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Cinema, Insatiability and Impure Form: Witkacy on Film

Introduction: The Absence of Cinema in Witkacy's Work

Cinema in the work of Witkacy is notable principally by its absence. Whereas many of Witkacy's Western contemporaries were fascinated by the emergence of this increasingly dominant 20th Century medium, Witkacy seems to have more or less ignored it altogether despite his interest and participation in a wide range of modern aesthetic practices including painting, photography, and mass produced portraits and theatre not to mention cultural criticism and philosophy. Whereas many of the artists associated with Dada or Surrealism including Dali, Duchamp, Man Ray and Leger all tried their hand at cinematic works, and even figures from the avant-garde theatre such as Brecht and Artaud both had their 'cinematic episodes' even if these were subsequently rejected, nothing of the kind seems to be the case with Witkacy. Part of the explanation for this must lie in the relative underdevelopment of cinema in Poland prior to World War II; most of the local cinema produced was in the form of highly conventional romances, with an avant-garde cinema only developing towards the end of Witkacy's life, that is to say in the late 30's. This avant-garde cinema was far removed from Witkacy's own aes-

thetics, being comprised of both a purely constructivist artistic cinema (Krystyna Kobro or the Themerson's) or social realism (the START group) and there is no evidence that Witkacy was aware of or interested in these tendencies. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that Witkacy would not have been aware of earlier forms of artistic cinema such as German Expressionist films, Soviet Constructivism or at the very least the films of Charlie Chaplin which had such an effect on Surrealist artists and critical theorists like Walter Benjamin. Even Witkacy's contemporaries such as Witold Gombrowicz show in their work more traces of a productive encounter with cinema, for example, in the references to Chaplin in Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*.

One of the few places where there is a reference to cinema, if a negative one, is in Witkacy's manifesto, *New Forms in Painting and Misunderstandings Arising Therefrom* (1919). In the section that considers the decline of art in response to the already analysed onslaught of modernity and its destructive and equalising tendencies that Witkacy saw as fatal for European art and culture, the cinema is mentioned precisely when Witkacy is considering the decline of the role of the theatre in modernity, in a passage that is worth quoting at length:

For people nowadays, the forms of Art of the past are too placid, they do not excite their deadened nerves to the point of vibration. They need something that will rapidly and powerfully shock their blase nervous system and act as a stimulating shower after long hours of stupefying mechanical work [...] Today's theatre cannot satisfy the average spectator; only the dying breed of theatrical gourmets appreciate the revived delicacies, whereas Cabaret on the one hand and cinema on the other are taking away most of the audience from the theatre [...] Cinema can do absolutely everything that the human spirit might desire, and so if we can have such frantic action and striking images instead, isn't it well worth giving up useless chatter on the stage which nobody needs anymore anyhow; is it worth taking the trouble to produce something as infernally difficult as a truly theatrical play when confronted by such a threatening rival as the all-powerful cinema.¹

It is worth considering this evaluation of cinema as a 'threatening rival' to the theatre fully as it is no mere simple condemnation of mass culture in the name of high art. Considering that this piece was written in 1919 and in Poland, when the cinema was considered a highly degraded form of popular entertainment and yet to attain the global economic dominance and artistic respectability it would acquire over the course of the 1920's, it was rather

¹ S. I. Witkiewicz: *New Forms in Painting and Misunderstandings Arising Therefrom*, [in:] *The Witkiewicz Reader*, ed. and trans. D. Gerould, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1992, p. 115.

prescient for Witkacy to ascribe to cinema the power to 'do everything the human spirit might desire.' This would imply a view of cinema not based on its current achievements but on what it was capable of but yet to realise. This ascendancy is only ascribed in part to the wave of modernisation and mechanisation which Witkacy clearly saw the cinema as a symptom of. Equally to blame was the decadence of the theatre itself, whose retreat into psychological realism in the wake of Ibsen and others had more or less sounded its death-knell; for Witkacy, the power of theatre, as of other aesthetic practices lay in its proximity to the powers of ritual, to provoke the kind of metaphysical experience that Witkacy referred to in terms of Pure Form.

The question remains as to why Witkacy saw the cinema as a rival rather than an ally in the artistic creation of Pure Form. Apart from the relative impoverishment of cinematic means of expression at this time, for Witkacy it seems that cinema, as the industrial art form par excellence was far too contaminated with the forces of modernity and modernisation to contribute to the kind of artistic insurrection he saw as being the role of 'those artists who would be absolutely incapable of living without creating' among whom he numbered himself. It is interesting to note in this respect that when Witkacy came to write his manifesto, 'Pure Form in the Theatre' there is no direct consideration of cinema at all, while nevertheless many of the terms Witkacy employs to describe Pure Form are paradoxically highly cinematic. For example, Witkacy refers to the work of art as an autonomous construction made of plastic and sonic components, utterances and actions, rather than deriving from any principle of psychology, representation or realism. While this might not in fact account for the dominant tendencies of narrative cinema then or now, it is highly resonant with what the cinematic apparatus makes possible in the cutting out of blocs of space-time composed of aesthetically recombined fragments detached from any prior context; this is the abstraction intrinsic to cinema that is not dissimilar than the formal abstraction called for by Witkacy in relation to the theatre. Furthermore, Witkacy's elaboration of the means for producing experiences of Pure Form via the mechanisms of shock is even more resonant with contemporaneous accounts of cinema such as by Eisenstein or Artaud that saw cinema's power to shock the nervous system directly as essential to its functioning, an approach later taken up by Walter Benjamin in his *Work of Art* essay. Why then if Witkacy's description of Pure Form in the theatre is so close to the radical potentials of cinematic experience does he refrain from even mentioning cinema in this manifesto? This cannot be answered definitively but I suspect that it would have something to do with the association of cinema with both mo-

ernity and Insatiability, the concept that is both a pre-condition for the experience of Pure Form and its antithesis. For Witkacy, modernity is essentially a narcotic experience, filled with all kinds of obsessions and distractions that cover over its essential emptiness. This state of addictive insatiability applies as much to contemporary forms of philosophy such as pragmatism or materialism as popular entertainments like the cinema as well as the obsession with the occult and mysticism and literal narcotics themselves, the charms of which Witkacy was hardly immune from. These various 'petty mysteries' serve to foreclose any genuine metaphysical experience, while at the same time expressing the insatiable desire for this experience; one can only suppose that, for Witkacy, Cinema, in a similar manner to the way he viewed the modern novel was too contaminated with both reality and modernity to be capable of Pure Form, even if it was an exemplary expression of the modern experience of insatiability; like the modern novel, the cinema would then be a formless 'bag in which one could put anything' rather than a medium capable of expressing Pure Form; however, this has not stopped several Polish filmmakers from attempting to give Witkacy's aesthetics and life a cinematic form, and it is to these attempts I will turn in the second part of this essay.

Tadeusz Kantor's Cricot 2 Theatre and *The Dead Class*

If there was a key post-war successor to Witkacy in Polish theatre it was clearly Tadeusz Kantor. Not only did he combine an engagement with contemporary art and artistic theatre but he saw his theatre as so indebted to the legacy of Witkacy that he named it the Cricot 2, after the pre-war Cricot theatre that was one of the few to present any plays by Witkacy and which met with the approval of Witkacy himself as being not an experimental but a truly artistic theatre. It is therefore unsurprising that six of the early productions of the Cricot 2 theatre were Witkacy adaptations. *The Dead Class* can be seen as a crucial turning point in Kantor's Theatre between these Witkacian beginnings and fully expressing his own vision of theatrical performance which would take on many subsequent forms while always retaining a commitment to an avant-garde performative practice for which Witkacy remained a key inspiration. *The Dead Class* was in fact a kind of integration of the works of the key pre-war writers Witkacy, Schulz and Gombrowicz, drawing on specific works by all three yet combining them into a single space of a re-animated classroom directly evoking the lost reality of pre-

-WWII Poland. Kantor's innovation was to double the figures appearing in the play with mannequins, an idea perhaps adapted from Schulz yet given a new level of intensity and monstrosity in Kantor's unique combination of plastic and theatrical art. Also in *The Dead Class*, Kantor challenged the usual idea of the naturalness of theatrical performance by appearing onstage himself as a deranged conductor or puppet-master, manipulating and provoking his theatrical creations, again echoing the descriptions of Jacob's mad father in Schulz's short stories. Yet despite the onstage presence of Kantor, *The Dead Class* is very much a performance of absence, the resurrection of a range of pre-war figures who do not realise that they are dead and therefore keep performing the same repetitive gestures that characterised them in their former lives, now transformed into monstrous and perverse imitations of their former selves, heightened by their accompaniment by hideous prostheses. There is something highly cinematic in this conception of theatre; in distinction to Kantor's contemporary Grotowski, for whom theatre should aim towards its origins in ritual by dissolving the boundaries between the stage, the performers and the audience and instead bringing out the living human essence of both performers and spectators, for Kantor, theatre is by definition the demarcation of an uncrossable line between the two, the act of producing an alien, virtual space, the space of the dead and of memory that tears reality in two rather than unites. In distinction to Witkacy's prophetic catastrophism, however, in Kantor's theatre, the catastrophe, directly associated with WWII and the holocaust has always already taken place and it is the role of theatre to bear witness to and evoke this past catastrophe from which we are yet to emerge and for which everyday forgetfulness is no solution. In this, he not only demonstrated his affinity with Witkacy's theories of Pure Form that are also based on the production of artificial, virtual, other spaces but also with cinema; as Metz and other theorists of the cinematic apparatus have noted, what defines cinematic perception is precisely the presence of an absence, of figures that were once present before a lens but are now absent from the bloc of space-time being presented to an audience in the form of 'imaginary signifiers' of an unbridgeable absence. Whether this cinematic dimension of Kantor's work is what drew Wajda to adapt *The Dead Class* or not, few commentators on this adaptation, including Wajda himself, saw it as an artistic success as a film. Perhaps the direct involvement of Kantor in the production prevented Wajda from realising his own vision of the work as he had done with Wsypiański's *The Wedding*; nevertheless, the resulting made for TV film is at the very least an invaluable document of Kantor's work and thereby the theatrical legacy of Witkacy himself.

Filming the Witkacy Legend: *In a Country House* and *Farewell to Autumn*

In one of the most perceptive treatments of cinematic adaptations of Witkacy's work, Katarzyna Taras's essay *Witkacy's Film Counterfeits* from 2001 treats a number of film adaptations of Witkacy's work, leading up to Treliński's *Farewell to Autumn* (which had recently appeared at the time the article was written). For Taras, all of these films take place under the sign of a double legend exerted by Witkacy's life and work. For Taras this double legend can be summarised as the legend of Witkacian catastrophism and the legend of Witkacy's own life. However, as the account of Witkacy's suicide on the eve of WWII which begins Taras's essay implies, these two legends are intertwined and inseparable, since Witkacy's life was intimately bound up with his aesthetics and in a sense he took the catastrophe of European modernity on himself, particularly in this final desperate performative self-annihilation.

The effect of these legends on cinematic adaptations of his work is to render them as something more than mere transpositions of theatrical works or novels into a cinematic form, since they also inevitably take on bio-historical qualities to greater and lesser extents. This is particularly the case with *In a Country House* or *The Independence of Triangles* in the version directed by Andrzej Kotkowski in 1985; rather than simply being an adaptation of the plays mentioned in the title, this film refers to a large number of Witkacy's plays including *The Water Hen*, *Mother* and *The Cobblers* amongst others. The structure of the film is perhaps most informed by *The Water-Hen*, based as it is on the killing of the heroine who nevertheless keeps reappearing in a perfectly corporeal form. However, Kotkowski was not content to simply combine several of Witkacy's theatrical works but also drew inspiration for his visual works, particularly his photographic self-portraits such as his famous self-portrait in a mirror that multiplied his own image in a play of reflections. He was also very interested in Witkacy's commercial portraits for the S. I. Witkiewicz portrait painting firm, especially for the way they represented female figures: the appearance of Beata Tyszkiewicz in the film was directly modelled on some of these portraits from the 20's and 30's. The end result of all these elements of the film was a film that was as much about Witkacy himself as the presentation of his works and many elements of Witkacy's biography found their way into the film. More than this, the incorporation of many of the visual elements of Witkacy's work attempted to re-

construct not just his world but his way of perceiving it, a tendency that would be repeated in subsequent Witkacy-based films.

Mariusz Treliński's adaptation of *Farewell to Autumn* took place in the very different context of post-communism and was the work of a director no less idiosyncratic than Kotkowski. Like Kotkowski, Treliński has only directed a few films of which the most well known is the more recent *The Egoists* (2000) a damning indictment of life in post-communist Warsaw that is not without a certain Witkacian catastrophism, shock and cruelty. Treliński for the rest of his career has devoted himself to theatre and especially opera and his films also share an operatic sensibility. Treliński's film begins in a no less biographical manner with a description of Witkacy's suicide in 1939, accompanied by the photographic self portrait 'the last cigarette of the condemned man' from 1924 and then a photograph of Witkacy from 1937–1939. As well as these allusions to Witkacy's life, Treliński makes allusions to a range of cinematic genres, a strategy no doubt conditioned by the new popular tendencies in Polish cinema in which in contrast to the dominance of art cinema during communism, Polish versions of Hollywood genres had come to dominate local film production. We therefore see in Treliński's film elements of the gangster film, the thriller, the melodrama and popular comedy all of which Treliński is able to extract from the original novel; in other words Treliński's film attempts to cinematise Witkacy's novel through the use of popular genres, a process Witkacy would no doubt have been very wary of and yet which is a quite successful transposition of the novel into a cinematic mode of expression. A key feature of Witkacy's work, evident in Treliński's film is decadence, which is again expressed through cinematic allusions, this time to Visconti's *The Damned* and Bertolucci's *The Conformist*. For these reasons, Taras sees this film less as an adaptation than as a game with Witkacy, that is nevertheless the best cinematic realisation of his work, the one that 'gives the greatest voice to the catastrophism of the author of the theory of Pure Form.'

Insatiability and Impure Form: Grodecki's *Insatiability*

Witkacy's novel *Insatiability*, while not itself a work of Pure Form, nevertheless presents a political and historiographic vision of the desire for Pure Form, also evident in some of Witkacy's theoretical writings. However, even more than in *Farewell to Autumn*, Witkacy treated the form of the novel as a

shapeless bag in which everything from the most erotic or banal experiences to abstract metaphysical observations could be thrown together with no attention given to the perfection of form; this led Witold Gombrowicz to consider the novel, despite flashes of brilliance an abject and even deliberate aesthetic failure, that is an act of self-destruction. Nevertheless the formlessness of the novel, epitomised by its information sections that give neutral reports on events that the novel does not narrate, is in many ways well suited to its subject matter of the insatiability of modernity and the destruction of European traditions and cultural decadence; it expresses fully both Witkacy's struggle against this decadence and modernity and at the same time his succumbing to it, while on the political plane it is extraordinarily prophetic.

While on the one hand the novel clearly belongs to the genre of the Bildungsroman and is filled with vivid and erotic descriptions of Genezip's progress to maturity, treated in a highly ironic or rather catastrophic way, its incessant philosophical and factual interruptions, and frequent digressions render it even less adaptable cinematically than most of Witkacy's other works. In Grodecki's 2003 adaptation, it is therefore no less a case of playing with rather than adapting Witkacy, although in this case it is less through cinematic allusions than through the filter of decadent eroticism. Despite, or perhaps because of this the film seems to lack both a real sense of eroticism and fails to capture Witkacy's social and intellectual world. One of the problems with the film is that it is dominated by its performers, especially Cezary Pazura who plays three roles in the film and was also an executive producer of the film. This means the film becomes more a case of playing Witkacy than playing with Witkacy, a series of performance pieces in which Pazura delights in playing the more grotesque characters of the novel like the paedophile composer Putrycydes Tengler. It does have the virtue of no longer focusing so much on the Witkacy legend scenes but rather on the work itself. If it does this for the most part by amputating the more philosophical aspects of the novel there are at least some scenes in which its decadent atmosphere is rendered cinematically of which the following from the chapter entitled in English either 'Deflowrfucked' or 'Sexphyxiation' is perhaps one of the best examples.

Abstract

In this essay the author discusses Cinema in the work of Witkacy, particularly its absence. He refers to many of Witkacy's Western contemporaries as being fascinated by this increasingly dominant 20th Century medium, which Witkacy seems to have ignored despite his interest and participation in a wide range of modern aesthetic practices including painting, photography, mass produced portraits, and theatre. Part of the explanation for this, it is suggested, may lay in the relative underdevelopment of cinema in Poland prior to World War II; most of the local cinema produced was in the form of highly conventional romances, with an avant-garde cinema only developing towards the end of Witkacy's life. The author continues to present a very succinct account of how Witkacy's work has been transmuted into the medium of Film and Television.

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