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AFFECTS THE HEART OF THE POLISH AVANT-GARDE THEATER¹

Kantor's idea that a work of art should provoke the audience to develop the intended affect was in fact similar to Antonin Artaud's beliefs and his conception of the "cruelty" of theater. It is important to note, though, that the cruelty Artaud discussed was by no means related merely to the theme of the play or to the events depicted in its fictional world. Rather, what he meant was affecting the audience: affecting real, actually existing human beings. It was for that reason that Kantor found Artaud's concepts interesting.

The question of affectivity is among the crucial issues studied by the humanities today. To the historical Avant-Garde,² the radical break with tradition consisted in a focus on both the non-rational mode of creation and the reception of a work of art. This was particularly relevant to the so-called Polish "new art,"³ which directed its attention to artistic communication stretched between rational elements and the sphere of emotions, thus attempting to define, in its own way, the space of entities today described as affects.

In the 1920s, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, a Polish painter, playwright, philosopher, and theoretician of art, created the concept of Pure Form (*Czysta Forma*),⁴

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² The artistic and literary movements characteristic of the period between 1905 and 1930.

³ The term „New Art” (*nowa sztuka*) collectively describes the poetics used by Polish prose writers and poets of the period between 1918 and 1923, as well as the literary groups active at that time in Poland. *Nowa Sztuka*, in turn, was a literary journal whose editors were initially Anatol Stern and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, who, in time, would represent opposing literary groups and currents of thought. The broad concept of New Art was, by the late 1920's, replaced by that of the Avant-Garde. See Aleksander Wójtowicz, *Nowa sztuka: Początki (i koniec)* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ 2017), 13 and 17–43. In this context, Anna Nasiłowska writes also about "new poetry." See Anna Nasiłowska, *A History of Polish Literature*, trans. Anna Zaranko (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2024), 360–443.

⁴ See Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz ("Witkacy"), "On Pure Form," trans. Catherine S. Leach, in *Aesthetics in Twentieth-century Poland: Selected Essays*, eds. Jean G. Harrell and Alina Wierzbianańska (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1973), 41–65.

which was one of the most original ideas of the Polish avant-garde. The contribution of Witkacy (as he would call himself) is significant in this context since it was his plays that provided the basis for Tadeusz Kantor's stage productions, among them his most famous one, *Umarła klasa* (The dead class). In general, one might say that the theoretical concepts worked out within the field of aesthetics in the 1920s had a profound impact on the entire twentieth-century theatrical practice. Moreover, one may go as far as to say that they came close to the ideas Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari⁵ would develop in their works only years later. The artistic creed crucial to the present considerations embraces the ideas Tadeusz Kantor expressed in his book, published in Italian⁶, French,⁷ and Polish,⁸ which summed up the series of lectures he delivered in the Scuola d'Arte Drammatica in Milan in 1986. A concluding element of the course was a stage performance *Un matrimonio*.⁹ The full Polish title of the play, *Ślub w manierze konstruktywistycznej i surrealistycznej* can be translated as "The wedding in a constructivist and surrealist style." The artist's intention was not only to place his work on the map of the twentieth-century artistic trends, but also to identify the constructivist and surrealist influences on Polish art of the time, including his own. The reason was that Kantor believed the two movements to have been fundamental to the twentieth-century avant-garde concepts. In retrospect, one can say that he perceived modern art as exhibiting either surrealist or constructivist tendencies, which he understood metonymically. Such an approach of Kantor's can be seen in the historic corrections he would introduce in the successive stagings of a performance.¹⁰ The significance of Kantor's vision can be seen in that he would tend not only to identify the two trends within the inner structure of artistic concepts, or in particular works, but also to extrapolate his pattern of art perception on art characteristic of entire countries. Thus, he believed the modern art of France, Switzerland, Spain, and the Czech Republic to be under the surrealist influence, while that of Russia, Germany, and Poland to exhibit constructivist trends. An excellent rhetor, Kantor did not aspire to formulate his views with scientific precision; rather, he wished to identify the main opposing conceptions of the art of his time. On the one hand—he held—modern art was to be primarily about unfettered

⁵ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Percept, Affect, and Concept," in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 163–99.

⁶ See Tadeusz Kantor, *Lezioni milanesi*, trans. Ludmiła Ryba (Milan: Ubulibri, 1988).

⁷ See Tadeusz Kantor, *Leçons de Milan*, trans. Marguerite Pozzoli and Marie Thérèse Vido-Rzewuska (Arles: Actes Sud–Papiers, 1990).

⁸ See Tadeusz Kantor, *Lekcje mediolańskie 1986* (Kraków: Cricoteka, 1991).

⁹ *Un matrimonio*, directed by Tadeusz Kantor, Civica scuola d'arte drammatica, Piccolo Teatro di Milano, June 25, 1986–July 23, 1986.

¹⁰ See Kantor, *Lekcje mediolańskie 1986*, 115–16.

artistic expression; on the other, though, it had to be a result of thoughtful action, of construction, of the artist's work in a given medium. Moreover, Kantor's distinction between the surrealist and the constructivist art had implications for art reception theory and inspired him to conduct various theoretical experiments. There was also another important aspect to Kantor's perception of art, namely, he believed the twentieth century exhibited a rivalry between the tendencies towards art guided by emotions (or emotions evoking art) and those towards intellectually motivated art that would appeal to the rationality of the audience. Needless to add, Kantor's rhetorical strategy had him silent on the fact that the dichotomy in question had characterized the entire history of art and reflection on its practice.

The constructivist and surrealist elements he introduced in his stage practice naturally expressed his creativity, and although, being himself, he claimed his art had gone beyond both trends, it was deeply rooted in them. More than that, Kantor's entire creative practice and theory oscillated around precisely the tension between art as an emotional practice and art as a result of intellectual work, or around art meant to evoke emotions while received intellectually.

Kantor did subscribe to the opinion, not uncommon in the Polish art historical discourse, that surrealism had no place in Poland,¹¹ which was a consequence of too strong an influence of the Roman Catholic Church.¹² While Kantor's rhetorical strategy necessarily involved a simplification of the issue, he would also extensively discuss and attempt to explain why it was the constructivist tendencies that became dominant in Polish art. Not unexpectedly, his view contributed to the spreading of the popular opinion that Polish artists disregarded surrealism. While Kantor's views in question may be described as retrograde, since he based his concept of surrealism on André Breton's manifestos exclusively, he was undoubtedly right in holding that the Polish, Russian, and German avant-gardes were dominated by constructivism. This is confirmed by Andrzej Turowski, who claims that the Polish model of constructivism did not leave room for Dadaism.¹³ The background of the phenomenon was certainly complex, yet one must note that a strong influence of the Romantic ideas in all the three countries was not insignificant in that context. Indeed, it was the Romantic age that brought appreciation of emotions and affects, prioritizing them over rationality, which was noted even by André Breton, whose 1924 "Manifesto of Surrealism,"¹⁴ expounds a "catalogue" of the

¹¹ See Tadeusz Kantor, *Próba mojej biografii*, manuscript in the archive of artist's family.

¹² See *ibidem*.

¹³ See Andrzej Turowski, *Awangardowe marginesy* (Warszawa: Instytut Kultury, 1998), 36.

¹⁴ See André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), 1–47.

forerunners of surrealism, an “ideal library,”¹⁵ as Małgorzata Baranowska calls it. It is worth mentioning, though, that while the Polish avant-garde considered the Romantic tradition as an enemy which had to be “mercilessly bitten and killed,”¹⁶ what the creators of new art saw in Romanticism was above all the power of rebellion, the need for social involvement, and affectivity informing its literary works. That was specifically true of theater-makers, who would not infrequently refer to the theatrical concepts developed by Adam Mickiewicz.¹⁷ The ambivalent perception of the Romantic Age and its ideas, which was characteristic of the twentieth-century Polish avant-garde, was inspired by works of Stanisław Wyspiański.

A strong impact of the Romantic tradition on Polish culture was also evidenced by the short-lived phenomenon of the Polish Futurism. While the movement originated in 1919, with the publication of mainly manifestos and various debut volumes, it was already in 1921 that Bruno Jasiński published an essay “Futuryzm polski (bilans)” (The Polish futurism: A balance sheet) in which he summed up the accomplishments of its followers.¹⁸ Indeed, by that time, the poetics of Futurism had changed: both the theory against which the movement had crystallized and the literary practices of the Futurists gave way to those of the intellectual milieu professing constructivist ideas and centered around the avant-garde magazine *Zwrotnica* (The switch) published in Cracow. A similar approach to that of the *Zwrotnica* circle can be found in the works and literary theory developed by Witkiewicz. The leader of the followers of *Zwrotnica* was Tadeusz Peiper, not infrequently described as the “Pope” of the Polish avant-garde. Despite the clear constructivist sympathies of the *Zwrotnica* milieu (the magazine published articles by Władysław Strzemiński and Walter Gropius, among others), Peiper himself tended to avoid the term “construction,” and would speak about “building” a work of art instead. Witkacy, on his part, in his critique of the primacy of theory over creative effort, outrightly disavowed constructivism.¹⁹ In general, one might say that, rather than compliance with the core of the pure theory of constructivism (if one ever existed), the output of

¹⁵ Małgorzata Baranowska, *Surrealna wyobraźnia i poezja* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1984), 42.

¹⁶ Bruno Jasiński, “Do narodu polskiego: Mańifest w sprawie natyhmiasowej futuryzacji życia,” in *Antologia polskiego futurizmu i Nowej Sztuki*, ed. Zbigniew Jarosiński (Wrocław: Osolineum, 1978), 8. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

¹⁷ See Andrzej Pronaszko, “Odrodzenie teatru,” in *Mysł teatralna polskiej awangardy 1919-1939*, ed. Stanisław Marczak-Oborski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1973), 281–95. See also Leon Schiller, “Teatr jutra,” in *Mysł teatralna polskiej awangardy 1919-1939*, 336–38.

¹⁸ See Bruno Jasiński, “Futuryzm polski (bilans),” in: *Antologia polskiego futurizmu i Nowej Sztuki*, 49–50.

¹⁹ See Stanisław I. Witkiewicz, “Wstęp do teorii Czystej Formy w teatrze,” in Stanisław I. Witkiewicz, *Teatr i inne pisma o teatrze* (Warszawa: PIW, 1995), 13.

Polish avant-garde demonstrated a combination of various literary tendencies of the time, simultaneously focusing on the idea of the work of art as a result of a “building process,” as well as on the impact it had on its audience.

Evidence of the above can be found in statements such as the one that a poet is one who creates sadness rather than “pours down the tears,”²⁰ or that “any fool can emotionally experience things, but the ability to recreate a past experience at the desk marks a poet.”²¹ What we see here is a confrontation with the modernist, and in fact Romantic, conception of art and artistic activity. Worth noting is also the fact that, already at that time, the tension between the emotional reception of a work of art, conceived in a modern way, and the intellectual one was acknowledged. Julian Przyboś realized that the Cracow Avant Garde had dethroned the Futurists and the reason why it happened was, in his opinion, that the artists who started New Art were too emotional and lacked a strong theoretical background which was characteristic of the poets with a constructivist approach.

The background thus delineated is significant to the present considerations because, around 1926, the term “avant-garde” began to be used to describe what had hitherto been called “New Art.” Interestingly, there used to be a *Nowa Sztuka* (New art) magazine published at the time, whose editors were poets Anatol Stern and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, representatives of the two opposing literary currents. It was around that time that the term *afektywny* (affective) began to recur in *Zwrotnica* as well as in works of the writers who were critical of its theoretical stance. The meaning of the term, however, was different from today’s. In modern Polish, *afekt* is an archaic term used when referring to a display of emotion, although, when it appeared in an entry in Jan Karłowicz’s dictionary of 1900, it was not described as such²². However, while considering the old and the modern meanings of the term as identical would amount to a major simplification, the present considerations are by no means focused on the historical development of the Polish language, and the above observation only points to the proximity between the ideas worked out by the Polish historical avant-garde and the concepts developed by Deleuze and Guattari.

Although differently worded, the theses Deleuze and Guattari put forward, or ones very similar to them, had certainly been discussed by philosophers before *What Is Philosophy?* was published. In his paper “W poszukiwaniu

²⁰ Julian Przyboś, “Człowiek w rzeczach,” *Zwrotnica*, no. 8 (1926), 210.

²¹ Tadeusz Peiper, “Nowe tworzenie,” in Tadeusz Peiper, “*Tędy*,” “*Nowe usta*,” ed. Teresa Podolska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1972), 360.

²² See *Słownik języka polskiego*, s.v. “afekt,” eds. Jan Karłowicz, Adam Kryński, and Władysław Niedźwiedzki (Warszawa, Lubowski i S-ka, 1900), 11.

afektu predeleuzjańskiego” (In search of a pre-Deleuzian affect),²³ Tomasz Swoboda scrutinizes the use of the term “affect” as it appeared in the art magazine *Documents*, edited by Georges Bataille and published in Paris between 1929 and 1930. The fact is that although in the late twentieth century, there was a “postmodern leap to ‘affect,’”²⁴ or an undoubted interest in that category, the Polish avant-garde interpreted it in uniquely different a way. The specificity of the Polish, constructivist avant-garde lay in the ambivalence of the “pure form” and “social engagement.” Additionally, the specificity in question was marked by the dichotomic, both affirmative and negative, attitude to the Romantic tradition. Such was the complexity of the contradictions that shaped the Polish avant-garde, the core issue of the entire movement being the relationship between emotionality and rationality in art.

Witkacy’s theoretical considerations and his 1922 pursuit of the Pure Form in art, rooted in precisely the same tension, are probably the closest to Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas in question. However, Witkacy, who developed his ideas in reference to painting and theater, would not use the term “affect” as such. Moreover, the artistic creed he proposed was a relatively late one in the history of the avant-garde, considering the fact that the Manifesto of Futurism written by Tommaso Marinetti was published in Italy already in 1909. As such, Witkacy’s ideas are noteworthy in that the time perspective allowed him for a novel perception of the new art. It was also not without significance that during the Russian Revolution of 1917 Witkacy was staying in Russia and witnessed the aesthetic turn parallel to the political events: the fact is that many ideas characteristic of the Russian constructivism heavily impacted European art of the time. It might have been his personal experience then that made Witkacy develop the idea of art’s non-involvement in socio-political issues. Undoubtedly, he also saw the naivety of the Futurist project combining art with politics and was familiar with the Russian constructivist art. Witkacy’s theory of art was part of his broader approach to the crisis of his contemporary culture as he perceived it. In his philosophy of history, he expressed the view that mankind was on a path of self-destruction and had already gone through successive stages of its ongoing collapse. He believed that while religion and philosophy will sometime die,²⁵ art could still be saved, and eventually, as the last resort, save humanity from destruction. The factor determining the end of the eras of religion and philosophy was, according

²³ See Tomasz S w o b o d a, “W poszukiwaniu afektu predeleuzjańskiego,” in *Kultura afektu – afekty w kulturze: Humanistyka po zwrocie afektywnym*, eds. Ryszard Nycz, Anna Łebkowska, and Agnieszka Dauksza (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2016), 151–69.

²⁴ Anna R. B u r z y Ń s k a, “Afekt – podejrzany i pożądany,” in *Kultura afektu – afekty w kulturze: Humanistyka po zwrocie afektywnym*, 130.

²⁵ See W i t k i e w i c z, “On Pure Form,” 56.

to Witkacy, the disappearance of what he called “a metaphysical feeling.”²⁶ One cannot help noticing that Witkiewicz’s criticism of his contemporary times resonated with theses already formulated in modernity, concerning the horizontal perspective of modern man. Suffice it to mention here José Ortega y Gasset’s theory of the mass-man²⁷ with its description of a modern individual as the “primitive in revolt ... the barbarian”²⁸ incapable of transcending his status quo. In a similar vein, Thomas Stearns Eliot, in poems such as “The Hollow Men”²⁹ or “Animula,”³⁰ writes about the spiritual impoverishment of modern man, and such concepts are echoed, for instance, in works of Józef Tischner, a notable Polish philosopher of the late twentieth century, who would speak of the “terraistic,”³¹ earthbound horizon of man. Witkacy in turn would describe those representing such a world view as “pyknics” (*pyknik*).³² While speaking about the characters in his plays who showed such characteristics, he would in turn use the description “pragmatists,” simultaneously pointing to the contrast between the ample physical posture of each such person and her scanty spirituality.

In his view, the absence of “a metaphysical feeling” was a general characteristic of modernity, but what he found most disturbing was that metaphysical aspects had been gradually disappearing from such great fields of human expression as religion, philosophy, and art. The problem, however, did not lie in that specific themes were being abandoned; rather, he held, religion and philosophy seemed to have lost the capability of, so to speak, organizing metaphysical feelings or expressing them. Only art still had a potential to assume such a role, and yet it had to be art adapted to the new times. Moreover, an artistic creation which was not only to express, but, above all, to evoke metaphysical feelings was not to be contaminated with “realistic” (*życiowe*)³³ elements, as Witkiewicz called them. However, it must be noted that the theory he thus worked out was not fully incorporated in the stage productions of his own plays.

²⁶ Ibidem, 54.

²⁷ See José O r t e g a y G a s s e t, *The Revolt of the Masses* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022).

²⁸ Ibidem, 74.

²⁹ See Thomas Stearns E l i o t, “The Hollow Men,” in Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), 77–82.

³⁰ See Thomas Stearns E l i o t, “Animula,” in Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962*, 103–4.

³¹ Józef T i s c h n e r, *Marxism and Christianity: The Quarrel and the Dialogue in Poland*, trans. Marek B. Zaleski and Benjamin Flore (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1987), 70.

³² See Stanisław Ignacy W i t k i e w i c z, *Narcotics*, trans. Søren A. Gauger (Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 2018), EPUB.

³³ W i t k i e w i c z, “Wstęp do teorii Czystej Formy w teatrze,” 41.

Among the factors that inspired Witkiewicz to proceed with his theoretical considerations was the fact that the poetry of the first wave of the avant-garde was highly emotional, but it lacked a theoretical foundation. According to Przyboś, it was its strong theoretical background that made it possible for the Cracow Avant-Garde to become the leading group in the Polish New Art. Indeed, Tadeusz Peiper, who was its chief member, was also known as the “pope” of the avant garde. Przyboś continued his narrative about the dominating position of the circle of *Zwrotnica* also in the decades to come, even in the second half of the twentieth century. What Witkacy actually accomplished was inscribing reflection on art into philosophical categories, which he did by means of “perceptual ... ‘a priori materials,’”³⁴ which inherently contribute to an affect.

As has already been said, according to Tadeusz Kantor’s rhetorical and thus simplistic distinction, constructivism was to be seen as the opposite pole of affectivity. Yet, the constructivist concept of a work of art as resulting from the cooperation of all the faculties of a human being was an indication that affectivity remained within their field of interest. Przemysław Czapliński emphasizes yet another trend of the avant-garde, namely, one inspired by Bertolt Brecht and the Brechtian tradition, i.e., cutting the viewer off from the affective reception of the presented world³⁵. However, Czapliński disregards the fact that Brecht’s work interacted with the audience affectively at the level of form, the form itself was affective by being at odds with the world it represented. The Brechtian model corresponded with what Witkacy perceived as the key element of the reception of modern art.³⁶ Among his observations was that, ironically, the audience of avant-garde art interpreted it precisely in terms of realism (*życiowo*), thus showing total ignorance and *de facto* not entering into modern artistic communication. “Art preserves, and it is the only thing in the world that is preserved. It preserves and is preserved in itself,”³⁷ wrote Deleuze and Guattari. Witkacy, on the other hand, pointed out that “What we cannot cross is the borderline of the dramatic work’s identity with itself.”³⁸ In this respect, one cannot help but observe that the postulates regarding, on the one hand, the inner unity of a work of art and, on the other, its autonomy, both characteristic of the avant-garde creative practices, converge with the theoretical ideas of Deleuze and Guattari. Already after the failure of the “so-

³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, “Percept, Affect, and Concept,” 178.

³⁵ See Przemysław Czapliński, “Poetyka afektywna i powieść o rodzinie,” in *Kultura afektu – afekty w kulturze: Humanistyka po zwrocie afektywnym*, 372–401.

³⁶ See Witkiewicz, “Wstęp do teorii Czystej Formy w teatrze,” 31.

³⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, “Percept, Affect, and Concept,” 163.

³⁸ Witkiewicz, “Wstęp do teorii Czystej Formy w teatrze,” 20.

cial avant-garde,”³⁹ as Kantor called it, the constructivists strongly emphasized the autotelic nature of a work of art, drawing a parallel between the artist’s construct and the machine. Therefore, one can say that it was action that lay at the basis of the constructivist vision of art. Witkacy spoke about modern art being misunderstood in the sense that its audience would not associate any affects with its form.

An artist of the early twentieth century, Witkacy found himself in a position having to refute the accusations from those who held that his works, paintings, as well as plays, depicted a deformed world. Ironically, despite the time passed, such opinions are still recurring even nowadays. Deleuze and Guattari write: “Harmonies are affects. Consonance and dissonance, harmonies of tone and color, are affects of music or painting. Rameau emphasized the identity of harmony and affect. The artist creates blocs of percepts and affects, but the only law of creation is that the compound must stand up on its own. The artist’s greatest difficulty is to make it *stand up on its own*. Sometimes this requires what is, from the viewpoint of an implicit model, from the viewpoint of lived perceptions and affections, great geometrical improbability, physical imperfection, and organic abnormality. But these sublime errors accede to the necessity of art if they are internal means of standing up (or sitting or lying).”⁴⁰ Witkacy, meanwhile, states that the essence of art is to show “the meaninglessness of becoming. It [Art] is about the possibility of a completely free deformation of life, or of the world of fantasy, for the purpose of creating a whole the meaning of which will be determined only by its inner, purely staged construction rather than by the rigors of psychology or a plot following some presumptions taken from daily life.”⁴¹

A common analogy with music becomes apparent: one can compare a work of art to a symphony. However, it is not that Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas converge with those of Witkacy simply on the level of the metaphors they use; rather, what one can observe is a convergence of their postulates regarding the autotelic nature of a work of art. Equally important is their approach to the issue of composition which is also emblematic of the constructivist movement. Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Witkacy, hold and even strongly emphasize that a work of art is a composition of elements necessary for it to become an autonomous whole which is simultaneously performative, that is capable of affecting the audience engaging with it.

According to Witkacy, the criticism of modern art for its works being allegedly deformed was a result of miscomprehension, while the critics did not

³⁹ Tadeusz Kantor, *Lekcje mediolańskie*, recordings in the archive of Cricoteka.

⁴⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, “Percept, Affect, and Concept,” 164.

⁴¹ Witkiewicz, “Wstęp do teorii Czystej Formy w teatrze,” 36.

show sufficient reflection on the form of art as such. The mimetic function of the alleged deformation of the world depicted in modern art did not lie in presenting reality according to the common standards of beauty, but in the communication with the audience accomplished on a discursive level, by appealing to the then modern perceptions of a dynamically changing world. In that sense a work of art was to be fully autonomous, autotelic, and expressing its own idea. "The artistic rather than realistic perspective consists in that, in a painting, one does not seek for the actual relationships of the objects it depicts, or for a purely sensual satisfaction with the juxtapositions of forms and colors but makes an effort to conceive of such separate elements as an integral unity, to integrate their multiplicity into a unity."⁴²

Importantly, when speaking of the unity of a work of art, Witkacy emphasizes even more strongly its autotelic nature: the fact that it need be self-contained rather than utilitarian. It is important, however, he stresses, that the emotional reception of art is never sufficient and does not exhaust the overall postulate of the art-reception strategy.⁴³ Thus, in the theory of aesthetics Witkacy developed, one can clearly see not only an anti-Romantic rebellion (which, as already mentioned, was probably a fundamental mark of the Polish avant-garde), but also an opposition to the Futurist conception of art. "While talking about the unity of a work of art, Witkacy stresses its autotelic nature even more strongly by emphasizing that a work of art cannot be perceived as a utilitarian object, but as one directed onto itself. He observes that an emotional reception of a work of art never suffices and can by no means exhaust the strategy of the work's reception. His standpoint encompasses not only an anti-Romantic revolt, so fundamental to the Polish avant-garde, but also his objection to the Futurist concept of art. While talking about "a metaphysical feeling," Witkacy does not stop at its emotional aspect. Further on, while addressing the issue of necessity in relation to a composition, he observes that "we are never in the position to ultimately account for the absolute necessity of the presence of a particular note in a symphony or of a particular patch of paint in a painting."⁴⁴ While analyzing Pablo Picasso's and Botticelli's paintings, he discerns the differences between old, bygone art and the modern one, which he considers of value, precisely in that the latter combines emotional and rational qualities. However, he does not overvalue either of them.

Indeed, it is the effort to find a balance between the beholder's emotions, or affects, and rational expertise in the issues of the identity and ontology of a work of art that delineates another plane where a convergence of the theories

⁴² Ibidem, 22.

⁴³ See *ibidem*.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 26.

developed by, respectively, Deleuze and Guattari and Witkacy can be observed. While addressing the problem of the mimetic nature of a work of art from the ontological perspective, Deleuze and Guattari note: "If resemblance haunts the work of art, it is because sensation refers only to its material: it is the percept or affect of the material itself, the smile of oil, the gesture of fired clay, the thrust of metal, the crouch of Romanesque stone, and the soaring of Gothic stone."⁴⁵ The construction of a work of art, which results in bringing the category of affect to the level of materiality, was no less important to Witkacy, who wrote that the image of a work "spontaneously appears in the artist's imagination either as an objectless vision in which directional tensions between particular masses are more or less defined, or as one in which such masses appear as silhouettes of the objects, and the moment of them becoming actual objects due to the tensions between them is not defined as such."⁴⁶

The issue of the materiality of the artwork was generally important to the avant-garde. Artists representing that current, who wished to create new art, questioned the artistic value of the works created in the past. However, this made them redefine the traditional categories of expression. Hence, the Futurists began their battle with words, painters scrutinized the meaning of concepts such as "composition," "painting," or "paint," whereas theater-makers focused on making stage art more theatrical. Simultaneously, their emphasis on the materiality of the work of art rendered its mimetic character impossible. Interestingly, the understanding of the issue in question gave rise to the artistic differences between Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor. What they had in common, though, was the idea that a performance is a "separate reality,"⁴⁷ as Kantor called it, or a "truth,"⁴⁸ which was a category used by Jerzy Grotowski. At the same time, Kantor, unlike Grotowski, exposed the materiality of a stage performance. Walking on stage himself, he showed that the play was a construct, a "manipulation,"⁴⁹ as he called it (thus, he ethically justified manipulation in art).

The emphasis on the creative aspects in the making of a performance was important to Kantor also at the level of operating and consciously evoking the affect in the spectator. He earned a reputation for his verbal brawls made in public, which, according to his close ones, were largely performed and during which he would shout out that he spent his nights constructing precisely such

⁴⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, "Percept, Affect, and Concept," 166.

⁴⁶ Witkiewicz, "Wstęp do teorii Czystej Formy w teatrze," 23.

⁴⁷ Tadeusz Kantor, "Lekcje mediolańskie", 78-79.

⁴⁸ See Jerzy Grotowski, "Świat powinien być miejscem prawdy," in Jerzy Grotowski, *Teksty zebrane*, ed. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek et al. (Warszawa: Instytut im. J. Grotowskiego, Instytut Teatralny and Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), 618-23.

⁴⁹ Kantor, *Lekcje mediolańskie*, recordings in the archive of Cricoteka.

stage scenes so as to “make them cry.” Such was the basis of Kantor’s concept of the “theater of emotions” (*teatr wzruszeń*),⁵⁰ which referred to evoking emotions among the audience rather than to echoing the artist’s affects or recording them.

“The aim of art is to wrest the percept from the perceptions of the objects and the states of a perceiving subject, to wrest the affect from affections as the transition from one state to another,”⁵¹ wrote Deleuze and Guattari. The authors emphasize the materiality of the affect: it being an autonomous entity. Witkacy defined it in a similar way, while speaking of metaphysical feelings and referring to the philosophical category of beauty. It is evident, however, that he his focus was ontology rather than aesthetics.

Interestingly, in a similar context, Tadeusz Peiper observed, somewhat ironically, that “art serves causing affects which sober, strengthen or cleanse, and whenever it succeeds in it, it enjoys the honor of competing with a factory producing ventilators or likes of soap.”⁵² However, the poet was by no means concerned with questions of the utilitarian nature of art. The metaphor of “factory” had a double purpose. Firstly, it showed the emotion evoked in the audience as consciously controlled by the artist, and therefore affective, fixed, and causing an affect to be evoked. Secondly, the poetic metaphors of coolness or cleansing are juxtaposed in the above quotation with the actual machines which are supposed to cause the effect of coolness or cleanliness. The poet’s obsession with machines is significant in that it makes it possible to combine affects and percepts into a work: a performative, functional work which comes into being not for utilitarian purposes, but affectively.

“Sensations, percepts, and affects are *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived.”⁵³ In this respect, Deleuze and Guattari attempt to juxtapose art with drawings made by people under the influence of drugs or by children. It is worth noting, that Witkacy also took drugs for artistic purposes, specifically when painting commissioned portraits, which he did not consider as art (he painted portraits merely for financial profit). Thus, his approach once again converges with that of Deleuze and Guattari, who stress the difference between a work made by an artist and one produced by an intoxicated person, the latter being purely emotional rather than affective. It was on similar grounds that Witkacy questioned portraiture as an art.

One can justifiably argue that Polish constructivism had a strong influence on the artistic trends that followed, among them the one creatively developed

⁵⁰ See Tadeusz Kantor, *Wielopole, Wielopole* (Kraków and Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984), 117.

⁵¹ Deleuze and Guattari, “Percept, Affect, and Concept,” 167.

⁵² Tadeusz Peiper, “Także inaczej,” in Peiper, “*Tędy*,” “*Nowe usta*,” 115–16.

⁵³ Deleuze and Guattari, “Percept, Affect, and Concept,” 164.

by Tadeusz Kantor already in the post-war Poland. To the Polish avant-garde artists, the essence of affects-making consisted in influencing the audience.

Kantor's idea that a work of art should provoke the audience to develop the intended affect was in fact similar to Antonin Artaud's beliefs and his conception of the "cruelty" of theater.⁵⁴ It is important to note, though, that the cruelty Artaud discussed was by no means related merely to the theme of the play or to the events depicted in its fictional world. Rather, what he meant was affecting the audience: affecting real, actually existing human beings. It was for that reason that Kantor found Artaud's concepts interesting. Needless to add that numerous other contemporary stage artists have incorporated them in their work.

Yet, a juxtaposition of such chronologically distant concepts manifests certain, not insignificant a drawback. In his early aesthetic theories, Witkacy, would not use the category of embodiment, which might be seen as a paradox, since—as Maciej Dombrowski observes⁵⁵—in the 1930s, he did create a particular metaphysics of embodiment. Witkacy believed that the category of corporeality might help "supplement" and improve the philosophical ideas, in particular those put forward by the phenomenologists. Dombrowski points out that Witkacy's concepts were close to those formulated only decades later by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.⁵⁶ However, it is significant in this context that although Witkacy undertook developed philosophical insights into the issue of the human body, he did not incorporate them into his aesthetic concepts, in particular into his theory of Pure Form. This is even more surprising, since he formulated his theory of art in relation to stage art which rests on the practice of embodiment: actors embody the words they speak.

The theater is also a form of art in which affectivity is the primary means of communication between the creator and the audience. Witkacy's conception of art remains disembodied, so to speak, as it does not address the issue of corporeality and thus demonstrates the rootedness of the Polish culture in the Romantic tradition.⁵⁷ Interestingly, the convergence of the Romantic, avant-garde, and postmodern trends in art comes to light in the stage productions of both Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski, artists whose works—despite their clear artistic differences—show numerous similarities on the level of

⁵⁴ See Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mark Taylor-Batty (London, New York and Dublin: Methuen Drama, 2024), 84.

⁵⁵ See Maciej Dombrowski, "Witkacego metafizyka cielesności," *Avant* 5, no. 1 (2014): 153.

⁵⁶ See *ibidem*.

⁵⁷ See Paweł Stangret, "Awangardowy wzorzec", in Paweł Stangret, *Artysta jako tekst: Nowoczesna sztuka metatekstu* (Warszawa, Wydawnictwo UKSW, 2018), 15-203.

rhetoric.⁵⁸ The “correspondence at the level of words”⁵⁹ in question concerns two aspects, namely, the emotional impact of the theater as such and the relationship of a given work to the cultural tradition.

Critics, in particular those representing international scholarship, have frequently raised the issue of the “Polishness” of the two artists, whose respective works were indeed deeply rooted in and showed persistent references to the Polish tradition.⁶⁰ Both creative attitudes, although radically different, have in common what Tom Ziemke called “historical embodiment,”⁶¹ which consists in emphasizing “a history of agent–environment interaction,”⁶² which, in the cases in question, includes the entire space of tradition and culture. Jerzy Grotowski himself asked, “What is the Romantic attitude?”⁶³ “In Poland—he explained—it is constituted by one’s own response to life and history.”⁶⁴ He further added that one’s own biography is as if an “organ” of the human being: it is the part of a human body which serves the perception of history.⁶⁵

A parallel attitude to the pervading presence of history is found in Tadeusz Kantor’s theater, where the actual, historical narrative is juxtaposed with a private perspective. This is how, in *Cricot 2*, figures such as Heinrich Himmler, Wit Stwos, Józef Piłsudski or Vsevolod Meyerhold enter the school classroom, the childhood room, as well as other artistic spaces created by Kantor. Such a confrontation of perspectives served, among others, exhibiting the human “misery” Kantor’s plays addressed by showing how miserable a private memory or a personal history look once juxtaposed with a narrative bringing up the names of powerful leaders, big numbers, and the dates that impacted the shape of the world. “The history written down by the historians is dead,”⁶⁶ Jerzy Grotowski

⁵⁸ See Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz, “Kantor-Grotowski, między maglem a wiecznością,” *Performer*, no. 2 (2011): <https://grotowski.net/performer/performer-2/kantor-grotowski-miedzy-maglem-wiecznoscia>.

⁵⁹ Zbigniew Osiński, *Jerzy Grotowski: Źródła, inspiracje, konteksty* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 1998), 326.

⁶⁰ See Dariusz Kosiński, “Argumentum: Polski teatr przemiany 2002,” in Dariusz Kosiński, *Polski teatr przemiany* (Wrocław: Instytut Jerzego Grotowskiego, 2007), 15–116.

⁶¹ Tom Ziemke, “What’s That Thing Called Embodiment?”, *Proceedings of the 25th Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society* 6 (2003): [https://www.researchgate.net/publication-n/248425645_What’s_that_Thing_Called_Embodiment](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/n/248425645_What’s_that_Thing_Called_Embodiment).

⁶² Ibidem.

⁶³ Jerzy Grotowski, “O praktykowaniu romantyzmu,” in Jerzy Grotowski, *Teksty zebrane*, eds. A. Adamiecka-Sitek et al. (Warszawa: Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego, Instytut Teatralny and Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), 653.

⁶⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁵ See ibidem, 654.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, 653.

would say, and Kantor would, correspondingly, introduce historical figures in his plays in order to show how the stereotyping of history was accomplished.⁶⁷

While both Grotowski's (organic) and Kantor's (constructive) orientations⁶⁸ incorporated the embodiment of history in stage performances, both artists were at the same time focused on emphasizing the value of the individual and the individual's personal experience, and despite their different modes of expression they believed that the best way to accentuate the significance of the issue was by way of provocation. "Both artists regarded blasphemy and profanity as the *sine qua non* of true art."⁶⁹ Grotowski would refer to the concept of "secular mystery"⁷⁰ invented by Ludwik Flaszen; however imprecise and problematic it was, the idea of provocation was inherent in it. Kantor, for his part, pursued deconstruction by parodying acknowledged greatness. However, neither of the strategies would have been possible, had it not been for the artist's embedment in the cultural code. Thus, they were both provocateurs and artists deeply rooted in Polish culture.

Such essential tension underpinned Kantor's and Grotowski's quest for universality.⁷¹ Both artists did not cross out individual experience, including origin, instead they had ambitions to communicate with a global audience. Both used affectivity to this end. "Art is the most deeply emotional phenomenon, existing on the border of the unknown, it operates in the deep layers of the social subconscious and therefore its role is capital,"⁷² said Tadeusz Kantor in an interview, repeatedly stressing that the reception of his work should be emotional, resulting in what Witkacy called "a metaphysical feeling" and Deleuze and Guattari called "affect." Grotowski, likewise, repeatedly stated that his theatrical output expressed an anthropological grasp of reality, the theater being merely a tool for man, and therefore transcending the rational criteria of a work of art.

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The ahistorical analysis used in the above considerations has shown how the theses proposed in early twentieth century were put into practice in later decades. Simultaneously, it made it possible to demonstrate that the issue of af-

⁶⁷ See O s i ń s k i, *Jerzy Grotowski: Źródła, inspiracje, konteksty*, 305.

⁶⁸ See *ibidem*, 292.

⁶⁹ Zbigniew O s i ń s k i, *Jerzy Grotowski: Źródła, inspiracje, konteksty; Prace z lat 1999-2009* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2009), 337.

⁷⁰ See "Goście Starego Teatru: Spotkanie dziesiąte, 13 lutego 1994," *Teatr*, no. 10 (1994): 4–10.

⁷¹ See O s i ń s k i, *Jerzy Grotowski: Źródła, inspiracje, konteksty; Prace z lat 1999-2009*, 340.

⁷² Wiesław B o r o w s k i, *Tadeusz Kantor* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1982), 162.

fectivity, important to the Polish avant-garde (and neo-avant-garde), remained relevant throughout the twentieth century, which was spectacularly evident in the outputs of Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski, who, while provocateurs, became exponents of Polishness, in particular to international audiences. Their plays were marked by a similar kind of tension evident in the relationship between individuality and universality they described. Both artists communicated with their audiences by affects. Interestingly, Jerzy Grotowski wanted to include the spectator in the space of the stage, while Kantor, after many experiments, separated the spectator from the space of the represented world.

A scrutiny of modern art in Poland makes it possible to reconstruct the process of how the Polish avant-garde worked out its own concept of affectivity. While the theory of the affect developed by Deleuze and Guattari was meant to rebalance or even to rehabilitate the role of emotions in the creative process (thus subscribing to the view, characteristic of modernity, that the intellectual values must not be overrated), Polish avant-garde artists, rooted in the Romantic tradition, based their work on emotions and were doing so with the intention to evoke emotions in their audiences. Therefore, the result was not infrequently provocative and subversive, and yet, despite the negativity inscribed in it, it served the goal the artists pursued: that of balancing the emotions with the intellectual message and its reception by the audience.

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ABSTRACT / ABSTRAKT

Paweł STANGRET, *Affects: The Heart of the Polish Avant-garde Theater*

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The article focuses on the theatrical output of Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski, addressing the issue of how they conceived of triggering affects by means of stage performances. The problem in question was particularly relevant in the case of Kantor, who created the concept of the “constructivism of emotions.” While neither of the artists explicitly referred to that category, it was nevertheless relevant to the performances they staged. The other problem analyzed in the paper is the presence of the issue of affectivity in the theoretical concepts the artists developed in their respective theories of the creative process and in their perceptions of the function of the theater as an art. While the outputs of Kantor and Grotowski show many differences, one can also point to the aspects of the concept of the theater they shared. Significantly, however, the paper shows the indebtedness of both artists (in particular Tadeusz Kantor) to the ideas and concepts worked out by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, whose theory of the Pure Form, formulated in the 1920’s, shows a surprising closeness to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s philosophical considerations on the affect in art. To Polish avant-garde artists, the categories of preservation, materiality, necessity, and composition were at the heart of an understanding of affectivity and the outputs of Kantor and Grotowski demonstrate how significant the issue of affectivity was to them in their appeal to the audience. Another characteristic their plays shared was a dialectic of Polishness and universality, which came to light in the international reception of their works. A philosophical analysis of the concept of the affect the artists used shows how close it was to that considered on the grounds of phenomenology.

Keywords: Tadeusz Kantor, Jerzy Grotowski, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, the theory of pure form, neo-avantgarde, the affect, modern theater

The article is an expanded and modified version of the lecture “Affects in the Theory and Practice of Polish Theater,” delivered at the 6th (online) International Interdisciplinary Conference “Memory, Affects and Emotions,” held by InMind Support on April, 25–26, 2024.

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Paweł STANGRET, Afekty jako podstawa teorii i praktyki polskiego teatru awangardowego

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Artykuł koncentruje się na dziele dwóch artystów: Tadeusza Kantora i Jerzego Grotowskiego, a zwłaszcza na ich koncepcjach obecności afektów na scenie. Zagadnienie to jest szczególnie istotne w przypadku Kantora, który stworzył pojęcie konstruktywizmu emocji. Chociaż ani Kantor, ani Grotowski nie odnosili się wprost do tej kategorii, była ona istotna dla ich spektakli. Drugi problem analizowany w artykule dotyczy pojęcia afektywności w teorii procesu twórczego oraz teorii funkcji teatru jako medium sztuki wypracowanej przez każdego z artystów. Chociaż w ich dorobku widocznych jest wiele różnic, można jednak wskazać na pewne podzielane przez nich aspekty rozumienia teatru. Co istotne, artykuł ukazuje również, jak dalece obaj twórcy opierali swoje dzieło na koncepcjach teoretycznych wypracowanych przez Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza, którego teoria Czystej Formy, sformułowana w latach dwudziestych ubiegłego stulecia, okazuje się zdumiewająco bliska teorii afektu w ujęciu Gilles’a Deleuze’a i Félix’a Guattariego. W przekonaniu artystów reprezentujących polską awangardę podstawę rozumienia afektywności stanowią kategorie utrwalenia, materialności, konieczności i kompozycji, a dzieła Kantora i Grotowskiego uwidaczniają, jak bardzo afektywność była dla nich istotna w ich oddziaływaniu na widza. Inną łączącą obu artystów cechą charakterystyczną ich dzieł stanowiła obecna w nich dialektyka polskości i uniwersalności, podkreślana w szczególności w międzynarodowym odbiorze ich pracy scenicznej. Od strony filozoficznej zaś pojęcie afektu, którym się posługiwali, jawi się jako wyjątkowo bliskie jego rozumieniu w fenomenologii.

Słowa kluczowe: Tadeusz Kantor, Jerzy Grotowski, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, teoria Czystej Formy, neoawangarda, afekt, teatr współczesny

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