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**Collapsing Weltanschauungs: On Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's  
Poetics of Progressive Disillusion**

**Some Comments on Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's Philosophical Standpoint,  
Centred around a Deconstructive Reading of "Oni" (1920)**

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## Abstract

This essay deals with Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's philosophical standpoint, the framework of his treatises and oeuvre. It analyzes the relationship between key terms and topics within the Witkiewiczian discourse: insanity – metaphysics – agency – depression – creativity, personal trauma – traumatic societal changes. Through a deconstructive reading of Witkiewicz's play *Oni* (1920), the aporias then are connected with the questions asked.

The deconstruction used is that of Jacques Derrida and terminology is also borrowed from Julia Kristeva and Michel Foucault. References are also made to biographies and analyses of Witkiewicz, as well as intertextual works. The main source of reference is however Witkiewicz's own oeuvre, including his treatises.

It concludes that Witkiewicz's poetics presents a series of collapsing weltanschauungs, due to society's neglect to answer the questions of metaphysics: every weltanschauung is unmasked as being unsatisfying, leading to disillusion and to its substitution by new, progressively pragmatized and automated weltanschauungs, which only bring humanity further away from answering the questions of metaphysics. Within Witkiewicz's poetics this amongst other things leads to a representation of multiple layers of weltanschauungs, in which for example what in a former weltanschauung is called a "metaphysical emotion" within its successor is called "insanity". Witkiewicz is on the one hand analyzed as aesthetically vanguard, and on the other as ideologically defensive and conservative.

The essay analyzes the connections between key concepts within the Witkiewiczian discourse in a broad, qualitative way, opening for further understanding of the works of the author and new perspectives for further research.

# **Collapsing Weltanschauungs: On Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's Poetics of Progressive Disillusion**

## **Some Comments on Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's Philosophical Standpoint, Centred around a Deconstructive Reading of "Oni" (1920)**

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### **I. Preface**

#### **Witkiewicz's Problem and the Problem with Writing about Witkiewicz**

This is an essay about Witkiewicz's philosophical standpoint, and will make use of a deconstruction of his play *Oni (They)* from 1920 as a departure point for further discussion. Before we look at the play I will mark out my own reading horizon and address some of the questions I will investigate further through my deconstruction and discussion.

#### **Feigning Insanity**

There are certain philosophical corners, or cul-de-sacs, that one can get oneself into, from which, by their philosophical standpoint, there doesn't seem to be any way out. In such a spot, one seems to have no way to go back, and no means to go further. One may however describe the spot one is at and elaborate its inescapability, reminisce about a lost past, curse at others for not understanding this disposition and lament one's loss of future and, in a way, one's present. This, I believe, in a way, is the spot Witkiewicz occupied for most of his life.

This spot does not seem far away from committing so called rational suicide, where one has through reasoning weighed and thought through the reasons for living and not living, and decided to opt for the latter. And although Witkiewicz did commit suicide, he had come to reach this cornered standpoint much earlier and denied himself suicide throughout his artistically most productive years. He had then been artistically silent for half a decade and mainly preoccupied with philosophy when he killed himself and left this world in 1939, the catalyst being the Soviet invasion of Poland. Or did Witkiewicz leave this world earlier?

Leaving this world may be thought of in many ways. It may for example be thought of as death, as transcendence, as madness. It may, through inversion, be thought of as the world leaving you, the world continuing to go about its business, while you seem to be completely left out of it, as if in a parallel bubble lost in time. What this inversion distinguishes is one's agency: was there a choice to step out of the world or did the world step

away from you? Rational suicide or planned and achieved transcendence would be cases of choosing to step out of this world, whereas madness (as in unwillingly losing touch, conception and/or understanding of the world) would be a case of stepping out of the world not through choice, but through inability to stay in it. Now, the crux with Witkiewicz's case is that although the world is lost to him he is still in it, although he believes communication has become impossible he still communicates and in what he thinks of as a maddening world of progressive automatization he chooses to step out of this world by taking the role of a madman. In other words, he turns the role of agency in stepping out of the world through madness upside down by *choosing* to do so: because he is of the opinion that the world has left him, is unable to reconcile with it and still chooses not to kill himself, he chooses madness as his voice, the only voice he deems able to carry his words and say what the world (which *he* thinks is mad) thinks is mad.

Witkiewicz's third novel *Nienasylenie (Insatiability)* has an epigraph from one of his favourite writers, Tadeusz Miciński (to whom the novel also is dedicated), from the poem *Samobójca (The Suicide)*. The line goes "When choosing my destiny I chose insanity"<sup>1</sup>. Here this turning upside down of agency in turning mad is clear. Within this line, the same thing is done with the role of agency in destiny. Destiny, usually understood as something predetermined, excludes choice. Thus, there is an oxymoronic choosing of destiny (which excludes choice), and moreover, the oxymoronic choosing of insanity (which also excludes choice). This is perhaps no place to explicate Miciński's poem, but let us note that the line adopted for epigraph together with the title of the poem succinctly bring us back to the ponderings of the paragraph above: the suicide oxymoronically choosing insanity as his destiny. What does this mean? Is choosing the not choosable (insanity as one's destiny) perhaps not compatible with life? Is choosing this, in other words, suicide? Is suicide what makes one able to choose insanity? What is to be gained from killing oneself to be able to choose the otherwise not choosable, insanity as destiny?

In a strict sense, of course, this line of thought does not hold. Witkiewicz did not actually commit suicide at the time we're thinking of and he did not actually go mad, but rather these seem to be positions of sorts taken and held because they had for him certain advantages. In other words, one should in Witkiewicz's case perhaps talk about a metaphorical or symbolic suicide and a feigned insanity as a means of transcendence. Now,

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Louis Iribarne's translation. Witkiewicz, *Insatiability* (London, 1985), p. 3. "Ja, wybierając los mój, wybrałem szaleństwo", Witkiewicz, *Nienasylenie* (Warsaw, 1982), p. 7. The original and whole poem may be found in Miciński's collected poetry: Miciński, *Poezje* (Kraków, 1980), p. 106.

what makes somebody adopt this position, what is gained through it and what are its consequences?

### **The Trauma of Society Conquering Metaphysics and Culture**

Before we can answer the above question I believe we need to look a little bit at the problems and questions Witkiewicz was dealing with in his work and in his life. A number of themes usually come to mind when discussing Witkiewicz's work: catastrophism and the impending end of the world; metaphysical anxiety and insatiability; demonic women and progressive perversion of sex; the mechanization/automatization/democratization of society and man and the fear thereof; suicides, doppelgangers and corpses coming to life; madness; the role, meaning and theory of art; high culture and society turned fruit- and meaningless and the impossibility and meaninglessness of replacing it; philosophy, religion, art turned meaningless; language turned meaningless. One can perhaps say that there is a lot of desperation and criticism at something being lost or about to be lost and a display and showcasing of the progressively deranged and meaningless forms the substitutes of the lost things and world take. But what has been lost and what is in grotesque form taking its place? Here I believe a slight contextualization may come in handy.

Daniel Gerould writes of Witkiewicz: "Both his plays and his novels show a late nineteenth-century world rushing abruptly into the late twentieth century"<sup>2</sup> and Jan Kott writes (in the foreword to the English translation of the play which is the subject of this essay) "Witkacy as a man, writer and artist seemed [...] like a dazzling relic from the beginning of the twentieth century who had strayed into contemporary times" but adds "[...] he was also [...] one of the most original precursors of what might be called the intellectual and artistic climate of the sixties [...]"<sup>3</sup>. One can say that Witkiewicz was not in tune or agreement with what was going on around him.

The central concept in Witkiewicz's aesthetical and ontological philosophy is what he calls 'the metaphysical feeling of the strangeness of existence'. In his first aesthetical treatise (*Nowe formy w malarstwie*, "New Forms in Painting", 1919), he says that this feeling emanates from our singularity as existences within a plurality of such and corresponds to such questions as "Why am I specifically that which I am, and not something else? in this place in infinite space and at this moment in infinite time? I could just as well not exist at all; why is there really anything? there could instead be Absolute Void, unimaginable even in the form of

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<sup>2</sup> Gerould, *Witkiewicz as an Imaginative Writer* (Washington, 1981), p. 340

<sup>3</sup> Witkiewicz, *The Mother & Other Unsavory Plays* (New York, 1993), p. 9

empty space, since space is only one of the sides of the duality of Existence, why not Void? how is it possible that I didn't exist at all before my beginning?"<sup>4</sup> [author's translation]. This duality of existence, the singularity and the plurality, is central to Witkiewicz and while he maintains that the sciences may work on understanding that which is common within the plurality of existences, he is adamant about them not being able to accord for 'the metaphysical feeling of the strangeness of existence' –for that there is philosophy, religion and art, which, however, have lost or are about to lose their ability to do so through subordination to social progress.

The treatise goes on to explain how this situation has come about. He recognizes social progress, "Subordination of the single individual to the interests of the whole – this is the most general formulation of the process that we call social progress"<sup>5</sup>, as a "necessity [...] [, and] the absolute impossibility of going back to the times when millions of weak were flagrantly oppressed by a handful of the strong" while stressing that "we nevertheless cannot close our eyes to what we will lose through socialization"<sup>6</sup>. He identifies the problem of man's building an equal society at the cost of freedom to have metaphysical anxiety, and thus any need to try and answer the questions of metaphysics, and, in effect, man is little by little degraded into machine. Man's search for truth, which at first was too heavy a burden, has been replaced with pragmatism and social utilitarianism. In the process, the search for truth was lost: "The loneliness of the individual in the infinity of Existence became unbearable for man in the as yet incompletely perfected conditions of societal life, and therefore he [...] create[d] a new Fetish in place of the great Mystery –the Fetish of society. [...] When the problem is posed that way, the only solution is to forbid people to search for the truth, as though that were a kind of fruitless mania [...]"<sup>7</sup>.

So, one may ask, without metaphysical anxiety, isn't man happy, free to enjoy the higher standards afforded by the progress of society? In Witkiewicz's view, I gather, he may just as well *be* "happy", but not in a true, metaphysical sense, since he is closing the door to true emotions. While he still has some memories of true metaphysical feelings, however, degraded substitutes for religion, philosophy and art will appear, until they won't be needed anymore. Then man no longer will be human, but a "happy", mechanized zombie-robot, created by man himself in the process of social progression, which to him is synonymous with the suicide of true humanity. "The proof that the great mystery has stopped existing for us

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<sup>4</sup> Witkiewicz, *Nowe formy w malarstwie; Szkice estetyczne; Teatr* (Warszawa, 1974), p. 7

<sup>5</sup> Gerould (editor), *The Witkiewicz Reader* (London, 1993), p. 108

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113

[...] lies in the search for half-mysteries, which, it is hoped, will provide life with some new magic [...] [T]hey are tiny symptoms of an anxiety that something has disappeared which needs to be restored *deliberately*, because without it, for some people, the grayness of tomorrow [...] is simply too monstrous.”<sup>8</sup> Then “true artists [...] will be kept in special institutions of the incurably sick [...] [and m]useums will be opened for the infrequent visitor”<sup>9</sup>.

I think it is uncontroversial to say that the time after World War I was a time of glory and bloom for scientism and logical empiricism, whereas metaphysics was marginalized. Likewise, democracy and communism were spreading, the old order was in a crisis and something new was taking its place. Witkiewicz seems to agree with man’s alienation in modern society as argued by Marx and Engels, but disagree with the conclusions drawn thereof. He doesn’t bring forth a full-fledged political alternative of his own, but criticizes the development around him. I think the stress on alienation in modern society, in some ways similar to existentialist philosophy and culture of the 1960’s, is what Gerould is pointing out.

In short, I think this, the progressive death of metaphysics and culture as a parallel and direct effect of the social progress of his time via its mechanization of man, is the societal, philosophical and cultural trauma Witkiewicz was experiencing and I believe this in many ways corresponds to what Witkiewicz perceives as being about to be lost and what in progressively grotesque form is being substituted. This I believe, as the word trauma suggests, was not only an intellectual understanding of matters, but also an emotive one. Let us, however, for the time being, call this Witkiewicz’s philosophical standpoint, the core of which I would like to call *the Witkiewiczian reminder*: Everything said and done from this point on will be a substitute for the void caused by neglecting the questions of metaphysics, until man is completely automatized. That said, I think, to understand matters more fully, we need to look at what I think of as Witkiewicz’s other, personal trauma.

### **The Personal Trauma**

Every biographical text on Witkiewicz will sound hyperbolic, but he does seem to have been of an extraordinarily intense personality. He lived from the age of five in Zakopane and was schooled privately by his father, a famous architect, artist, art critic and theoretician, and other members of the contemporary intelligentsia and cultural elite. His childhood friends included the pianist and composer Karol Szymanowski and the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 113-114

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 116

He is often described as a wunderkind fascinated with everything and insatiable for knowledge. Witkiewicz throughout his life also bore the yoke of an inferiority complex towards his father.<sup>10</sup>

He wrote his first plays at the age of eight, held his first art exhibition and wrote his first philosophical essay at the age of 17. In the '00's and the years before the First World War Witkiewicz is often described as living the life of a romantic fin-de-siècle artist-genius-dandy, painting, writing and having romantic affairs with bluestockings and actresses. Then, this small-scale Dionysian lifestyle and weltanschauung abruptly came to an end.

In 1914, Witkiewicz's fiancée Jadwiga Janczewska committed suicide. The suicide was probably connected with an affair she had had with Szymanowski<sup>11</sup> and was made out as a work of art, making use of modernist symbols to link Thanatos and Eros<sup>12</sup>. This flung Witkiewicz into suicidal depression. One week after Janczewska's suicide, he writes a letter to his friend Malinowski, describing his depression and suicidal condition: "[...] I don't see anything [...] but the frightful emptiness of life after the death of everything important that makes life worth living."<sup>13</sup> This is, in my opinion, the beginning of Witkiewicz's personal trauma, the disillusion of which was to be deepened and broadened in scope, but also dulled, over the coming years. The sad and dejected sentiment of the letter does however seem to have lasted throughout his life.

The sentiment and its formulation are also, to my eyes, conspicuously similar to his philosophical view of the world: a world where all "metaphysical" emotions are being substituted with grotesque parodies, where real life is being substituted by dead automation. In another letter to Malinowski he writes: "I can't sleep at night, and during the day [...] I try to work, which seems to be a hideous comedy and fills me with terrible disgust for life and for the remainder of this frightful existence which lacks all sense of purpose."<sup>14</sup> What is added in this sentence is work, and in Witkiewicz's case, that is, of course, artistic work. However hideous work may seem to him, it appears to be what keeps him going and to be his only solace from life, which his alienation in and disgust toward now seem absolute.

This, I think, is the meaning of Witkiewicz's metaphoric-symbolic suicide. On the verge of suicide, when he perceives no more life in life, he decides to go on living dead in order to carry out his ordeal, finish his artistic and philosophical work. From this point on,

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<sup>10</sup> His pseudonym, Witkacy, is an elision of Ignacy and Witkiewicz, and he employed it to distinguish himself from his namesake and father, Stanisław Witkiewicz.

<sup>11</sup> Markowski, *Polska literatura nowoczesna* (Kraków, 2007), p. 278

<sup>12</sup> Witkiewicz, *Seven Plays* (New York, 2004), p. XV

<sup>13</sup> Gerould (editor), *The Witkiewicz Reader* (London, 1993), p. 81

<sup>14</sup> Gerould (editor), *The Witkiewicz Reader* (London, 1993), p. 81

Witkiewicz's life is under the bile, work is done in order not to and whilst not pulling the trigger. This is also the time when Witkiewicz starts his philosophical work. I do not wish to suggest that Witkiewicz's whole philosophy is a projection of his personal trauma onto the world, but rather that there is a mutual projection of the two onto one another and that they thus are meddled and inseparable, so that when talking about one, the other must be taken into account.

In June 1914, Malinowski decides to try and blow life into his childhood friend and arranges so that Witkiewicz can come along as photographer and draughtsman on an anthropological expedition to Oceania. They visit among other places India, Ceylon, Papua and Australia. Jan Kott suggests that he might have seen Balinese theatre on his travels, and, as a foreigner not knowing the language, understood it as formal and ritual, influencing him in the creation of his theatre of pure form.<sup>15</sup>

The travels do not seem to have snapped Witkiewicz out of his condition, however, and he returns to Europe to defy death with the outbreak of World War I later the same year, enrolling as a Tsarist Russian officer. During his time as officer, he is introduced to the decadent lifestyle of the Russian aristocracy in its death throes, whilst faring war. At this time he is also introduced to orgies and drugs. The extreme contrast of the two seems to have dulled his depressive condition, however not changed his view on things in its essence. He could lead a life similar to the one he led before the war when not in combat, but he also sees this life literally being fought down and crushed by the Russian revolution. He is wounded and recovers and is awarded a medal for his bravery in action. After the revolution, Witkiewicz returns to Poland after what must have been eight very dangerous months for a former Tsarist officer. Soon after his return he starts publishing plays and aesthetical treatises, the first being *Nowe formy w malarstwie*, which I discuss above and which he had been working on during his time as officer. The treatise sums up his views on pure form as a transcendental aesthetics, giving Witkiewicz a way to practice his 'metaphysical feeling of the strangeness of existence' in the dead world around him and allowing him a method to communicate his philosophical and aesthetical views to the recipients. In other words, in a dead world and in a dead life, for Witkiewicz pure form becomes a resistance movement of sorts, not with actual hope of bringing him back to life, but at least allowing him to go on living dead.

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<sup>15</sup> Witkiewicz, *The Mother & Other Unsavory Plays* (New York, 1993), p. 17

## **Two Traumas: Consequences to Be Drawn and Questions to Be Asked**

So, using the language we've employed, we find Witkiewicz as a dead man doomed to live on in a life-after-life, in a world-after-the-world, making art when there is no more art, writing philosophy when there exists no more need to answer the questions of that discipline. There is a lot of textual evidence suggesting that Witkiewicz actually did perceive things in this manner. One of the questions that have come up is whether Witkiewicz chose himself to reach this position or if he landed there without agentive choice. This has a number of follow-up questions: Was Witkiewicz actually insane? Did Witkiewicz feign insanity? Was Witkiewicz an insane man feigning insanity? Did Witkiewicz's philosophical views on the world create and/or strengthen his personal trauma? Or inversely, is Witkiewicz's philosophical view on matters a gigantic projection of his personal trauma, of his guilt-ridden feelings towards his fiancée's suicide and his own inferiority complex towards his father, using all of philosophy, religion, the arts and society as a projection screen? So far, we are caught up in circles as to these questions, understanding every question through the other, unable to separate them. My essay will neither be able to nor try to disentangle these threads. I will however, knowing the difficulty of disentangling philosophical standpoint from personal trauma, take this doubly bound hermeneutical circle as a starting point and follow the two threads simultaneously and eventually, in the end, compare the two. If I have any success at all, I most probably still will not be able to give either one any stronger reliability or character of truthfulness or predominance, but I will have followed both threads, allowing the, as I see it, two reasonable and plausible paths to tell us what they will. Before the analysis of *Oni* proper, I would, however, like to raise a few more thoughts.

## **Pure Form as a Resistance Movement**

Witkiewicz presented in a number of aesthetical treatises, essays and articles the concept of 'pure form'. His major aesthetical treatises lay out the concept first in painting in *Nowe formy w malarstwie* ("New Forms in Painting", 1919) and then in the theatre in *Teatr* ("Theatre"). The concept is succinctly summarized in the essay *O czystej formie* ("On Pure Form"), where it is also extended to music and poetry. Witkiewicz never considered the novel a work of art.

In all shortness, 'pure form' derives from a number of thoughts: A work of art is different from other things because it has a sense of wholeness and oneness within the multiplicity of beings from which it in no other way is fundamentally different; this sense of wholeness and oneness derives from form. Form is the ordering of content, without which form cannot exist. Pure form is to acknowledge this and to focus on the form, to subordinate

content to form and to put stress on the “artworkness” of the artwork. However, as Witkiewicz points out, the point is “not programmatic nonsense”, it is a means of communicating individuality.

Witkiewicz’s ontology mirrors his views on art. Individuals consist of parts and are not discretely separated from the rest of the world. What makes an individual an individual is, just as with a work of art, that the individual retains a sense of oneness and wholeness within the seamlessness of being and beings, what Witkiewicz calls the individuality within the multiplicity of being. Focusing on the oneness and wholeness (form) of the artwork, the artist has a chance of communicating the oneness and wholeness (form) of his own being, in other words what makes that individual stand out. What stands out in the individual is his metaphysical feelings, what Witkiewicz calls ‘the metaphysical feelings of the strangeness of existence’.

So far, we have an aesthetical system designed to translate the form of the individual into the form of an artwork. However, considering Witkiewicz’s views on modern society (which I have laid out above), ‘pure form’ can be safely deduced to have an agenda. Witkiewicz considers the main problem in contemporary society to be the pragmatism that derives from the wish for ever-better material well-being at the expense of metaphysical feelings and individuality. ‘Pure form’ goes in this way completely against the grain, being focused fully on individuality, uniqueness and polemizes with pragmatism already by using the word “metaphysical”. On top of that, Witkiewicz announces that to be able to communicate individual metaphysical feelings in a society designed to through pragmatism conceal and subvert these unpractical feelings, the artwork need take on a progressively deranged form (or “artistic perversion”<sup>16</sup>). In his own words: “Creative artists cannot communicate their experiences in the calm, straightforward forms of old, just as the viewers or listeners of today by such forms cannot be affected; naturally, I have in mind those who actually have an interest in experiencing artistic emotions, and not those who are looking for a heightened, and for that matter not heightened, reality.” [author’s translation].<sup>17</sup>

It seems also there is a cathartic element in Witkiewicz’s poetics of ‘pure form’: that the viewer/reader (in the contemporary era of pragmatism) be reminded of there being something outside of pragmatism, in all shortness – that he be reminded of his metaphysical feelings. In this sense Witkiewicz’s poetics is a resistance movement, a terrorism for metaphysics. The aim of this terrorism is to unmask pragmatism, to show that it is a veil, that

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<sup>16</sup> Witkiewicz, *O CZYSTEJ FORMIE i inne pisma o sztuce* (Warszawa, 2003), p. 61

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

something else exists and that that other is important and should not be forgotten about. I think this is evident throughout Witkiewicz's project, and very clearly in the play which is the subject of this essay.

## II. Deconstruction of *Oni*

### Methodology

Deconstruction is a theoretical framework for literary analysis worked out by Jacques Derrida. The concept is succinctly summarized in his *Letter to a Japanese Friend*<sup>18</sup>. An example of the methodology in usage is Jacques Derrida's own classic deconstruction of Plato's *Phaedrus*, called *Plato's Pharmacy*<sup>19</sup>.

In all shortness, the text is deconstructed into oppositions. Oppositions are seen as being under erasure, as being able to be deconstructed further. This leads to deeper layers of oppositions. At the bottom of the oppositions is an opposition which is not opposed to anything else within the text, a place which cannot be deconstructed further. In deconstruction theory, this is the opposition from which the rest of the oppositions disseminate. Such a place is called a 'dissemination', a 'pharmakon' or an 'aporia'. I have chosen to use the last term.

In my analysis, I have adopted two more concepts, from early and late psychoanalytic literary theory. One is Sigmund Freud's definition of the 'uncanny' (as something which is similar to a belief surmounted yet reminding us of that very belief, making it uncanny)<sup>20</sup> and Julia Kristeva's term 'abjection' (something that can neither communicate nor be communicated, being neither subject nor object)<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Derrida, J. *Derrida and Différance* (Evanston, 1988), pp. 1-5. "Letter to a Japanese Friend" is a letter Derrida wrote to his Japanese translator, which perhaps most succinctly describes the methodology.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, J. *Dissemination* (Chicago, 1981), pp. 61-171.

<sup>20</sup> Freud, S. From The "Uncanny". in: Leitch a. o. (Ed.). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York, 2010), pp. 824-841. The most precise definition Freud gives: "an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (ibid., pp. 838-839). We are here concerned with uncanniness of the latter sort.

<sup>21</sup> Kristeva, J. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Chichester, 1982), pp. 1-31. The first chapter, *Approaching Abjection*, elucidates the term.

### **A Short Contextualization of *Oni* and a Note on Intertextual References**

According to *Pamiętnik teatralny* Witkiewicz finished *Oni* in May 1920.<sup>22</sup> That is two years after his return from Russia and two years after Poland had gained independence. For Witkiewicz, these years had been very productive. He had written nearly ten plays (not all of them published yet), published many articles and had a number of exhibitions.<sup>23</sup>

In October 1919 his treatise on pure form in painting *Nowe formy w malarstwie* was published. In early 1920 his treatise on pure form in the theatre was published in the literary review *Skamander*. The theories on pure form are referred to in the play (in painting and in theatre, respectively), therefore this may be of interest.

Other plays referred to in *Oni* are William Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, Tadeusz Miciński's *W mrokach złotego pałacu czyli Bazylissa Teofanu. Tragedia z dziejów Bizancjum X. Wieku* ("In the Murk of the Golden Palace or Bazilissa Teofanu. A Byzantine Tragedy of the Xth Century", 1909) and two plays called *Niepodległość trójkątów* ("The Independency of Triangles") and *Metafizyka dwugłowego cielęcia* ("Metaphysics of a Two-Headed Calf"), titles Witkiewicz later would use for actual and independent plays. Witkiewicz had most probably begun working on *Niepodległość trójkątów* already, but according to *Pamiętnik teatralny* he finished it in February the following year.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Oni* –Synopsis**

The play is unconventionally parted into "two and a half" acts. It starts with a "half-act", which actually is longer than any of the two subsequent "full acts". The whole play takes place in the art-collector and connoisseur Bałandaszek's drawing-room in his country-house, close to the capital.

### **Half-act**

Bałandaszek and his girlfriend, the beautiful actress Spika, are alone, bickering. Spika is seemingly about to practice her part for the performance of the play *Niepodległość trójkątów* the following day; Bałandaszek is mainly concerned with the soothing feeling of spiritual calm his art-collection provides him with. The principles of their bickering could be that of any couple (communication problems, not striving towards the same goals), but their wording is specific to them and sometimes an abstraction of that of other couples': art, theatre,

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<sup>22</sup> *Pamiętnik teatralny*: Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz 1885-1939 (1985). No 1-4 (133-136), p. 65

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66

collecting, automation, authenticity of feeling, sexual ability, split personality, what men and women are like and a craving for acknowledgement of the other part's love. A theme that comes up is that of whether there does or doesn't exist a secret government for the combating of art, *they*, of which rumours are spreading. First they are interrupted by Bałandaszek's cook, Marianna, and then later by an intruder, Seraskier Banga Tefuan, who says he is "an enemy of the arts and chairman of an association for combating art in all its aspects"<sup>25</sup>. He says he also has connections to the government and Bałandaszek assumes he is part of the rumoured secret government, while calling him "a delusion"<sup>26</sup>. Spika believes he is her husband Richard, whom she hasn't seen for years but hasn't divorced. Bałandaszek throws the intruder out.

### Act I

It is the following day. Spika is practising her part when Bałandaszek wakes up and they continue their bickering postcoitally.

Soon, however, Tefuan bursts in again, this time together with the rest of *them*: colonel Abłoputo, the matron and wife of the automationist party's leader Protruda Ballafresco, the president's wife Halucyna Bleichertowa, three aristocratic secretaries (count Maciej Chraposkrzecki, baron Ruprecht Baehrenklotz and marquis Fibroma Da Mijoma), the financier Salomon Prangier, his wife Rosika, lieutenant Kretowiczka and two footmen. Tefuan announces that they have come to "appraise [...] [the] gallery [...] and condemn it all to be destroyed."<sup>27</sup>

Bałandaszek is first threatened at gunpoint by the footmen. Tefuan explains the automationist religion and why art necessarily has to be destroyed, finishing with the words "That's the theory. Now for the practice!"<sup>28</sup>. Everybody except Spika and Rosika walk offstage into the gallery to destroy the artworks.

Spika and Rosika have a jealous conversation over Bałandaszek. Rosika says she wants him and that she can get him. Spika insists that she loves him. Rosika tells Spika that Tefuan is the one who writes all the pure nonsense plays Spika acts in. Tefuan returns to the onstage drawing-room and Spika immediately throws herself at him, escaping Rosika.

Tefuan tells Spika about the agonies Bałandaszek is going through. Then he confesses that he actually is her husband, count Tremendosa, and that he created the theory of

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<sup>25</sup> Witkiewicz, *The Mother & Other Unsavory Plays* (New York, 1993), p. 128

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136

automation to keep himself from loving her –since he can't have her, he's going to destroy her by destroying the theatre. This makes her want Bałandaszek all the more.

All those who left enter, except two of the secretaries and Bałandaszek. Abłoputo officially announces that the destruction of all modern art has commenced, that artistic creation from now on will be punished with a death penalty, that the play Spika will be performing will be a “neo-farce *dell'arte*” whose title will be announced after the play and that they tonight will have a ball “[a]nd we'll dance [...], no longer weighted down by all that is shameful, depressing, and, so to speak, indigestible in modern art.”<sup>29</sup>

The two secretaries enter after Bałandaszek who storms in, devastated because *they've* destroyed his art collection. All of *them* leave to get prepared for the ball, leaving Bałandaszek and Spika. She wants to talk with him about all the strange and terrible things she's heard and been through. Bałandaszek is devastated and wants to be left alone. She leaves for the theatre, warning him he'll regret having pushed her away and that he'll get pangs of conscience later on.

## Act II

Later the same evening, music is playing and people are dancing in the semi-offstage ballroom. In the drawing-room, Bałandaszek is running around anxious about Spika who hasn't returned yet. Abłoputo and Marianna try to calm Bałandaszek, saying she surely will come back. Abłoputo notices there's a Picasso still hanging on the wall and smashes it, adding to Bałandaszek's panic-stricken discomfort. Bałandaszek says he has a craving for a dark woman and Marianna leaves to bring him Rosika. Tefuan tries to calm Bałandaszek, saying there's nothing wrong in following one's urges and that he knows what he's going through, because he once was a collector himself. Rosika enters and the two are left to themselves. They speak about sexual affairs and leave, excited, for the gallery.

In come Tefuan, Abłoputo, Halucyna and Protruda. They speak about the future of their movement. Protruda wants real, not secret, power. Halucyna says the women can't wait, contrary to men who can live on posthumous fame. Abłoputo wants a swift revolution, a *pronunciamento*. Tefuan says not to hurry, that the important thing is to do the deed well, by destroying art.

Suddenly, the maid Ficia runs in, announcing that Spika has been brought home dead. Bałandaszek bursts in upon hearing the theatre-director Gamracy Vigor's voice. Vigor

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 142-143

enters, proclaiming that a tragedy has occurred, that Spika has been murdered during the performance of the superfarce *dell'arte*, “[...]in connection with certain intrigues which affect you all most intimately. The finance minister’s wife [i.e. Rosika] isn’t entirely guiltless in all this[...]”<sup>30</sup>. He also lets the others know that the title announced after the play’s performance was *Metafizyka dwugłowego cielecia* and that the audience thinks the murder wasn’t real and part of the play.

This irritates Tefuan because he wanted Spika to suffer a little longer and he gets anxious that the audience would find out and their revolution would “collapse if the wretched mob find out that there are already corpses”<sup>31</sup>. Abłoputo gets the idea to blame Bałandaszek for the murder. Spika’s corpse, “incredibly beautiful”<sup>32</sup>, is brought onstage. Bałandaszek confesses to the murder, although at first not “to the physical murder”<sup>33</sup>. He also confesses he always wanted to be a creative artist and to the self-disgust toward having ended up as a collector and a theorist. Bałandaszek says he will kill himself and Abłoputo comments that “[i]nstead of dying, just confess it was you who killed her. It doesn’t matter to you, but it does to us”<sup>34</sup>. Bałandaszek, shattered, confesses.

Rosika announces that she wants to go to jail with Bałandaszek. Her first argument is that he “belongs to [her]”, because he gave himself to her “[...] when he needed to express his most basic desires”<sup>35</sup>. Bałandaszek doesn’t want her. She says he seduced her. Bałandaszek reminds her of her part in the “seduction”. He says he only loves Spika and that he is finished as a man. Rosika insists on being locked up with him. Tefuan announces he also only loved Spika and that he and Bałandaszek from now on should be friends. Bałandaszek, his world fallen apart, tears himself away from Tefuan, saying “[...] I’m completely alone and I don’t know, first of all, who I am, second, why I exist, third[...] how? Here’s my answer to that question: if there aren’t any answers to the first two, what does it matter about how?[...]”<sup>36</sup>

Abłoputo and Protruda are pleased. Bałandaszek is taken out to the ballroom by two soldiers. Tefuan is about to have a breakdown. He now confesses again he did everything to get at Spika, commenting that “[a] little earlier, three centuries ago, I’d have done it differently, all by myself, with my own stiletto or with poison, and I’d have no pangs of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 151

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 152

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 153

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 153-154

conscience”<sup>37</sup>. Abłoputo tries to cheer him up. Tefuan is completely disillusioned (“I don’t believe in anything –not even in automationism.”<sup>38</sup>). Abłoputo says that he agrees, “[n]othing exists, but we remain. We’ve got to go on playing the secret government [...] to the very end”<sup>39</sup>. *They* leave. Marianna and Ficia are disillusioned. Marianna: “[...] They’ve taken the other world away from us, and they haven’t put a new one in its place.”<sup>40</sup> Ficia: “There is no other world. [...] [A]nd yet it’s so hard to live”<sup>41</sup>.

### **Deconstruction**

*Oni* has a complex structure, with entangled character-character relationships and many meta-layers, which can be followed along various vectors, themes or paths of close-reading. I will try to analyze these into various oppositions and to see where and how in the text these are under erasure, where they deconstruct.

The first we may note is that the character list is divided into two parts: Bałandaszek, Spika, Marianna, Ficia, Gamracy Vigor, the two footmen and *they*, i.e. everybody else. This is the first opposition we notice, and perhaps the one most overtly given to us. We may call this a divide into two orders.

### **Two Orders**

So, what are the two orders? Bałandaszek’s order consists of himself, his girlfriend Spika, the cook Marianna and the maid Ficia. Central in this order is of course Bałandaszek’s collection, which seems to be what his life is centred around. Bałandaszek tries to soothe himself through his collection and Spika to practice for her performance. They are constantly bickering but the situation never falls apart. Marianna brings them food.

*Their* order is that of the automationists and they have an agenda: to free man from suffering by making him an automaton. They already secretly control the government (Halucyna is in fact the president’s wife), now they plan to destroy all art, for *they* ”want to destroy the very source of evil –and that source is art”<sup>42</sup>. Their plans clash with the status quo of Bałandaszek’s order on all points: they destroy his art collection, they ruin the theatre for Spika and Spika, Bałandaszek and the art collection all fall victims to their changes.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 154

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 155

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 135

### ***Their Flooding of Bałandaszek's World and Shattering It***

First we may note the most obvious, but likewise telling – that Bałandaszek's country-house, his safe country return, where he has taken refuge with his girlfriend, step by step is being flooded by *them*. They first take control over it and then tear it apart. One can say that the safest place in Bałandaszek's world, where he can feel calmed and soothed by his art collection, is under threat, and in a process is taken over and apart. In the end, Bałandaszek, equally shattered as his house and collection, is taken away.

In the half-act, Bałandaszek allows Tefuan into his haven, but manages also to throw him out. Thus, Bałandaszek's world can continue as it was.

In the first act, he again lets Tefuan in, this time together with the rest of *them*. However, he does not manage to throw *them* out. He is threatened at gunpoint and the destruction of his collection commences. From this point on, *they* walk freely in and out of the country-house. The first act is the process by which *they* take over Bałandaszek's world and start tearing it apart: tramping in, taking up space, taking command and by force destroying the art collection.

In the second act, *they* manifest their victory by taking the liberty of having a ball in Bałandaszek's house. Spika is brought back dead and Bałandaszek is by force taken away. *Their* mission has been accomplished and *they* leave.

So, to summarize, we have one order of things or a status quo (that of Bałandaszek's country house) attacked, taken over and forced out of its safest haven by another (*them* and *their* order of automation). In the half-act Bałandaszek's order reigns, in the first act there is a fight and a meddling with *them* winning and the second act is *their* reign and *their* throwing a ball, throwing the last remnants of Bałandaszek's order out (the last artwork and Bałandaszek himself) and leaving the place with Spika's corpse to the maid and the cook.

### **Nuanced and Intermediate Layers and Characters in the Order of Bałandaszek's Country House**

I think we now have laid out the basic functions of *their* order taking over the status quo of Bałandaszek's country house. This is the main opposition of the play. However, if we look more closely we will see a number of complex relationships and motives, which will not fully be covered by the opposition of Bałandaszek's country house status quo and that of *them*. There are layers and nuances within each order and various connections between them. Let us begin with the order of Bałandaszek's country house.

Obviously, in this order Bałandaszek himself seems to be central. So is also his art collection. To keep this order working, Bałandaszek needs his cook Marianna, an uneducated woman<sup>43</sup>, to bring him food. In fact, the times when Bałandaszek is most at peace, when he repeats his “everything’s just great”<sup>44</sup> and “oh, it’s really great, really great”<sup>45</sup> is when he is absorbing his art collection and Marianna is bringing him food.

Spika’s role in this constellation is something like that of an invited tourist. If we consider Bałandaszek and his art collection with the addition of Marianna’s cooking to be what makes the status quo stable, then Spika seems to be an external, unstable factor, putting this status quo at risk. She upsets Bałandaszek’s arrangement and calm and struggles for his attention and affection, competing with his artworks. On top of that, she is married to somebody else, whom she for various reasons won’t or can’t divorce. From this point of view, she is not a safe bet for Bałandaszek. Although the situation isn’t exactly falling apart, she is a kind of threat to Bałandaszek’s *weltanschauung* already present even before *they* trample in and shatter it.

Now, of course, we are following a course lopsided in favour of Bałandaszek. Later, we will review matters from a gynocentric perspective, but let us for the time being continue the androcentric course we’ve started. But already before we add Spika to the equation, there is another unstable element: Marianna.

Marianna is a woman of the people, to use an expression contemporary with the play. She is one of Bałandaszek’s servants, the one who keeps him content by bringing him food. Although not completely uninitiated, she does not show any appreciation for Bałandaszek’s art collection or his hyperbolic praising of the visual arts. She is also very cynical about *them* and comments quite pragmatically that “Times are changing [...] You won’t be able to ogle through your picture gallery much longer. I’ll always be able to fix a good dinner. But are those blobs going to survive [...]? That’s the question [...]”<sup>46</sup>. In fact, she believes *her* position is secure. She is also the one informing Bałandaszek and Spika about *them* and that *they* have moved in to the neighboring house. She keeps herself updated about *them* and later in the play we also find out that she keeps *them* updated about Bałandaszek and Spika. In other words, she is a spy, as Rosika lets us know later on<sup>47</sup>. In fact,

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<sup>43</sup>Unfortunately, not very well rendered in the English translation, but seen in the Polish original through the use of for example the colloquialism “wicie” instead of “wiecie” (S. I. Witkiewicz, *Dzieła wybrane Dramaty* \* (Warszawa, 1985), p. 369)

<sup>44</sup> Witkiewicz, *The Mother & Other Unsavory Plays* (New York, 1993), p. 118

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 124

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 138

she is a double agent and an opportunist (“I serve whoever is in power, nothing more.”<sup>48</sup>). Double nature is a trait and theme that is prominent also in the bickering of Bałandaszek and Spika and throughout the whole of the play. We will develop this theme later on, but for the time being let us note that even within Bałandaszek’s personal order, or bubble, if you will, there are unstable elements, elements suggesting the vulnerability of his situation, traitorous elements which he in fact is dependant on.

### **Nuanced and Intermediate Layers and Characters in *Their* Order**

*Their* order is more populous. It is the order of an advancing army and it is headed by a colonel, Abłoputo, and an ideological leader, Tefuan. Colonel Abłoputo has a Russian-clinging name<sup>49</sup> and is both a colonel in the overt government and in the secret one. He is very enthusiastic about the revolution and is, adequately for the ideology *they* represent, going about things quite pragmatically. The other army personnel are lieutenant Kretowiczka and a number of soldiers in the police force. Kretowiczka only has one line and the soldiers none. They are the army, they take over, threaten with firearms and arrest when they are told to. Tefuan is *their* most complex character and we will return to him shortly.

*They* also include the rich financier Salomon Prangier and his wife Rosika. Salomon mainly speaks when he is jealous of his trophy wife, 24 years his junior. *They* moreover include two first ladies: the wife of the president of the overt government, Halucyna Bleichertowa, and the wife of the leader of the automationist party, which could be called the secret de facto government, Protruda Ballafresco. The three obedient secretaries are minor characters.

The automationists at first keep up a façade of pure ideology, which especially is the case with Tefuan, but as the play progresses personal motives the characters have for joining the party become clearer. This unmasking is in fact the main function of the second act of the play in general, which we will return to later on. For most of them, the motive seems to be a matter of personal gain. The women want glamour, fame and youth and the financier thinks he will make money from it. Tefuan is the ideological leader of the movement but is later on exposed as not believing in it as much as having created it in order to get at his wife. Abłoputo does not seem to be very ideological but on the other hand very enthusiastic about the revolution, boosting the party’s morale and making sure the operation gets done. In fact, when Tefuan has surrendered his ideology, it is Abłoputo who insists on it. He may not

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 146

<sup>49</sup> In English this has been rendered by translating the name into “Fondoloff”.

exactly understand Tefuan's ideology, but understands the philosophy of the revolution in his own way (adding comments like "I'm a philosopher, too"<sup>50</sup>) and is adamant about going through with it, "[j]ust as you have to drink all night long when you're invited to a party, whether you want to or not [...]"<sup>51</sup>.

Tefuan is the first of *them* to appear in the play, in the half-act, introducing himself and his agenda, before being thrown out by Bałandaszek. He appears to be the absolute threat towards the order of the country house, specifically wanting to destroy art in all its forms. Already on Tefuan's first visit, Spika, however, comments that he is her long absent husband, count Ryszard Tremendosa. Although he denies this at first, he confesses to it later on. In one more way is he also from the beginning of the play linked to the order that he is about to destroy – he is the playwright behind the progressively more absurd plays Spika acts in and needs to practice for. As the play progresses, the second connection is explained by the first: Tefuan wants Spika back, but has since he can't have her started a guerrilla warfare against the theatre, thus ruining what is most important for her. His means of attacking the theatre are from the inside, writing plays that are unintelligible to the public and unrelatable to the actors, thus making the theatre collapse from within.

Spika is also the reason as to why Tefuan created the theory of automationism, "to keep myself from loving you", as he confesses in the first act.<sup>52</sup> Looking at matters from this perspective, Bałandaszek and his art collection, which we have defined as definitive of the order of the country house, seem to be secondary to Tefuan, and only accidentally fall victims to a plot directed solely against Spika. Following this thought, the origin of the connection between the two orders is Spika. When her death is announced, not only Bałandaszek, but also Tefuan, is torn apart, and announces the meaninglessness of his life and project: "[...] I don't believe in anything myself –not even in automationism. [...] I loved only her [...] Life doesn't exist! There's nothing! [...]"<sup>53</sup>. When Spika dies, although not necessarily the protagonist of the play, the play is torn apart. Bałandaszek and Tefuan are finished as characters and the play finishes. *They* move on somewhere else to play again, to shatter another art collection, unmask another Bałandaszek and to murder another Spika.

There is one more connection between the two from within *their* order and that is Rosika. Spika accuses Bałandaszek on various occasions for taking mistresses, and Rosika seems to be the exact type he'd have as a mistress, and in the second act this also happens.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 146

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 155

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 140

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 155

Later on, when he is to be thrown into jail, Rosika wants to follow him, but he doesn't want her with him. Rosika has also been in touch with the double agent Marianna.

### **Two Orders: Two Potential Plays Intertwine, Thus Revealing and Synthesizing Latent Double Natures**

Thus we have first divided the play in the opposition *their* order – the order of Bałandaszek's country house. Then we have shown how the play at first glance is a play about *their* order wiping out the order of Bałandaszek's country house. After that we have shown how the two sides of the opposition already in the beginning of the play contain elements of each other and how this opposition is under erasure. We have shown how Bałandaszek's order certainly falls apart, but also how *their* ideological leader Tefuan is revealed as not being who he claims to be and how he also falls apart in the process of carrying out a revolution of his own creation. With a foot in both camps, to various degrees leaning towards one or the other, we also have Spika, Marianna and Rosika.

One way of breaking down this opposition is by thinking of the two orders as two different plays. The country house play then is about the unmasking of the rich art collector, about his hypocrisy towards his girlfriend, about how he really always wanted to be an artist and that he is hiding his self-loathe behind a myriad of art-works and theories. As *Oni* starts, with Bałandaszek and Spika bickering, one could say that it is the play that is about to be acted out.<sup>54</sup> This does not happen, however, because the play accidentally intertwines with a different play, that of *them*.

*Their* play in many ways also is a play of unmasking: the unmasking of Tefuan, the unmasking of the automationist ideology, the unmasking of the motives of the automationists for joining the play. This is the play that is invading Bałandaszek's country house, to his own and his potential country house drama's dismay, but also to that of the potential drama of *them*.

Following this line of thinking, the two plays would need two different role lists, and the intermediate characters would thus have alter ego's in each play. This would look something as follows:

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<sup>54</sup> This would perhaps be a kind of bourgeois "unmasking" drama in the style of for example Maria Zapolska's *Moralność Pani Dulskiej*.

Country house play		<i>Their</i> play
Bałandaszek	alias	Enemy of the Revolution
Spika's absent husband	alias	Seraskier Banga Tefuan
Girlfriend Spika	alias	Wife Spika
Cook Marianna	alias	Spy
Potential lover	alias	Wife Rosika
Ficia		the rest of <i>them</i>

When the two plays intertwine, we are shown what functions the intermediate characters have in each play. From the country house play's point of view this is something as follows: Bałandaszek, while still being art collector and Spika's boyfriend, is shown to be an enemy/prey of the revolution; Spika's former husband is shown to be Seraskier Banga Tefuan, the ideologue behind the revolution; Spika isn't revealed to be, rather are we reminded that she is, somebody else's wife; Marianna the cook is shown to be a spy or informant; the lovers Bałandaszek is accused of having are shown to exist, here in the form of Rosika.

In *their* play, this is of course the other way around: Seraskier Banga Tefuan, the ideologue behind the revolution, is shown to be Ryszard Tremendosa, the husband of Spika, and to mainly want to get her back; the enemy of the revolution Bałandaszek is shown to be the new boyfriend of Tefuan's wife; the informant is shown to be a cook and servant in Bałandaszek's household; and Salomon Prangier's wife Rosika is shown to be promiscuous.

So, after the characters are exposed as to who they are in the obverse play, a synthesis starts. Bałandaszek, art collector-boyfriend, now becomes art collector-boyfriend-enemy of the revolution and Seraskier Banga Tefuan, ideologue, becomes ideologue-husband-playwright; Spika is now girlfriend-actress-wife; Marianna cook-spy; and Rosika wife-lover. Most characters are affected by the intertwining of the two plays, but only the ones who already have roles or potential roles in the obverse play, have a latent double nature that is exposed and needs to be synthesized.

In Bałandaszek's play, the only one left unconcerned is the servant girl Ficia, whereas in *their* play, this is the case with most characters, and, most significantly, with Abłoputo.

### **Unmasking, Synthesis and the Carrying out of the Revolution**

When the two orders/plays that on their own are about to carry out their own unmasking, meet and have to synthesize, the characters with roles in both plays together with two art forms fall victims: Spika dies, Bałandaszek is shattered as a person and thrown into jail, Tefuan/Tremendosa is completely disillusioned and Rosika can no longer stand her husband; the art collection is shattered and the theatre has been corrupted. The new scenario was expected from neither play: the country house play for sure didn't expect *their* play invading and *they* didn't expect Tefuan to fall apart. The two plays were already originally about uncovering their respective intra-hypocritical double natures; but, as they meet, the process is sped up. The consequences do not end there, however, for the synthesis creates a new scenario where the unmasking and shattering turns out to be both more brutal and more meaningless: if each play was about showing the hypocrisy and meaninglessness of its own values, then, when combined, they also show the hypocrisy and meaninglessness of the values of its alternative.

Stoical, headstrong and pragmatic, Abłoputo has no latent double nature that could jeopardize the revolution to be revealed when the two plays meet. He is tempted one or two times (for example, he says he would also like to go to jail if such beautiful women as Rosika are going to be there), but doesn't falter. On top of that, he makes sure to correct anything that might put the revolution at risk (for example, insisting that Bałandaszek admit the murder of Spika, although he did not commit it; encouraging Tefuan when he is disillusioned).

And the deed gets done. Throughout the second act, as personal motives and double natures are being unmasked, Abłoputo stands firm. And by the end of *Oni*, as the victims are being counted, he makes sure to encourage everybody to continue *even though* the revolution has been carried out. On Tefuan and Bałandaszek the realization is dawning that the world has lost its philosophy, its art, its theatre and its beautiful women, and they are shattered. Abłoputo actually recognizes this and tries to alleviate their emptiness, encouraging them to continue, conjuring and proposing alternatives to what they have lost that are in agreement with the revolution – proposing, in one word, substitutes.

### **Order, Play, Unmasking, Disillusion**

So far, we have thought of *Oni* as two orders, where one order takes over the other. Then we have broken this down to two potential plays of unmasking that trample in on one another, with the effect of not only unmasking themselves but also unmasking each other. This creates

a new situation, unexpected for both potential plays originally, where one play that would have been about the unmasking of one order, leaving disillusion, now has the added effect of seeing its alternative unmasked as well, doubling the disillusion. This leaves victims, dead or shattered, on both sides. In the end, those unharmed by the turn of events, start conjuring new substitutes, filling out the gaps that have been made.

Let us review the vocabulary we have used: order, play, unmask, disillusion, substitution. Each play starts with an order, which then is unmasked, leaving disillusion, this is doubled by a like development in the mirror-play that is invading, a new situation arises when both plays have merged and substitutes little by little start coming up.

Order, in this case, may be thought of as a kind of arrangement, a constitution. In Bałandaszek's case, it is made up, mainly, as we have commented earlier, by his art collection. Much of the bickering between Bałandaszek and Spika is about authenticity. Spika accuses Bałandaszek of not having any real feelings toward her ("You don't see real suffering at all, but instead you invent your own"<sup>55</sup>, "Oh, if only you *would* lose your self-control just once."<sup>56</sup>), of not being himself when he makes love ("To be grasped again by that cold, inhuman sex machine"<sup>57</sup>, "You're an automaton, an inhuman sex machine."), of not being as special as he claims to be ("Remember how a petty aristocrat had his flunkies teach Voltaire a lesson [...] Given your origins [...], do you think you'd have been who you are now? You'd be winnowing chaff in a mill by the road, and the great would tread on your subservient mug with their red heels [...]"<sup>58</sup>, "[...] you've got to be treated like any old Tom, Dick, or Harry [...]"<sup>59</sup>). Bałandaszek defends himself, saying she does not understand him, that she does not understand art or theory, and that he loves her as well, but not in the formal way he loves the artworks. However, he also acknowledges some of the critique, saying he has a double nature ("Don't you think it's torture for me too? There really are two separate people inside me."<sup>60</sup>): one that is caught up in concepts and one that is "authentic". When she pushes him, we early on get a glimpse of Bałandaszek's self-contempt ("[...] I don't know anything, and I'm not able to create. Believe me, I'm undergoing awful tortures. [...] I'd like to rest in a soft case like a jewel. But what obsesses me is whether I'm not really just an ordinary piece of cut glass, and whether my case is not worth more than its contents").

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<sup>55</sup> Witkiewicz, *The Mother & Other Unsavory Plays* (New York, 1993), p. 122

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122

Spika, the invited tourist, is thus constantly trying to puncture Bałandaszek's order, or bubble, and although he defends himself, she is in fact rather successful. Bałandaszek himself starts to doubt his own authenticity, values and theories. And then *they* enter only to speed up the process of eroding Bałandaszek's *weltanschauung*: ideologically, by saying he is an enemy of the revolution that will win, that art is bad because it is the root of sadness and human evil, and practically, by destroying his art collection and taking over his house. At first, Spika gets rather excited about *them* completely erasing Bałandaszek's order (Spika: "[...] Maybe then you'll start to love me [...]" Bałandaszek: "Maybe so [...]"<sup>61</sup>). But within the same line, Bałandaszek already has a premonition of disaster: "[...] It seems not only won't my gallery exist, but neither will I, or you, or any of our feelings". And when Spika dies, this premonition comes true.

And in this manner, Bałandaszek's world is torn apart, his order is shattered, a double nature is unmasked, he is left disillusioned and we again return to Bałandaszek's final monologue, which more and more is turning out to be the *aporia* of the play ("I'm completely alone, and I don't know, first of all, who I am, why I exist, third [...]: how? [...] [I]f there are no answers to the first two questions what does it matter about how? [...]"), a depressed, silent humming in the background, that one only need take away this or that component to hear, expose, unmask.

We are able to show the same thing with Tefuan: his order (his philosophy and his revolution) is shown to have a double nature when he turns out to really be after Spika, in the process of the play the order becomes more and more eroded. Just as with Bałandaszek, the utter meaninglessness of his projects dawns on him only when Spika is dead, and just after Bałandaszek, he has a monologue mirroring his: "I don't believe in anything myself – not even in automationism. [...] Life doesn't exist! There's nothing!"

### **Substitution: The Uncovering and Covering Up of Nothingness**

From every point of view we've looked at the play so far, we return to the same two monologues of disillusion and nothingness. Starting from here, the rest of the play turns out to be a kind of display and puncturing (or uncovering) of the layers of substitutes that have been created to hide the nothingness.

In Bałandaszek's case, these layers of substitutes are the art collection and art theories substituting (or covering up) his being a failed artist, and as we probe further, this

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 136

substitutes the nothingness underneath. In Tefuan's case, the revolution and philosophy of automationism is the substitution of his having lost Spika, this substitution in fact being an acceptance and averring of the nothingness, a kind of transparent substitutive layer.

In both cases, when unpeeling the substitute layers constituting the orders, the nothingness at the bottom is neither cool, relaxed and untroubled as a blank mind with no worries nor emotionally inert and tinged with the greyness typical of clinical depression, but rather in a state of terror, which Witkiewicz, no doubt, would call metaphysical. The stuff of the terror seems to lie in the realization that every form we take will be a substitute for nothing, every step towards an ordering of life will be pragmatic and inauthentic, every mask we put on easily may be snatched away from us (not least by ourselves), every new nature will leave a shadow double nature, and every time we return from this core of nothingness the effort needed to break down the illusion of "life" around us will be smaller.<sup>62</sup>

If there is nothing underneath these layers, then why should the nothingness be the core and not the periphery, one may ask? Addressing this issue only within the play, this would have to do with the nature of the unmasking of a philosophical hypocrisy that both Bałandaszek and Tefuan fall victims to.

If Tefuan's substitutive *weltanschauung* consists of a conceptualization of the nothingness underneath, why is he so disappointed at experiencing its axiom? Abłoputo remains stoical, whereas Tefuan falters. For one thing, Tefuan has been unmasked as having created automationism as a substitute for Spika and it is only when she dies that the connection between the affirmative conceptualization of nothingness and the terror of nothingness becomes clear.

This is also the case with Bałandaszek, whose *weltanschauung*, although eroding through Spika's interrogation, collapses when the overt subject of his theories, his artworks, are taken away from him, and the possibility of a different *weltanschauung*, with and through Spika, is made impossible by her death.

"Our very existence is the collapse of something or other"<sup>63</sup>, comments Bałandaszek early on in the play. And indeed, the collapsing of *weltanschauungs* seems to be the main theme of the play, an existential given, the disillusion being cyclical, for one has to cover up the terror of nothingness somehow. "Any society is good only to the extent that even

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<sup>62</sup> In his essay *Witkacy: miny nad otchłanią* (Eseje, 2009), Michał Paweł Markowski reaches a similar conclusion, stating that the essence of Witkiewicz's poetics (in general) is the realization that we can only make faces, and that underneath these there is nothing.

<sup>63</sup> Witkiewicz, *The Mother & Other Unsavory Plays* (New York, 1993), p. 118

though you're a member of it you don't really feel that you are"<sup>64</sup>, he adds a little later. This is the condition of not being within the eye of the terror of nothingness, but being sheltered by layers of substitutes. It is a condition that is not fully sheltered, partly aware of its double nature, of its shadow nothingness, but it needs to be punctured, the axiom of its order needs to be taken away or rendered meaningless, for it to implode to the terror of nothingness. A society is a way of ordering, much larger than that of one person, such as Bałandaszek or Tefuan, but in essence the same. At least two plays referred to in *Oni* are about major changes in society.<sup>65</sup>

Why nothingness in the play comes first and is seen as essence is perhaps not made clear by this, but the wish for a difference is clear, a wish for belief, but with every fallen *weltanschauung* and every new disillusion, the possibility of believing diminishes and the possibility of wrecking a new order, becomes bigger. Life, as portrayed in the play, is a series of cycles of collapsing *weltanschauungs* heading towards progressive disillusion. From this point of view, Tefuan may be seen as a kind of later, more cynical and disillusioned version of Bałandaszek (also mirrored by Tefuan first losing Spika to Bałandaszek, and then Bałandaszek losing her when she dies). It seems the ultimate form one takes after cycles of disillusion would be that of Abłoputo, who happily continues believing in the cynical automationism of the revolution when his comrades are falling apart – the “happy” automaton of Witkiewicz's fears. Is this who Bałandaszek and Tefuan are headed toward becoming? Is Abłoputo immune to new and further disillusion?

### **Spika's Role: Unwanted Reminder *or* From Unruly Object to Object**

The main differences between Tefuan/Bałandaszek and Abłoputo are the former couple's relationships to Spika and that they both collapse when she dies. For both, their relationship with her is in a conflict; they both only seem to want to objectify her and to be completely disinterested in seeing her as a subject. Spika as an object is what Bałandaszek craves, as a new addition to his art collection. Spika as a subject frightens and threatens him, disentangling his network of substitutes for his own hypocrisies and imperfections.

If we accept Tefuan as a later version of Bałandaszek, the same thing would have been the case with him when they were together. However, when they are no longer

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 120

<sup>65</sup> William Shakespeare's *Henry VIth* and Tadeusz Miciński's *W mrokach złotego pałacu czyli Bazylissa Teofanu. Tragedia z dziejów Bizancjum X. Wieku*

together she continues to upset his order because he cannot stop thinking about her. The automationist revolution is, simply, his way of taking action and doing something about this.

Neither Tefuan nor Bałandaszek can stand Spika as a subject, but she won't give herself up to objectification. Tefuan thus resigns at defining her as object, which she does not surrender to, but instead tries to disqualify her from the realm of expression, by having no means of self-expression or of being expressed, as neither object nor subject, as a function outside all of syntax –as abject. Spika's function in the play can thus be formulated as being a reminder of the terror of nothingness underneath the layers of substitution. Tefuan and Bałandaszek crave this reminder, because they want to objectify it and thus control it, but are unable to do so. Tefuan's revolution, whose sole aim is to destroy Spika, can likewise be expressed as being an attempt to once and for all do away with the unwanted, but desired, reminder of the terror of nothingness.

Once the deed is done, the vanity of the enterprise comes to light. The reminder of the terror of nothingness is obviously done away with by Spika's destruction, but the effect is only a tsunami of the experience of that very terror, with the difference that the characters now are unsheltered by substitutes, unable to defend themselves by a personal order against the terror, have no bubble to return to. It is surely no coincidence that Spika is pointed out to be "incredibly beautiful"<sup>66</sup>, and thus most desirable, but least attainable, when dead.

But already new substitutes are about to take the place of the former ones.

### **Survivors and New Substitutes**

In the process of the respective and mutual unmasking of the two plays, all characters are scrutinized and proven to be vulnerable to some degree. Among *them*, however, most stand the test: they have been proven to have ulterior motives for the revolution, but do not fall into disillusion. This group of survivors is headed by Abłoputo, who tries to comfort the disillusioned with new substitutes, new ways of keeping the terror of nothingness at a distance.

In this manner, he proposes his method of soothing Bałandaszek's angst: "If you're suffering from a rash of guilt feelings, why don't you go to a dermatologist: a little brownish ointment, and you'll be cured in a week's time. Now when it comes to a spiritual rash, simply clear your throat and spit it out, that's all there is to it! [...] And you might like to drink a little more –that's right."<sup>67</sup> And to Tefuan: "Maybe we'll make a small *pronunciamento*; maybe life will take on some meaning. Richard! Our little revolution is

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<sup>66</sup> Witkiewicz, *The Mother & Other Unsavory Plays* (New York, 1993), p. 152

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147

hanging by just a little hair. We'll come to the surface yet!"). His alternatives are in the vein of the revolution he now is the new ideological leader of, and it is now his simplified, pragmatic understanding of the project that has taken the place of Tefuan's much more conceptual and ambitious perspective.

Witkiewicz seems to be whispering to us: the terror will always be there and the terror is the fundament of humanity, any shelter from it will be substitutive in quality, but we cannot subdue it by making it banal, with every such attempt a more pragmatic and automated substitute will take the place of the former, taking us further from an attempt at trying to understand this fundamental human experience and instead trying to eradicate it by automating man, and thus erasing the quality of the terror, but in the process also humanity. In the play, we have identified three steps of man on the way to automation: Bałandaszek, Tefuan and Abłoputo.

### **A Gynocentric Revision: Spika and Rosika as Subjects**

So far we have been looking at Spika from Tefuan and Bałandaszek's point of view, as an unruly object, pushed into the abject. Can we unfetter her and promote her to subjecthood, and where will that lead us?

Spika is with her boyfriend Bałandaszek at his country house. She is frustrated with him because he shows little interest in her, being disinterested in her acting and focusing his attention on his art collection. He even lavishes the cook Marianna with more compliments than her. They bicker constantly. What does she see in him?

In some respects, the rivalry between Bałandaszek and Tefuan is among the women mirrored by the rivalry between Spika and Rosika. Rosika also intends to leave her husband for Bałandaszek. Spika's husband is a count, Rosika's a rich businessman. It seems they both are dissatisfied with their marital relationships, and want Bałandaszek, or a person such as him, instead.

Considering the two plays, Rosika is somebody who wants to leave *their* play to be in the country house play. In this respect the two women are similar, only Spika left Tefuan when he was Ryszard, before the revolution and automationism, before *them*, she left him when he still was in a former play, before he had made a new revolution in the wheel of progressive disillusion. And in this sense, Rosika, being the-one-who-wants-to-leave-her-husband-for-Bałandaszek in the next phase of disillusion, is already a grotesque alteration of Spika: younger, promiscuous, manipulative, chansoniste instead of actress, married to a financier instead of a count. Spika recognizes this uncanny later-but-younger version of

herself, and accordingly answers Rosika's invitation to collegueship with dismissal: "But, my dear, I'm an actress. And that doesn't make me friends with every questionable person in southeast Europe."<sup>68</sup> and "Oh, what a revolting pig you are [...] I've never met such a cynical woman before."<sup>69</sup>, after having gotten to know her ideas. Rosika answers the latter comment as follows: "You're the one who's a pig, a pig in disguise. [...]", meaning she knows Spika will be like her, that she only needs to experience a complete failure of her methods, a disillusion, and she will turn into her own later version – Rosika.

Going back to Spika, one could say, in fact, that, whereas Bałandaszek is dissatisfied with Spika as an object, Spika is dissatisfied with him as a subject. She finds his *weltanschauung*, his layers of substitution, too transparent. Spika's alteration after one revolution of disillusion, Rosika, might have found Bałandaszek fine the way he is (although Bałandaszek probably would have been dissatisfied with her pragmatic views on perversion), but Spika is interested in finding out what lies underneath his façade: "[...] I could give up his body, I could live with him through all eternity without even touching his lips, but he has to be mine, mine!"<sup>70</sup> Perhaps she sees a potential in Bałandaszek, and desperately wants to find it. And perhaps, had not *their* play come and invaded the country house play, she would have unmasked him as truly wanting to be an artist, and perhaps they would have been able to continue their life from there. But, with *their* play invading, killing Spika, this alternative is wiped out.

Spika never gets to live through a new disillusion, she never alternates into a later version, such as Rosika, her constant reminder of a different life is too much to handle and Tefuan/Ryszard sentences her to death. As an object, Spika is this reminder; as a subject, perhaps she is the "earliest" (least disillusioned, pragmatic, automated) rendition of a person there is in the play. If we break the gender boundary, we can thus hypothesize an order as follows: Spika – Bałandaszek – Rosika – Tefuan – Abłopto. The later alteration will always feel reminded of the terror of nothingness by its earlier, more original version, and want to control it, whereas the earlier version will want to unmask the later. This will go on until automation has been completed, which, in *Oni*, is represented by Abłopto.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 134

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 139

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 138

### **The Fate of the People**

So far, the fates of Marianna and Ficia have hardly been touched upon. Marianna, the spy, is hardly an ideological revolutionary, but rather a pragmatic opportunist. She doesn't believe in the revolution, but she believes that it will take place. Although she is disloyal towards her master and mistress, she also warns them of what is about to happen: "A secret government – that's all we know, and that's enough [...] They are running everything [...]"<sup>71</sup>, "Times are changing [...] I'll always be able to fix you a good dinner. But are those blobs going to survive in the light of what's going to happen? [...]"<sup>72</sup>, "Oh, children, children! [...] If They are setting up shop here, it's curtains for you."<sup>73</sup> Ficia upholds a silent, but loyal, attitude throughout the play.

When the revolution has been carried out, Marianna realizes the meaninglessness of what has happened. She might have thought the revolution would make some alterations (such as the destruction of the art gallery), but had never thought it would leave an empty house, no mistress and no master to speak of: "They've taken the other world away from us, and they haven't put a new one in its place."<sup>74</sup> Ficia might have been ignorant of the revolution, and accordingly she cannot be dissatisfied with it, but she is dissatisfied with its consequences: "There is no other world. I don't believe in anything myself. And yet it's so hard to live, so terribly hard."<sup>75</sup> The revolutionaries, as Marianna points out, do not replace anything, they simply destroy and move on, to tear apart some new home. The revolution continues. Its victims are the arts, philosophy, the not yet as disillusioned, but also the people. Eventually a new world will, however, take the place of the former, but it will be a grotesque caricature of it, it will be pragmatic and automated in the vein of Abloputo's new substitutes, it will put every concept in quotation marks: "arts", "philosophy", "terror", "nothingness", "metaphysics".

### **The Fate of the Rest of *Them***

By the end of the play Tefuan is shattered, Rosika doesn't want to continue her life with *them*, whereas Abloputo remains focused. The rest of *them* are scrutinized, but hardly changed in the end. They continue their functions, but they were never as important to either the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 124

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 126

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 155

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

revolution or the order of the country house as the four characters mentioned earlier. It is however not improbable that one of them would fall victim if *they* move on to another house.

### Vigor and the Theatre

Throughout the play there has been a meta-intrigue about the theatre, which we so far have left untouched. Spika, the actress, is much concerned about its recent turn of events, the “pure nonsense” plays which she finds ridiculous and the “commedia dell’arte in *pure form*” that is rumoured to take their place (substitute them). We learn that the author behind these plays is Tefuan and that they and the turn of events in the theatre have been part of his plan to destroy Spika, the reminder of the terror of nothingness.

Vigor, the theatre director, announces the death of Spika, saying “this happened in connection with certain intrigues that affect you all most intimately”<sup>76</sup>. This we already know. However, he also takes no responsibility for his actors, saying the main actor killed Spika “in a fit of madness”<sup>77</sup> and that he’s “got to have clean hands to show the official government. The rest is no concern of [his]”<sup>78</sup>.

The theatre, like the characters in the play and like the play itself, is falling victim to a series of grotesque alterations through substitution, because of Tefuan’s wish to eradicate the reminder of the terror of nothingness.

### Aporias and Summary

In my analysis, we do not find the aporia of *Oni* in one place, but I think a combination of four lines will cover it. Those are Bałandaszek’s comments “Any society is good only to the extent that even though you’re a member of it you don’t really feel that you are.”<sup>79</sup>, “Our very existence is the collapse of something or other.”<sup>80</sup>, his monologue of disillusion “I’m completely alone, and I don’t know, first of all, who I am, second, why I exist, third... Oh, there’s no third point. I just imagined there was. Who and why -these are the two questions confronting man! How! There’s one more question: how? Here’s my answer to that question:

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 151

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 152

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 120; in the original: “Dane społeczeństwo jest o tyle dobre, o ile będąc członkiem tego społeczeństwa nie odczuwa się właśnie tego, że się jest członkiem.” (S. I. Witkiewicz, *Dzieła wybrane Dramaty Vol. I* (Warszawa, 1985), p. 371)

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p.118; in the original: “Istnienie samo jest ciągłym upadkiem czegoś.” (S. I. Witkiewicz, *Dzieła wybrane Dramaty Vol. I* (Warszawa, 1985), p. 368)

if there aren't any answers to the first two, what does it matter about how?"<sup>81</sup> and Marianna's final statement: "They've taken the other world away from us and they haven't put a new one in its place."<sup>82</sup>

These lines, I think, succinctly sum up the catastrophist weltanschauung and historiosophy of the play:

"Any society is good only to the extent that even though you're a member of it you don't really feel that you are." sums up the ever-present two-sidedness of being, the nothingness which can be kept at a distance through an order, or substitution.

"Our very existence is the collapse of something or other." sums up the fragile state of this substitution, which is liable to collapse as long as there is a reminder of a less automated/disillusioned order.

"I'm completely alone, and I don't know, first of all, who I am, second, why I exist, third... Oh, there's no third point. I just imagined there was. Who and why -these are the two questions confronting man! How! There's one more question: how? Here's my answer to that question: if there aren't any answers to the first two, what does it matter about how?" shows the intestines of the other side, the heart of nothingness. It shows what is being held away by substitution, but what every order, except one that is completely automated, always will be reminded of.

"They've taken the other world away from us and they haven't put a new one in its place." is what happens when the sentiment of the terror is dulled because a new substitution is about to take place. It is the sad realization that nothing will ever get better, but that life has to go on anyhow.

In the play, two orders are about to unmask themselves, however, because they trample in on one another, they also unmask each other. This leaves many characters with no order, with no steady footing, in terror. Eventually, it is a new order, a grotesque version of one of the orders, that becomes a new substitute for the two former ones. In no way does it solve the problems of the former orders, but it tries to eradicate their symptoms.

At the bottom of *Oni*, lies this succession and progression of collapsing weltanschauungs, steadily heading towards disillusion dulled through automation.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 153-154; in the original: "Jestem sam i absolutnie nie wiem, po pierwsze, kim jestem, po drugie, po co jestem, po trzecie... ani, ani... Och! Trzeciego punktu nie ma. Zdawało mi się. Kto i po co – oto są dwa pytania człowieka! Jak! Jest jeszcze jedno pytanie: jak? Na to odpowiadam: kiedy dwa pierwsze są odpowiedzi – wszystko jedno jak." (S. I. Witkiewicz, *Dzieła wybrane Dramaty Vol. I* (Warszawa, 1985), p. 413-414)

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 155; in the original: „Zaświaty nam zabrali, a świata nowego nie dali na ich miejsce.” (S. I. Witkiewicz, *Dzieła wybrane Dramaty Vol. I* (Warszawa, 1985), p. 416)

### III. Conclusions and Discussion

In the subsequent sections I will try to connect the aporias and conclusions of my deconstruction with the questions sketched in the first section: the relationships between insanity – agency – creativity, philosophical – personal trauma, and ‘pure form’.

#### Signals of ‘Pure Form’ in *Oni*

A number of factors in the play signal to us that its contents should not be taken at face value, and that the play is formally exaggerated, bent and underscored according to Witkiewicz’s poetics of ‘pure form’. *Oni* has a distinct tint of exaggeration, caricature and surreality.

One such distinct feature comes with the names of the characters in the play, which often are distorted caricatures of realistic names. For example, Chraposkrzecki could be the name of a Polish Baron (in the vein of such *szlachta* families as Wiśniowiecki and Kamieniecki), only “chrap” is the sound of a female elk during heat, and “skrzeczeć” means to squeak or to croak; Kretowiczka is diminutive of “kret”, meaning mole, but also makes you think of “kretyn”, cretin. The list goes on.

Not only the names are caricatures, however, so also the characters themselves are exaggerated, distorted character types: Bałandaszek, the caricature of an over-refined, detached aesthete; Rosika, the dark femme fatale looming and luring for a new erotic fix; Abłoputo, the hard-boiled military man who puts duty above everything; Tefuan/Ryszard, who is the epitome of a long history of jealous husbands willing to do everything to retaliate the loss of their woman. As Tefuan himself admits in the play, “A little earlier, three centuries ago, I’d have done it differently, all by myself, with my own stiletto or with poison, and I’d have no pangs of conscience. Today I’m doing it like a coward, using that loathsome ham actor, after having previously written two dozen plays that make no sense whatsoever.”<sup>83</sup>, he is just a caricature of jealous lovers of past.

Also the form and content of the play is presented as a caricature of other plays. I have shown above how parts of *Oni* can be seen as a caricature of a bourgeois unmasking drama. The intertextual references to Miciński’s dead serious play of social changes in the Byzantine Empire and to an absolute classic of a historical drama about social changes, Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*, make for a backdrop of how social changes could be expressed in plays of former times. As Witkiewicz points out: “Creative artists cannot communicate their experiences in the calm, straightforward forms of old, just as the viewers or listeners of today

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<sup>83</sup> Witkiewicz, *The Mother & Other Unsavory Plays* (New York, 1993), p.154

by such forms cannot be affected”<sup>84</sup>, and this is of course just what we are witnessing. These references only underscore the point –a play of today cannot be like a play of former times, since society is changing and deeper “artistic perversion” is now needed in order for the viewer to experience metaphysical emotions.

But *Oni* is not a play about a final stage of man’s dehumanization; it is a play about a succession of dehumanizing stages, progressing towards complete disillusion and automation. In terms of plays-in-the-play, this is shown through the intruding future of progressively more absurd plays –you may find *Oni* absurd, but the future will be worse. We have a backdrop of Shakespeare and Miciński, and a future of “commedia dell’arte in pure form”.

Witkiewicz never presented his poetics of ‘pure form’ as an atemporal, ultimate aesthetics but very clearly as an only means of communicating metaphysical emotions considering the contemporary state of society and culture, and clearly as symptomatic of it.

### **The ‘Pure Form’ Terroristic Catharsis of *Oni***

With *Oni*, Witkiewicz presents his contemporary audience with a ‘pure form’ play about social changes heading towards progressive disillusion, pragmatization and dehumanization, as I have shown in my deconstruction. Reconnecting with my theses in the preface, where I state that there is an agenda of terroristic catharsis for metaphysics in Witkiewicz’s poetics, I will try to show how I think this is shown in *Oni*.

The aporias I have deconstructed the play into show the progression of collapsing weltanschauungs at the heart of Witkiewicz’s play. I have also characterized a state in the play without substitutive layers, an unprotected state of metaphysical terror. In the case of terroristic catharsis, there need be a transference from metaphysical terror to terror-ism.

A note should be made here about the connection between the state of the metaphysical terror in the play (best exemplified by Bałandaszek’s final monologue) and ‘the metaphysical feeling of the strangeness of existence’ in Witkiewicz’s poetics, aesthetics and ontology. In his treatises, ‘the metaphysical feeling of the strangeness of existence’ is presented as a fundamental state, not inherently of terror, but which we are losing touch with through pragmatization and thus cannot handle when faced with (making us perceive it as terror), a sort of addiction to pragmatism that worsens with time and has a final stage – automation. In essence, the state of metaphysical terror in the play and ‘the metaphysical

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<sup>84</sup> Witkiewicz, *O CZYSTEJ FORMIE i inne pisma o sztuce* (Warszawa, 2003), p. 61

feeling of the strangeness of existence' of Witkiewicz's treatises are the same, only the former is an example of what form that feeling takes when subjected to somebody in an advanced stage of pragmatization.

*Oni* shows the collapsing and substitution of *weltanschauungs*, and their backside, 'the metaphysical feeling of the strangeness of existence' as a state of terror. For a catharsis to take place, the viewer need feel empathy, or perhaps complicity, with the characters of the play. To his help, Witkiewicz has portrayed a breadth of characters, in various stages of disillusion, but all unmasked during the course of the play and heading towards the same progression of disillusion. The viewer should thus experience the unmasking of his or her own world when watching the play, and, if successful, a 'metaphysical feeling of the strangeness of existence'. Through that experience the viewer should thus become part of Witkiewicz's anti-positivist resistance movement. In all shortness, the viewer should experience a catharsis in the painful experience of relating to the breakdown in *Oni*, and, since the experience should be metaphysical in quality, he should become an accomplice to Witkiewicz's resistance movement – a catharsis and conscription for terrorism at the same time.

### **'Pure Form' Terrorism, Trauma and Philosophy**

I have in the preface summed up the message of Witkiewicz's terrorism, communicated via the 'pure form' catharsis, as *the Witkiewiczian reminder*: Everything said and done from this point on will be a substitute for the void caused by neglecting the questions of metaphysics, until man is completely automated. If the catharsis is successful, this is the 'metaphysical' insight that should affect the viewer. By definition, the affected viewer would also become part of the resistance movement against pragmatism and automation since he would undergo a strong experience outside, and transgressive of, their realm.

The Witkiewiczian reminder via the 'pure form' catharsis is thus meant to be experienced and to affect *emotively*, whilst also retaining a philosophical framework. Returning to the question of trauma versus philosophy, we can see how in the play, in my analysis and in Witkiewicz's theoretical framework, there is a merging of emotion and intellect, seemingly inseparable from each other.

When Witkiewicz writes that religion, philosophy and the arts are losing bearing upon 'the metaphysical feeling of the strangeness of existence' through pragmatization, socialization and democratization, this is neither a philosophical nor an emotive standpoint – it is both. It is, perhaps, what Witkiewicz would call a 'metaphysical' standpoint. When

Witkiewicz in 1914 fell into depression and started to work out his theoretical framework and to work seriously as a playwright, there is a hermeneutical circle inherent to the situation: he was depressed *because* he was beyond reach of society, philosophy and the arts *because* he was depressed *because* he was beyond reach of society, philosophy and the arts, et cetera. This predicament, of not seeing anything “but the frightful emptiness of life after the death of everything important that makes life worth living”<sup>85</sup>, of their having “taken the other world away from us [...] [without] put[ting] a new one in its place”<sup>86</sup>, is very much that of a void, and a cul-de-sac, both emotive and philosophical; a void I believe Witkiewicz spent most of his life trying to fill with something meaningful, through his work, both creative and theoretical.

### Insanity – Agency – Creativity

So, what does Witkiewicz do –*choose* insanity? The oxymoronic phrase can be explained if we understand insanity as Foucault does in “History of Madness”<sup>87</sup>, using the definition “absence of an *oeuvre*”<sup>88</sup>. This does not exclude loss of touch and/or conception of the world, it specifies the condition –as unintelligible, incommunicable, abject. In Foucault’s formulation: “From its ordinary formulation, historical time imposes silence on a thing that we no longer can apprehend, other than by addressing it as void, vanity, nothingness”<sup>89</sup>, “The great *oeuvre* of [...] history [...] is indelibly accompanied by the absence of an *oeuvre*, which renews itself at every instant, but which runs unaltered in its inevitable void the length of history [...]”<sup>90</sup>.

Witkiewicz, no doubt, seems to have landed at a similar position in 1914, and by *choosing* it, he chooses to remain there. A void is only a void when unfilled, an abject position is only abject until it attains a voice to meaningfully communicate with. Witkiewicz *does* communicate – via plays, treatises, criticism, novels, works of art – although he tacitly has defined his position as incommunicable. To back his position, Witkiewicz formulates his ontology, historiosophy, aesthetics and poetics – of a constant loss of footing for the ‘artistic’ person, of a deepening rift of alienation between metaphysics and society, of collapsing

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<sup>85</sup> Gerould (editor), *The Witkiewicz Reader* (London, 1993), p. 81

<sup>86</sup> Witkiewicz, *The Mother & Other Unsavory Plays* (New York, 1993), p. 155

<sup>87</sup> The semantic glide from “insanity” to “madness” I believe is of no consequence here. My use of “insanity” is taken from Louis Iribarne’s translation of Tadeusz Miciński’s poem *The Suicide* (*Samobójca*), used as epigraph in his translation of *Insatiability* (London, 1985, p. 3). The original uses the word “szaleństwo”, which is also the term used in Foucault’s work in the Polish translation, *Historia szaleństwa*.

<sup>88</sup> Foucault, *The History of Madness* (Abingdon, 2006), p. XXXI

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

weltanschauungs being replaced by ever-more banal substitutes. For Witkiewicz, it seems, every work is final, because the position adopted to write it, may just as soon erode.

Witkiewicz identifies himself with an insanity under attack, although insanity is a term of the ‘attacker’: the pragmatized society, progressively abjecting him into “the absence of an *oeuvre*” (that is, madness/insanity). He may as well have written that *metaphysics* is being abjected in a more and more pragmatized and democratized society, making him *seem* insane, but he doesn’t. This interchangeability of ‘metaphysics’ and ‘insanity’ in his own writing hints toward a degree of resentment, in the sense that he is projecting a *certain* problem into a *general* hostility. At the very least, it hints that Witkiewicz’s position is such that it cannot be appeased or satiated, since it is defined negatively.

Witkiewicz’s creativity nourishes dangerously off of his being stuck in a void of depression/insanity/‘the metaphysical feeling of the strangeness of existence’. He has locked himself in a cul-de-sac by defining his position as symptomatic of contemporary society, which is abjecting him further *by the hour*. By the nature of his standpoint, Witkiewicz seems to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Notwithstanding, Witkiewicz’s actual oeuvre presents a very interesting prism of society and culture – rich with the past, vanguard within its contemporaneity and projecting far into the future – and a fierce civilizational critique.

### **Witkiewicz: Past, Contemporary, Future**

In the preface I noted how Witkiewicz has been assessed as being a precursor (“Both his plays and his novels show a late nineteenth-century world rushing abruptly into the late twentieth century”<sup>91</sup>) and as an anachronism (“a dazzling relic from the beginning of the twentieth century who had strayed into contemporary times”<sup>92</sup>), and seemingly out of time with his contemporaneity. Indeed, Witkiewicz is seemingly a dazzling blend of the future and the past. One thing that may elucidate is that Witkiewicz’s poetics itself is closely linked to the temporal linearity of his historiosophy: showing a past crushed in a contemporaneity heading towards a progressively inhumane future.

The past Witkiewicz carries with him is in many ways that of ‘the metaphysical feeling of the strangeness of existence’, a romantic speculative mysticism, reminiscent of mystic writers as Tadeusz Miciński and of decadent Young Poland ones, like Stanisław

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<sup>91</sup> Gerould, *Witkiewicz as an Imaginative Writer* (Washington, 1981), p. 340

<sup>92</sup> Witkiewicz, *The Mother & Other Unsavory Plays* (New York, 1993), p. 9

Przybyszewski. Witkiewicz's first novel, *622 upadki Bunga* from 1910, is perhaps the best example of his own writing of this sort. What happens from 1914 and onwards is that, upon realizing that his standpoint now is out of vogue, he builds in a terroristic layer into his work (with a theoretical framework to back it up), meant to dis-illusion the viewer from the present and allowing the uncanny ghosts of the past to haunt the pragmatic weltanschauung of contemporaneity.<sup>93</sup>

While the multiple layers of time present without actual *passage* of time in Witkiewicz's poetics is fascinating in its own right as a means of representation, it is also one of the key factors stretching his works far into the future. Witkiewicz clearly shows social changes, while showing a disappointment with them. Within the layers of time there is always the memory of what came before and what is 'truer'. It comes up as memories, breakdowns, walking dead, Spika's corpse, et cetera. So, while being in the temporally present there is always an uncanny (surmounted but seemingly back) past present as well, making for an odd stillness of time. With time, ghosts accumulate and the future will only get worse, until man is automated. This fragmented nature of his works – able to show complex units as weltanschauungs and societies of past and present simultaneously while remaining very subjective – make for a poetics somewhat precursory to that of post-modernism. In fact, just as Gerould writes, Witkiewicz, in a way, shows the journey of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century into post-modernism.

Witkiewicz in his contemporaneity thus becomes something of an extreme radical and a reactionary conservative. He is radically vanguard in his aesthetics and poetics but is adamantly staring backwards and inwards ideologically.

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<sup>93</sup> Witkiewicz's 'terrorism' thus in fact is decidedly uncanny in the Freudian sense: He retains a door to former (surmounted) weltanschauungs, and allows vestiges of them to invade the present *en masse*. (Compare Freud: "an uncanny experience occurs [...] when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.", Freud, S. From The "Uncanny". in: Leitch a. o. (Ed.). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York, 2010), pp. 838-839)

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## Streszczenie po polsku

### **Rozpadające się światopoglądy: O poetyce progresywnego rozczarowania**

#### **Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza**

##### **Komentarze dotyczące filozoficznego stanowiska Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza, rozbudowane poprzez dekonstrukcję sztuki „Oni” (1920)**

Praca składa się z trzech części: wprowadzenie, dekonstrukcja i konkluzje z dyskusją.

We wprowadzeniu przedstawiam mój horyzont czytania, poprzez który szkicowana jest problematyka oraz stawiane są pytania, na które później próbuję odpowiedzieć. Postawione pytania to: jaka jest relacja między traumą pragmatyzacji społeczeństwa, opisaną przez Witkiewicza w jego traktatach, to znaczy odejście od metafizyki poprzez proces osiągnięcia pozytywistycznych celów ogólnoludzkich, który jednocześnie oznacza niwelację kultury i automatyzację człowieka, a osobistą traumą Witkiewicza, która go nęka od czasu samobójstwa jego narzeczonej, Jadwigi Janczewskiej, w 1914. roku, oraz przeżycia w carskiej armii podczas Pierwszej Wojny Światowej i rewolucji październikowej; jaką rolę gra w tym kontekście witkiewiczowska poetyka i estetyka ‘czystej formy’.

Wchodząc w dyskurs Witkiewicza, kluczowa staje się relacja między szaleństwem – metafizyką – depresją i ‘metafizycznym przeżyciem dziwności istnienia’ (termin Witkiewicza). Linijka z wiersza Tadeusza Micińskiego *Samobójca*, „*Ja, wybierając los mój, wybrałem szaleństwo*”, jest użyta jako motto powieści Witkiewicza *Nienasyceńca*, i zawiera wiele z tych pytań: Co to znaczy wybierać swój los, a ponadto szaleństwo? Ani losu, ani też szaleństwa nie można wybierać, a jednak Witkiewicz z tym się identyfikuje. Co to znaczy i jak to się łączy z krytyką cywilizacji Witkiewicza i z poetyką ‘czystej formy’?

Stawiam tu tezę, że można łączyć obie traumy, ponieważ zaczynają występować u Witkiewicza w tym samym czasie, i wyrażone są tymi samymi słowami. Poza tym jest postawiona dodatkowa teza, że poetykę ‘czystej formy’ można rozumieć jako terrorystyczny ruch oporu przeciw pragmatyzacji, jak na rzecz metafizyki.

Dramat *Oni* (1920) dotyczy toku wydarzeń w domu letnim kolekcjonera sztuki Bałandaszka. Między wywodami o sztuce droczy się ze swoją konkubiną, aktorką Spiką. Dom zostaje zinfiltrowany i okupowany przez *nich*, rewolucyjną grupę, której celem jest unicestwienie sztuki – ponieważ *oni* ją uważają za źródło zła i indywidualności – i w ten sposób zautomatyzować człowieka. *Oni* zaczynają swoją „pracę” od zniszczenia kolekcji

Bałandaszka. *Oni* też infiltrują teatr, doprowadzając do wewnętrznego rozpadu teatru, poprzez wprowadzanie coraz więcej absurdałnych sztuk. Ta zmiana doprowadza do śmierci aktorki Spiki. Tefuan jest demaskowany jako zazdrosny mąż Spiki i w momencie jej śmierci staje się rozczarowany hypokryzją swojej ideologii, tak jak i Bałandaszek się staje rozczarowany już bez kolekcji i bez Spiki. Zostaje rewolucja i *ich* pułkownik Abłoputo, niewzruszony wydarzeniami, i zdecydowany dalej prowadzić *ich* rewolucję.

Dekonstruuje sztukę najpierw na dwa układy: Bałandaszka i *ich*. Następnie patrzę na nie jako dwie oddzielne sztuki które się same demaskują (pokazują swoje własne intra-hipokrytyczne elementy): Bałandaszek jako naprawdę chcący być artystą a nie kolekcjonerem; Tefuan, tworzący rewolucję, tylko aby zemścić się na Spice. W ciągu osobnych demaskacji, układy/sztuki przypadkowo się łączą, co też podwaja następujące rozczarowania: każdy układ jest podwójnie rozczarowany, ponieważ też jest świadkiem rozczarowania swojej alternatywy. Pod tymi układami czai się nicość, którą w rozczarowaniu widzą i Bałandaszek i Tefuan, i, że ich układy to kryją, każdy układ coraz nadaremniej. Odtąd można mówić o dwóch światopoglądach i o zmianach w czasie, łącząc to z katastroficzną historiozofią Witkiewicza.

W konkluzjach syntetycznie łączę stawiane pytania razem z dekonstrukcją.

W sztuce '*Oni*' widzę terrorystyczny katharsis 'czystej formy' w identyfikacji widza z rozczarowaniem Bałandaszka i Tefuana. Terror nicości w poetyce Witkiewicza jest odbieraniem 'przeżycia metafizycznego' człowieka spragmatyzowanego. Terroryzm ukazuje się poprzez przeżycie metafizyczne jako stan terroru nicości: widz staje się transgresyjnym elementem w anty-metafizycznym społeczeństwie.

Oksymoron wybierania szaleństwa, łączony z metafizyką, depresją i 'metafizycznym przeżyciem', objaśniam przez użycie Michela Foucaulta rozumienie szaleństwa jako 'ciszy historii', i jako abjekcję, w terminologii Julii Kristevy. To znaczy, że po znalezieniu się w takiej pozycji, po samobójstwie narzeczonej, i po rewolucji, Witkiewicz wybiera, że w tej pozycji pozostaje, komunikując się „z drugiej strony” terrorystycznie poprzez 'czystą formę'. Takie stanowisko umożliwia otwarcie drzwi do byłych światopoglądów i nadaje jego poetyce charakter awangardowy i niemal postmodernistyczny, lecz ideologicznie introspektywny i konserwatywny.