self-ironical dedication: "To the Honourable Sir / Colonel Janusz de Beaurain / instead of a wreath on the Beloved Master's grave / Grateful employees of The S. I. Witkiewicz Portrait Painting Firm!"<sup>20</sup>

Witkiewicz appears in the text as the author of maxims and as the owner of the "Company." The "maxim" is, in fact, a reference to Salomon's parable about a true friend. The construction of this maxim is based on a paradox which is, incidentally, characteristic of a dandy. In the first part of the sentence, instead of the glorification of a true friend, there is seeming praise of the opposite. The word "luxury" has an ambivalent meaning. On the one hand, it denotes a pleasure that one can rarely afford. On the other hand, it is something unnecessary and redundant. Witkacy expresses in a euphemistic way, the general truth that the costs of having a false friend are too high.

By writing such a maxim on the painting dedicated to Janusz de Beaurain, Witkacy makes an ironic allusion to their relationship that can be understood only by considering certain specific situations from the artist's biography. What is more, the exaggerated entitling of Janusz de Beaurain as "Honourable Sir" also adds to the ironic undertone of the work of art. It is of course, also possible that the painting and dedication were meant to be only a practical joke.

The name *The S. I. Witkiewicz Portrait Painting Firm* appears in the catalogue from the Garliński exhibition of April 1925 as the name of a one-man utility enterprise "manufacturing" portraits.<sup>21</sup> There were some legendary "ceremonies" connected with the existence of the Portrait Company. For example, the most notable of these include, the employment of imaginary co-workers for various positions as well as giving them diverse pseudonyms.

<sup>19</sup> Signature from the picture. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939). *Katalog dzieł malarских*, Warszawa 1990, p. 114.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Regulamin Firmy Portretowej 'S. I. Witkiewicz'*, [in:] idem: *O Czystej Formie i inne pisma o sztuce*, ed. J. Degler, Warszawa 2003, p. 27.



In the S.I.W. Directorate "the Home Village of the Master and Our Beloved Director the people employed were as follows: Chief of Cabinet [...] Witkasiewicz, Cashier – Witkasiński, Secretary General – Witkaze and Courier – Witkasik or Witkasieńko. Furthermore the signatures of the company 'documents' are sometimes derived from the deceased co-workers of the Master."<sup>22</sup> Multiple characters created by Witkacy also appear when seeing clients out. Depending on the situation, Witkasik would fetch the coat, Witkasiński would open the door, Witkasiewicz would hand over the hat or present the portrait.<sup>23</sup>

The dedication which appears on the portrait sometimes creates a certain situation: the grateful employees of The S. I. Witkiewicz Portrait Painting Firm "instead of a wreath on the Beloved Master's grave" offered a portrait of their principal, to the colonel. Witkacy here mocks official conventions of commemorating the deceased during funerals. Even though the content of the inscription is a reflection of what is usually written on a wreath, leaving a painting on a grave would still be controversial. If we assume that the "Master" is the principal of the employees, it becomes clear that the reason for the employees to be grateful and to call him beloved is in fact his death. The meaning of the words in Witkacy's art, commonly bear no reflection of the visual message. This is most evident in the portrayal of the young man who, with a hint of a playful smile and dressed in an unbuttoned shirt, does not look at all like a "Master." This fact notwithstanding, by making himself a sepulchral portrait, Witkiewicz challenges the tradition of funeral portraiture.

A good example of the assumption of the role of a dilettante and a snob may be the self-caricature dated May 30th 1933 – *Mahatma Witkac*. My translation of the inscription is as follows: *Mahatma Witkac invoked a Small Ghost from the Remote Past on a Piece of Ectoplasm*. The scene is that of a spiritualistic séance, drawn "almost in the dark" and is formed as a linear composition. At the bottom, the background is unfinished and the signature is mixed together with the notes. This text is separated from the drawings by a wavy line, above which, among diagonal black lines, there are two figures. A fragment of Witkacy's torso, his head in the top right corner of the painting, is in the forefront. The nature of the drawing is very much that of a caricature. This is effected through the following means: strands of hair that stick out, a protruding eye, a disproportionately long, hooked, pointy nose, fish-like, pink lips with drooping corners, the pink blush on a sunken cheek,

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<sup>22</sup> S. Okołowicz: *Przeciw Nicości...*, op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> H. I. Krahelska: *'Ceremoniały' Witkacego*, „Panorama” 1973, nr 1, p. 34–35.

the large ear, the neck with a protruding Adam's apple and an arm which is disproportionately small in comparison to the head. *Mahatma* presents the "small vision" invoked in front of himself – a torso and head of a young woman drawn in a realistic convention. The model has a slender face, a well-shaped small nose, pink lips, and big blue eyes looking at the viewer with kindness. Her beauty, the elegant clothing and the slight blush dismiss any interpretation that she is a ghost or a phantom.

The title *Mahatma*, meaning literally, a magnanimous man was reserved in India for distinguished ascetics, mystics and philosophers. Joanna Siedlecka mentions that Witkiewicz often referred to himself as *Mahatma*<sup>24</sup> and uses this word in his morning bathing songs.<sup>25</sup> In the letter to his wife Jadwiga from August, 1929, Witkiewicz signs himself as "Mahatma Witkacy from Równia Krupowa"<sup>26</sup> and writes that he had created a self-portrait "as Mahatma Witkac."<sup>27</sup> Edmund Strążyński in a peyote turban portrait from May, 1929 is called *Mahatma Tymbcio*. In *The Only Way Out*, the narrator presents a description of Marceli: "Wouldn't he paint it, if only instead of [...] using vodka and cocaine he had used his will, purity of life i.e. the so called 'mahatmizm' as the engine for this artistic machine."<sup>28</sup> A similar understanding of this word is presented in Witkacy's letters to his wife in which he claims: "I want to mahatmize completely" (July 23rd, 1930), "5 years of mahatma and then szlus = voilà mon idée" (July 24th, 1930), "I like less and less the mahatmising project, especially now when I see that Tymbcios are not happy at all" (July 26th, 1930).<sup>29</sup> An interesting point is that the analysed image was made by Witkiewicz without smoking or drinking.

Likewise, we must not forget the dilettantism demonstrated through the invoking of spirits. Witkiewicz was interested in spiritualism and took part in such sessions.<sup>30</sup> Mahatma invokes a "small vision" on a piece of ectoplasm

<sup>24</sup> J. Siedlecka: *Mahatma Witkac*, Warszawa 1992, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> A. Micińska: *Witkacy – poeta*, [in:] eadem: *Istnienie poszczególne: Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz*, ed. J. Degler, Wrocław 2003, p. 257.

<sup>26</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Listy do żony 1928–1931*, prepared to print by A. Micińska, edited and footnoted by J. Degler, Warszawa 2007, p. 129.

<sup>27</sup> S. Okołowicz: *Portrety metafizyczne*, „Konteksty” 2000, nr 1–4, p. 195.

<sup>28</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Jedyne wyjście*, ed. A. Micińska, Warszawa 1993, p. 222.

<sup>29</sup> Idem: *Listy do żony 1928–1931*, op. cit., p. 197–199.

<sup>30</sup> In 1922 Witkacy wrote to Kazimiera Żuławska that he had attended three spiritistic séances with the medium Jan Guzik in Warsaw: "I saw the phantom of miss Janczewska and other wonders" (see: Żuławski: *Z domu*, Warszawa 1979, p. 235). Jadwiga Witkiewiczowa dates her husband's interests in spirituality to the years 1925–1927. In addition, she mentions the medium Modrzewski – alias Franek Kluski, whose séances Witkacy also attended. It is likely that the name of the dish written on *Mahatma Witkac*

– a substance that drools from the mouth of a medium during a hypnotic trance. A humorous effect is created by adding a unit of measurement used in reference to the solid matter, to the word “ectoplasm” while on the visual level ectoplasm is drawn in black lines.

Witkiewicz is consistent to the point of mockery in registering all of the stimulants that accompanied the process of painting. On the portrait of Mahatma, he wrote down all the medication that he had taken, together with a list of meals and beverages: “anti-cough pills + tea + noodles with gravy + Ems water + aspirin.” Witkacy mocks his own system. His signature is his “formula for the work of art” in which the inspiration is reinforced by chemical substances, and which he here expresses the ironic distance of the artist towards his creation, drawings and himself.

On June 1st, 1933 *Auto-Witkacy* was created and complemented with a commentary saying: “Let the dilettante of life in itself standing over his grave die in peace.” This self-portrait in which the artist calls himself the dilettante would seem to support the accuracy of the diagnosis of a self-discrediting strategy, in particular the role of a dilettante.

The pastel drawing shown here presents the upper body of Witkacy captured *en trois quarts* to the left, in a tight display frame. The face is evenly lit. On the forehead, nose and cheeks, the artist placed shades of white and red. The idealized features are brought out by a soft moulding. The “prettiness” is underlined by the smooth skin, the black triangle-shaped eyebrows, slicked back hair, the nose shorter than in reality, eyes with big green irises and full, dark, red lips. The effeminate lips are in contrast with the grim eyes glowering at the viewer from under bushy eyebrows. The head itself seems to be suspended in the air. Apart from the suggested collar of the shirt, the body has no distinct shape. The shoulder line is detached from the head. The background is filled with thick lines in cold hues that reflect the shape of the head. In the lower part of the painting there are inscriptions: the author notes, other than the dates and the usual markings of the amount of cigarettes smoked while painting, the drinking of two beers and the use of nasal drops.

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is not accidental (noodles – pol. kluski). Witkacy “claimed that he had seen his dead fiancée quite clearly” (J. Witkiewiczowa: *Wspomnienia o Stanisławie Ignacym Witkiewiczu*, [in:] *Spotkanie z Witkacym. Materiały sesji poświęconej twórczości Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza* [Jelenia Góra, March 2nd–5th, 1978], ed. J. Degler, Jelenia Góra 1979, p. 88–89). A protocol from the session with Kluski from the year 1925 mentioned by Tadeusz Kłak (*Witkiewicz na seansie spirytystycznym*, „Akcent” 1985, nr 2–3 (20–21), p. 83–89) after the book by Norbert Okołowicz.

The word "dilettante" is usually used in reference to an artist, or someone involved in science, but also one who is amateurish and lackadaisical. The combination of the words "a dilettante of life," which proves to be a considerable phraseological invention of the author, brings out a self-satirical undertone, unless – like a dandy – one decides to treat life as art. In the article *Demonism of Zakopane* Witkiewicz claims that: "[...] life is transformed into art and accidents are collected in order to create complexes that are abstractly beautiful in character."<sup>31</sup> "Life in itself" can also be interpreted in the context suggested in *Maciej Korbowa and Bellatrix* as a synonym of physical love.<sup>32</sup> "A dilettante of life in itself" is "standing over his grave" (even though on the visual level it is not presented) and demands from everybody permission to "die in peace." Therefore, the question remains, as to whether it is another coquettish attempt to challenge preconceptions, or is it the self-assuring confession of a dandy haunted by sickness?<sup>33</sup> The anticipations and forecasts of a forthcoming death are inscribed in the same poetics as presented by offering a portrait instead of a wreath on the grave or *The Last Cigarette* (1922). Witkacy also refers to the *topos* of an artist appreciated *postmortem*. One cannot ignore the element of megalomania in such an attitude.

Finally, let us recall the words of Marceli from *The Only Way Out*, the last painter of the Pure Form who spoke about the "fictional prolongation of the personal lifeline of the author:"<sup>34</sup> "Oh! – Something howled quietly inside him in grief over the fact that one cannot live his life at least fifty times exploring each time a different side of his diverse nature."<sup>35</sup> Therefore, not one self-portrait but a collection of images of a dandy's face might, in a sense, manage to realize the dream of which Marceli spoke.

The self-portraits of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz which I have chosen for the above discussion would, I submit, clearly prove the existence and operation of a self-discrediting strategy in Witkacy's life. More precisely, feminization or assumption of roles such as those of a megalomaniac, a snob or a dilettante gave rise to brilliant artistic realizations and are indeed not

<sup>31</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Demonizm Zakopanego*, [in:] idem: *Bez kompromisu*, op. cit., p. 500.

<sup>32</sup> Idem: *Maciej Korbowa i Bellatrix*, [in:] idem: *Dramaty I*, ed. J. Degler, Warszawa 1996, p. 116.

<sup>33</sup> Witkiewicz at the time of creating the portrait suffered from an acute inflammation of sinuses. See: J. Proszyk: *O przyjaźni Witkacego z Kazimierzem i Stanisławem Alberti*, a presentation given at the session: *Witkacy: bliski czy daleki*, organized in September 17th to 19th, 2009 by the Museum of the Middle Pomerania.

<sup>34</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Jedyne wyjście*, op. cit., p. 145.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p. 221–222.

a matter of marginal concern. Such inspirations, derived from dandyism, became an integral part of his life and oeuvre. Unusual distance towards himself together with a great deal of self-criticism is only one important element of his brilliant personality. Thanks to Witkacy, I should like to conclude that I hope it has been possible to illuminate here that laughter directed towards oneself is a fundamentally essential feature of human existence.

## Abstract

Many researchers of Witkacy's oeuvre alert us to the strong presence of 'dandyism' both in his literary work and in his biography. The classification of 'dandyism' is significant, however, for his entire work including his art. It should be recalled that 'dandyism' is not only seen as an exaggerated concern with appearance but also an attitude expressed in a certain individuality of style, eccentricity, nonchalance and skepticism. This paper analyzes the self-discrediting strategy in Witkacy's work, first described by Grzegorz Grochowski. It 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. The intention of the contribution is to explore the ways in which this self-discrediting strategy has been articulated in self-portraits.

I would like to thank The National Museum in Warsaw and Agra-Art Auction House in Warsaw for the permission to print.

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S. I. Witkiewicz: *Self-Portrait as a Woman*, October 11th, 1927  
pastel/paper, 63 x 48 cm  
personal property (sold at Agra-Art Auction House in 2006)



S. I. Witkiewicz: *Witkacy + Tymbcio*, January 1932, pastel/paper  
lost drawing, illustration from:  
A. Micińska: *Witkacy. Life and Works*, Warsaw 1991



S. I. Witkiewicz: *Self-portrait Dedicated to Janusz de Beaurain*, July 7th, 1930  
pastel/paper, 64.2 x 48.5 cm, property J. Koprowski, Warsaw, illustration from:  
*Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939). Katalog dzieł malarskich*, ed. I. Jakimowicz  
in cooperation with A. Żakiewicz, Warszawa 1990





S. I. Witkiewicz: *Mahatma Witkac*, May 30th, 1933  
 charcoal, pastel/paper, 63 x 47.5 cm, property K. Wojakowa, Zakopane  
 illustration from: A. Micińska: *Witkacy. Life and Works*, Warsaw 1991



S. I. Witkiewicz: *Auto-Witkacy*, June 1st, 1933, pastel/paper, 68.8 x 49.1 cm  
The National Museum in Warsaw