

Between Shadow and Light

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All literary scholars, theater scholars and admirers of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz should read Ewa Szkudlarek's interesting new monograph entitled *Portrety cieni Witkacego* [Witkacy's shadow portraits]. It is a unique, original, and insightful book, presenting its readers with a new methodological approach in the humanities through its focus on the visual and metaphorical aspects of shadows. The monograph presents the reader with a new perspective on Witkacy's works. While plenty of other works devoted to Witkiewicz also discuss different aspects of the artist's works, Szkudlarek's monograph analyzes the artist's oeuvre across different media and addresses questions that have not been noticed by other scholars. The life and work of Witkacy have been analyzed in different perspectives, including in terms of personality (madness, obsession, despair, melancholy), but no one has noticed the "shadow line" before, both in the artist's philosophy and work.¹ The shadow connects and differentiates

¹ J. Degler, *Witkacego portret wielokrotny: szkice i materiały do biografii (1918-1939)* [Witkacy, multiple portrait: Sketches and materials for a biography] (1918-1939), Warszawa 2009. A. Żakiewicz, *Jednolity świat wyobraźni. O wątkach literackich w malarskiej twórczości Witkacego* [Unified world of imagination: Literary motifs in Witkacy's paintings] in: *Witkacy. Życie i twórczość* [Witkacy: Life and works] Conference proceedings commemorating the 55th anniversary of Witkacy's death (Muzeum Pomorza Środkowego, Słupsk 16-18 September 1994), ed. J. Degler, Wrocław 1996. L. Sokół, *Witkacy i Strinberg: dalecy i bliscy* [Witkacy and Strinberg: distant and close], Wrocław 1995 and other.

the works of Witkacy. The multi-faceted nature of the shadow, in the context of culture, psychology, psychoanalysis, and existentialism, unites Witkacy's entire oeuvre. Szkudlarek thus makes a major interpretative contribution. The monograph demonstrates that Szkudlarek knows how to identify and study cultural references to emotions and experiences. She is also able to analyze poetics and aesthetics. It is also worth emphasizing that Szkudlarek discusses the shadow as a means of expression, a "poetic idiom," in a broad context: it is a fundamental feature of Witkacy's represented world. The shadow, Szkudlarek argues, acts as a metaphor for the human condition, human vulnerability and mortality.² What is particularly innovative is that the scholar analyzes "shadow aesthetics," locating it in-between the aesthetics of light and the aesthetics of darkness. In fact, the monograph reconstructs shadows that exist or disappear because of the light emanating from Witkiewicz's literary images, paintings, and photographs.

Szkudlarek analyzes the shadow in literature (novel, drama), painting (portrait, landscape) and other art forms (theatre, photography and film). As she writes in the introduction to the monograph, the study sheds new light on the works of the outstanding 20th-century Polish artist. She also emphasizes that the cultural, artistic, metaphysical and existential dimension of the shadow is also important in Witkacy's work.³ Considering such a broadly defined research problem, the book is structured in a clear and logical way. It is divided into three parts – I. Shadow Images, II. Shadow Illusions, III. Shadow Projections – and each of these parts is further divided into chapters.⁴

In the first part, Szkudlarek discusses shadow in painting (portrait and landscape) and in photography. The researcher analyzes the "mimetic aesthetics" in Witkacy's works.⁵ The second part of the book is devoted to fictional characters and the role of the shadow in complementing the human condition in prose, plays and photographs. Witkacy's characters are "shadowed" and thus contribute to the mysterious, metaphorical dimension of Individual Existence. In the third part, Witkiewicz's works are discussed in the context of Carl Gustaw Jung's shadow archetype. This part demonstrates the self-making dimension of Witkacy's works in a biographical context. Szkudlarek discusses various aspects of Witkacy's works, which correspond to his personality traits and personal experiences of the "shadow line" (including his life in Lithuania).

Witkacy never commented on the shadow in his aesthetic and theoretical texts, yet shadow is present in the works of art he created. Szkudlarek points out that in his psychological theory of colors, Witkacy writes about the possibility of perceiving different colors. She also adds that "Witkacy visualizes shadows in his paintings, photographs and literary texts. Not only the form, but also the colors of the shadow are important for Witkacy. Portraits of women

² E. Szkudlarek, *Portrety cieni Witkacego* [Witkacy's shadow portraits], Poznań 2018, p.14.

³ *Ibidem* p. 22.

⁴ Part I. Shadow Images: I. Portrait, II. Photographic portrait, III. Landscape, IV. Photographic landscape; Part II. Shadow Illusions: V. Shadows of figures and characters, VI. Theater shadows, VII. Film shadows; part III. Shadow Projections: VIII. The shadow of personality, IX. Shadow Colors, Shadow Transformation. The individual parts and chapters refer to the logical structure of the entire argument.

⁵ Beata Popczyk-Szczęśna, review of *Portrety cieni Witkacego*, artPapier. <http://artpapier.com/index.php?page=artykul&wydanie=380&artykul=7550>. Date of access: March 30, 2021.

are very interesting in this respect, as they show the special bond between the artist and the model. The shadows in the portraits are painted with different colors. The portraits have a complex color scale: from the traditional halftones of black to glossy white (portrait of Maria Witkiewiczowa from 1918, portrait of Edwarda Szmuglarowska from 1930), yellow, red, purple, blue (portrait of Lena Iżycka from 1925, portrait of Małgorzata Wanda Żukotyńska from 1928, portrait of Helena Białynicka-Birula from 1929).⁶

W. Sztaba writes that: "Portraits are most often drawn in color, and this is emphasized by Witkacy. The portraits are made of dynamic color lines, arranged in colorful layers, one above and over the other. The glow of colors, visible in pastel artworks, is also there: this time these are mostly luminous lines, streaks of color, glowing wires."⁷

The analysis and visualization of the shadow in portraits painted as part of the so-called "S.I. Witkiewicz's Portrait Company" and photographic portraits are particularly interesting. Szkudlarek skillfully uses her knowledge of painting, art history, aesthetics, literature, drama, photography, and psychology. She pays attention to the "colors of the shadow," because for Witkacy not only the form but also the shadow matters. Witkacy expressed the model's soul by means of "dynamic lines." The artist divided his portraits into five types depending on their location on the scale – from naturalism to Pure Form. Szkudlarek refers to Witkiewicz's technique of painting portraits as "the psychology of the brush," because he tried to capture not only the physical resemblance but also, more importantly, psychological features. The artist's greatest talent was portraying both the body and the soul. In her analysis of Witkacy's portraits, both paintings and photographs, Szkudlarek pays attention to the characteristic features of the image and describes the unique relationship between the painter and the model. She emphasizes that "Witkacy's portraits are all carefully thought-out studies of the face, emphasizing the personality of the model. The artist and the model maintain eye contact, which contributes to the reflection of the shadow emanating from the eyes."⁸ Witkacy not only recreated models as if in a mirror reflection "noticing how a dense or a fine web of shadows surrounds the cheeks, the eyes and the hair of his models. He also energetically and decisively paints in thick lines, leaving empty spaces in-between, thanks to which the faces in the portraits or self-portraits look as if they were smeared with shadows."⁹ This play of light and shadow is characteristic for the artist – it is his unique means of expression. It is also an important formal feature in his novels and dramas.

Szkudlarek analyzes painted and photographic portraits, skillfully using her expert knowledge of photographic techniques (she discusses their history), art history, and psychology to analyze Witkacy's works. She also refers to the artist's theoretical knowledge to emphasize the important role that the shadow plays in Witkacy's philosophy.

⁶ E. Szkudlarek, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

⁷ W. Sztaba, *Gra ze sztuką. O twórczości Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza* [Playing with art: The works of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz], Kraków 1982, p.116.

⁸ E. Szkudlarek, *op.cit.*, p. 46.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

Particular attention should be paid to the brilliant interpretation of the photograph of Witkiewicz's fiancée, especially in the perspective of future tragic events. Szkudlarek sees in Jadwiga Janczewska's photographic portraits "some artistic intuition." Witkacy sees his fiancée as "the eternal bride in the land of shadows."¹⁰ The portraits of Witkacy's fiancée are not faithful representations. Szkudlarek argues that in photographic portraits Witkacy plays with various means of perception. Witkacy's artistic sensitivity, as well as the ability to play with light and shadow, reflect the dramatic nature of Janczewska as an individual and the relationship between her and Witkacy.

Witkacy took many photographs of Jadwiga Janczewska, but two of them are analyzed in more detail. Szkudlarek pays particular attention to two photographs from 1913, which show the bride in a hat with a veil. The first photograph is described by the scholar thusly: "She turns her gaze away from the camera, looking down, thoughtfully. Her wide-brimmed hat casts a distinct shadow over the patterned wall. She is captured, lifeless, in the moment as if she were beautiful Eurydice descending, quite unexpectedly, into Hades."¹¹ The second photograph of Janczewska in a hat with a veil "exposes the enlarged shadows of the eyelashes. (...) The eyelashes and lace embroidery as if intertwine..."¹² Szkudlarek offers comprehensive, inspiring and suggestive interpretations. She draws on a number of associations and provides various contexts, e.g., Staff's poem, *Shadow*, elements of Eros and Thanatos, Orpheus and Eurydice, or the drama *Orpheus* by Anna Świrszczyńska.

Szkudlarek's analysis of the artist's self-portraits is indeed brilliant. Szkudlarek writes: "the self-portraits are painted with restless, nervous strokes, which extend beyond the shape of the face. These lines sometimes protrude like spikes or a wire mesh. Witkacy thus thickens the darkness around himself, catching it in a net, as it were, showing that he is doomed to be wounded. He also reminds us that he is doomed to be harmed and that he is in a hopeless situation. The artist places himself in a hostile, dangerous and, to some extent, claustrophobic space."¹³

The discussion of the shadow in Witkacy's autobiography, his self-making practices and works is particularly interesting. Witkacy's life was shrouded in mystery and scandal, and he perpetuated this image. His life was an extension of the style of Young Poland modernists for whom shock became both entertainment and a distinguishing feature of artistic philosophy. Szkudlarek analyzes the shadow in Witkacy's life, referring to contemporary psychology and psychiatry. The shadow is as an expression of tension, metaphysical fear, which connects the external and the internal world. It is a visualization of the archetype of the unconscious in the human psyche.

In the chapter "Landscape," Szkudlarek emphasizes that Witkacy, like other avant-garde artists, used the shadow as a symbol, as a means of expression. She writes: "Witkacy's landscapes

¹⁰Ibidem, p. 61.

¹¹Ibidem, p. 62.

¹²Ibidem, p. 63.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 47.

are not a subject in themselves for me; they are the key to interpreting those works by the artist that, broadly speaking, explore the concept of space. (...) For Witkacy, a work of art is a kind of medium which can be read anew, depending on the adopted perspective.”¹⁴

Szkudlarek draws attention to the previously unnoticed aspects of Witkacy’s photographic works, drawing on the artist’s reflections on landscape, which led him to formulate “his own philosophy of the landscape.”¹⁵ Witkacy’s drawing style and writing style, especially his technique of description, are united by the landscape. It is especially visible in Witkacy’s novels: *622 upadki Bunga* [622 Falls of Bungo], *Pożegnanie jesieni* [Farewell to Autumn], *Niensycenie* [Insatiability], *Jedyne wyjście* [The Only Way]. The descriptions of landscape, Szkudlarek emphasizes, show the artist’s unique “landscape sensitivity.”¹⁶ Landscape and shadow together create a whole that functions in-between reality and metaphysics – the two interact with each other and work together.

Szkudlarek pays attention to the philosophical and aesthetic reflection visible in Witkacy’s landscapes. They engage in a dialogue with both the traditional concept of a work of art and innovative “aesthetics.”¹⁷ The scholar refers to Leonardo da Vinci’s theoretical reflections on the shadow and the artistic concepts of Impressionists and Symbolists. In the 20th century, European artists began to paint shadows differently. Szkudlarek also notices this change in Witkacy’s works: he represents internal and external shadows.

In the second part of the book, Szkudlarek discusses in detail the shadow as a trace. As always, she combines different theoretical perspectives (psychology, philosophy, aesthetics, literary studies, art history) in her analysis of the ontology of the shadow as a trace. The “trace” is one of the most important categories in anthropology. Szkudlarek interprets the concepts of “shadow” and “trace,” referring to Witkacy’s photographs in the snow (including a figure reflected in the water with his mother in the snow). The scholar refers to F. Soulages, who claims that “a photograph is a trace,”¹⁸ but also quotes Barbara Skarga, who observes that “the concept of the trace is related to space and time. The trace is always here, in a given place (...) The trace refers to the past, to what was, but is no longer, at least here and now. It is a sign of something from the past, something that happened, passed, but left its mark more or less clearly (...) serving as proof of the existence of a given culture.”¹⁹ The trace, Szkudlarek argues, has the nature of a shadow, insofar as it can be “permanent or fleeting, expressive or vague, with a clear form or shapeless.”²⁰ Traces, like shadows, are shaped by nature. Szkudlarek refers to Heidegger, Plato and Levinas, discussing the existential understanding of the shadow as a human being. The photograph as a “trace of a trace” resembles Plato’s “shadow of a shadow.” Szkudlarek does not adopt Plato’s theory uncritically, building her own interpretive discourse. She believes that Witkiewicz never attained the truth and “full knowledge” in

¹⁴Ibidem, p.78.

¹⁵Ibidem, p.80.

¹⁶Ibidem

¹⁷Ibidem, p. 81,

¹⁸Ibidem, p. 138.

¹⁹Ibidem

²⁰Ibidem, p. 139.

either photography or painting. At best, he only touched “the shadow of consciousness, the representation of which is not real; it is only an illusion.”²¹

The photographs reproduced in the monograph show various forms of Individual Existence.

Szkudlarek uses Witkiewicz’s concept of Individual Existence to reinterpret the shadow as a form that complements the representation of a human being.²² Witkacy’s artistic reincarnations in literature, drama, and photography are made complete by the shadow which adds an aura of mystery to them. The shadow plays the same role as the description of the protagonist, his body language, and face: it represents the spiritual dimension of Individual Existence. Szkudlarek analyzes Individual Existence in existential and metaphysical terms: it is filled with anxiety (as defined by Witkacy). The scholar also further reinterprets the concept of Individual Existence. The shadow is analyzed in the context of Carl Gustaw Jung’s philosophy, even though he does not deal with psychoanalysis but with the metaphor of the shadow as a form of cognition. As a concept and an artistic form, it is filled with metaphysical (as Witkiewicz would say) anxiety. Szkudlarek distinguishes between conceptual shadows and poetic-artistic shadows. She analyzes five key meanings of the shadow metaphor: they complement one another and play an important role in her interpretations. She looks for the sources of the shadow either in Witkacy’s works of art and critical essays or in contemporary psychology and psychotherapy. Both approaches complement and/or unite individual perspectives and analyses.

Szkudlarek also analyzes shadows and traces in Witkacy’s plays: *W małym dworku* [In a small country house], *Kurka Wodna* [The common moorhen], and *Pragmatyści* [The Pragmatists]. Playing with light and shadow lies at the heart of these theatrical performances. In Witkacy’s plays, the shadow plays the role of “the aestheticism of representative art.” Szkudlarek observes that “the gallery of characters in his plays enriched the theater with the metaphor of image and shadow.”²³ Witkacy zooms in on his protagonists, hopeless, lonely, and powerless, and “dresses” them with light to emphasize the meaning of life. Their shadow is the essence of human existence; it represents the individual. The interpretation of Mamalia from *Pragmatyści* and her dance is interesting and insightful. Szkudlarek writes: “Mamalia’s dance and the meanings of her name point to various forms of shadows. Regardless of her pose on stage (she can be a passive doll, a poor puppet or a cabaret dancer), her illuminated body is accompanied by a shadow.”²⁴

In *W małym dworku*, we see “a complex process of restoring what has been replaced by realism; matter and thus the spiritual dimension of the shadow are rediscovered.”²⁵ The characters in Witkacy’s dramas are “shadows of existence.” The shadow complements their personalities.

²¹Ibidem, p. 162.

²²In the late 1920s, Witkacy created the foundations of his own philosophical system based on ontology, which he called biological monadism. In 1935, he described his philosophy in the treatise *Twierdzenia implikowane w pojęciu Istnienia* [Theorems implied in the concept of Existence].

²³E. Szkudlarek, op.cit, p.167.

²⁴Ibidem, p.178.

²⁵Ibidem, p.182.

The third part of the monograph discusses shadow projections. In these chapters, Szkudlarek once again discusses the concept of life between light and darkness, i.e., physical and metaphysical existence. She refers to C.G. Jung's psychological concepts to analyze the archetype of the shadow. The shadow "is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort."²⁶ There are two worlds in Witkacy's works, a physical one and a metaphysical one, i.e., people live in between light, darkness and shadow. The shadow refers to one's consciousness, to the psyche. Szkudlarek analyzes an interesting example of Witkacy's self-portrait from 1938 "Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."²⁷ These portraits show the duality of human nature (the shadow surrounds one part of the face, while the background is black).

The last two chapters, "Shadow Colors and Shadow Transformation," are indeed fascinating. Color, blue to be exact, "creates a metaphysical atmosphere of suspension on the border between the earthly (the end of Individual Being) and the otherworldly (the infinity of the Individual Being)."²⁸ The interpretation of blue in Witkacy's works, especially against the background of changes in painting of the 19th and 20th centuries and the works of the artist's father, allowed the scholar to see more than others. Szkudlarek discusses "shades of blue, light blue, dark blue, bright and faded blue" in Witkacy's works, once again demonstrating her extensive knowledge and interpretive skills. The author combines visual analyses with the science of perception, referring to the works of Rudolf Arnheim, Newton and Goethe.

Color, light, and shadow characterize Witkiewicz's works, as seen in the symbols of "extinguishing the lamp," "night butterfly," "gray moth," "burning candle," and "beautiful fire." Through reminiscences, the author shows the human soul, recalling literary works, photographs, plays and films.

Discovering light and shadow through the perception of the world turns being a *flâneur* into an aesthetic experience. Witkacy's search for light is his search for balance in life, and shadow and darkness are what absorbed his world. "Everything that is contained in Witkacy's *flâneur* is reduced to a wandering eye seeking a source of light."²⁹

Szkudlarek's *Portrety cieni Witkacego* also demonstrates the author's sensitivity and skill as a writer. Different theoretical concepts interweave in the book. Thanks to the power of her poetic language, Szkudlarek creates suggestive images. However, the reader can expect more than just "the pleasure of the text." The monograph discusses various works by Witkacy and features illustrations that represent the visual history of the artist's vanishing shadow.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

²⁶C.G. Jung, *Man and his symbols*, London 1962, p. 55.

²⁷These portraits were painted according to the regulations of the Portrait Company after consuming cocaine, drinking beer or smoking a cigarette – type E.

²⁸E. Szkudlarek, *op.cit.*, p.259.

²⁹*Ibidem*, p. 285.

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KEYWORDS

shadows of characters

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SHADOW COLORS

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SHADOW PROJECTION

ABSTRACT:

Ewa Szkudlarek's book *Portrety cieni Witkacego* [Witkacy's shadow portraits] is an innovative look at the work of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. The author discusses the visual and the metaphorical aspects of shadows by analyzing the artist's oeuvre across different media. This has not been done so far. The shadow connects and differentiates the works of Witkacy. The multi-faceted nature of the shadow in the context of culture, psychology, psychoanalysis, and existentialism unites Witkacy's work. The shadow acts as a metaphor for the human condition, human vulnerability and mortality.

THEATER SHADOWS

portrait

SHADOW TRANSFORMATION

photographic portrait

film shadows

landscape

PHOTOGRAPHIC LANDSCAPE

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