

# Utopia and dystopia in Witkacy's theory and artistic practices<sup>1</sup>

## Utopia e distopia na produção artística e teórica de Witkacy

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to investigate the utopian and dystopic frontiers present in the artistic and theoretical production of the Polish artist Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, known by the pseudonym Witkacy (1885-1939). The hypothesis raised here is that there is a certain contradiction between theory and practice performed by the artist. Even considering that creativity was threatened with extinction in this new society subjugated by mechanization, Witkacy had a utopian view of art, believing that this was the only mechanism capable of give the individual the opportunity of experience the Mystery of Existence. However, in his literary productions, especially in the novel, the artist reveals an antagonistic vision, creating frighteningly dystopian images of the society. What moves this study is the conflict generated by these opposing views. While, on the one hand, the artist manifested an idealization, a utopian vision of art, on the other hand there is a deep pessimism, a dystopian view of man and society. This article will confine itself to analyzing two literary works, *Insatiability* (1930) and the play *The Mother* (written in 1924 and published in 1962) as well as the theoretical production of the artist – *New Forms in Painting and the Misunderstandings Arising Therefrom* (1919) and *Pure form in the Theater* (1921).

**Keywords:** Utopia; dystopia; Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz – Witkacy (1885-1939).

### Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é investigar as fronteiras do utópico e do distópico presentes na produção artística e teórica do artista polonês Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, conhecido pelo pseudônimo Witkacy (1885-1939). A hipótese aqui levantada é a de que haja uma certa contraditoriedade entre teoria e prática realizada pelo artista. Mesmo considerando que a criatividade estava ameaçada de extinção nessa nova sociedade subjugada pela mecanização, Witkacy possuía uma visão utópica acerca da arte, pois acreditava ser este o único mecanismo capaz de fazer o indivíduo experimentar o Mistério da Existência. Já em suas produções literárias, especialmente no romance, o artista revela uma visão antagônica, criando imagens assustadoramente distópicas da sociedade. O que move esse estudo é o conflito gerado por estas visões opostas. Enquanto, por um lado, o artista manifestou uma idealização, uma visão utópica da arte, por outro lado há um profundo pessimismo, uma visão distópica do homem e da sociedade. Este artigo se limitará a analisar duas obras literárias, *Insaciabilidade* (1930) e a peça *A Mãe* (escrita em 1924 e publicada em 1962), bem como a produção teórica do artista – *New Forms in Painting and the Misunderstandings Arising Therefrom* (1919) e *Pure Form in the Theater* (1921).

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**Palavras-chave:** Utopia; Distopia; Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz – Witkacy (1885-1939).

Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, Polish interwar artist, aka “Witkacy”, embraced anonymity as from 1918 with a view to distancing himself from his father, the artist Stanislaw Witkiewicz, who was vastly influential in his life. From an early age, Witkacy showed evidence of prominent artistry, amply producing in a vast array of aesthetic fields. His creations bear manifold affinities to the early twentieth century avant-garde movements in art. Nevertheless, he does not enjoy the recognition many of his peers do.

The hypothesis formulated herein has a bearing on the reconciliation of theory and practice in Witkacy’s oeuvre evidenced in particular by utopic as well as dystopic visions. In order to support this thesis, this text will briefly analyse the main aesthetic concepts conceived by the artist. In addition, two literary works: a drama, *The Mother*, and a novel, *Insatiability* will be approached. Our purpose, thus, is to detect how utopic and dystopic motifs inhabit his writings and the extent to which theirs is an antagonistic rapport.

Witkacy was a painter, portraitist, photographer, novelist and playwright. He is a renowned figure in Poland whose influence is not restricted to the artistic sphere but equally contemplates the fields of theory and philosophy. His main theoretical proposition refers to what he termed ‘Pure Form’, a concept he furthered after integrating a group of avant-garde artists known as the Formists in Krakow in 1918. In the origin of the group, previously known as Polish Expressionism, all the members developed rather individual poetics and therefore did not adhere to a specific doctrine and despite not sharing stylistic uniformity, the artists acknowledged the priority of form over the semantic content of a work of art. The group maintained their activities from 1917 to 1922 and a certain ideological battle against Realism and Naturalism might be deemed as their common ground.

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In the year following Witkacy’s adhesion to the Formists, the artist publishes his most important theoretical treatise, *New Forms in Painting and the Misunderstandings Arising Therefrom*, and in 1920, *Introduction to the Theory of Pure*

*Form*. In this text, the artist discusses the concepts he coined of "Pure Form", "Unity in Multiplicity" and the "Mystery of Existence".

In 1921, he also stages the "Pure Form", writing the essay *Pure Form in the Theatre* (1921). The proposal he developed for the theatre is very close to the one elaborated by Antonin Artaud years later, which gained him the reputation of having been a sort of unofficial forerunner of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. Witkacy's relative obscurity in comparison to Artaud is more often than not attributed to his place of origin and the language in which his theoretical treatises are written.

Although the "Pure Form" is a key concept in Witkacy's aesthetics and despite his extensive writings around the theme, the exact signification of the term remains incomprehensible. "Pure Form" is, according to Witkacy, a utopian project encompassing all reality phenomena and not only those akin to art, which contributes to the incomprehension surrounding it, for neither objective nor subjective criteria are established so as to distinguish or characterise what he sees as art and what he considers to be "other expressions". The difficulty involving this concept is due mainly to the fact that the artist does not employ "form" in its usual meaning. In the artist's words: "[...] the notion of Pure Form [...] does not bear any resemblance to the notion of form as the recipient of content: form as the expression of ideas or feelings or as the shapes of objects in paintings". (WITKIEWICZ *apud* PUZYNA, 1986, p. 102) In this sense, the term is not employed in an Aristotelian perspective (where a distinction is drawn between form *versus* content). To Witkacy, the idea of "Pure Form" consists of a utopian vision of knowledge and the understanding of reality in all its creative and systemic experimentations (art, philosophy, history, religion etc).

In *The Concept of "Pure Form"* (1986), Konstanty Puzyna sought to clarify the conceptual confusions stemming from the use of the word "form" in the text of *New Forms in Painting* (1919). According to Puzyna, Witkacy argues that the term may have four different meanings within the art sphere, namely, a) forms of contours; b) "real" forms; c) the capture of form; d) aesthetic form. The first two meanings bear on "the shapes of objects in the outer world" or, to be more precise, on how we perceive such objects. In the case of the first, flat or bidimensional forms, and in the case of

the second, multidimensional forms, which resorts to binocular perspective (PUZYNA, 1986, p. 102-103). The third meaning is problematic, for it is difficult to ascertain Witkacy's rendition of "capture of the form". The last and fourth meaning "aesthetic form" is tantamount to what the artist calls "Pure Form", a key concept in Witkacy's aesthetics, which is invariably spelt with capital letters. "Pure Form" is directly connected with what the artist named "Unity in Multiplicity":

“The form of a given work of art, which must be defined as a certain unity in multiplicity (...) possesses a quality of unity in itself. In other words, the aesthetic form is a construction whose unity cannot be reduced to any other concepts or explained by something alien to pure form” (WITKIEWICZ *apud* PUZYNA, 1986, p. 104,)

To Witkacy, the aesthetic form constitutes the utopian and desirable dimension of the work of art; even if the utopia of perfection is linked to the contradictions inherent in the artist's fallibility: "regardless of how paradoxical it may seem, we declare that the precondition to fulfill profound aesthetics is the impossibility of conceptually establishing the reason for which a certain combination of qualities constitutes a unity." (WITKIEWICZ *apud* PUZYNA, 1986, p. 106) In other words, while there is a utopian desire inherent in the work of art to attain this "Pure Form" or this "Unity in Multiplicity", the criteria for the construction of Pure Form do not appear to hold in practice, for the artist himself admits his incapacity to determine a unity.

Witkacy reveals in his writings his pessimism regarding creativity, which, to him was threatened with extinction in the new society subdued by mechanisation, a common theme in the twenties, in which artists oscillated between the fascination for the new times and the horror of engulfing industrialisation. However, the Polish artist boasts a "utopian optimism" by assigning the responsibility of fighting the terror and the absurdity of contemporary existence to art: if religion and philosophy had long lost their power to establish a rapport with the mystery of existence, art as utopia was the only field of human activity capable of promoting a "metaphysical" experience. In other words, if the human being was becoming insensitive to the world and to art, the creative activity would therefore contribute to a utopia of metaphysical contours: the connexion of the individual and the spiritual.

The main sign of Witkacy's dystopian vision, which encompasses the endangered creativity in a near future, is to be found in his play *The Mother*, written in 1924 but only published in 1962.

Named "repulsive comedy" by the author himself, the play centres around the unconventional relationship of a mother and her son featuring dialogues which verge on absurdity, conversant with an innovative theatrical approach. The play, divided in two acts and an epilogue, challenges conventional dramatic patterns. The author requires a black and white chromatic entirety, save for the mother's knitting. Moreover, all the characters should display a cadaverous whiteness with black cheeks and lips.

Witkacy suggests a naturalistic environment for the first two acts but towards the end of the second act, a rupture reveals the obscure facet of the characters, closing with an improbable scene, in which all the characters gather in the drawing room and use drugs deliberately. In the epilogue, any similarity or familiarity with naturalism vanishes, for the author instills a new theatrical dimension. The characters are contained by a black space devoid of windows or doors. Witkacy draws on the same resources of bourgeois drama and then moves on to the implosion of this very theatre, by severing the tethers of Aristotelian principles. Each act of the play follows independent time and space reasoning, the last of which dissolving into pulverisation. Neither space nor time of the scene unfolding is explicit, one is left to wonder whether one is before images of reality, memory or hallucination. It is up to the beholder to interpret such dystopian juxtapositions.

The first acts opens with the motherly lamentation of Nina Cobraska. Widow and alcoholic, the mother supports the house knitting. The character accuses her son Leon of vampirising her. She oscillates between denigration and idolatry of her son. Leon is a thirty-year-old man who refuses to work because he is far too concerned with his philosophical theories and believes his studies will change the world. Leon tells his mother he is to marry Sofia, a poor, impolite suitor. In the first scene where mother and son are present, it is possible to ignore the ambiguity haunting their relationship hovering between love, hatred, cynicism, tenderness and abuse.

The second act unfolds in a rather luxurious room, unlike the first. The mother, however, continues knitting and drinking. In this new "dramatic" act the family enjoys a certain wealth and the mother no longer needs to knit to support the household. Knitting becomes a pastime which allows her to maintain her addiction, for now, besides drinking, the mother developed an addiction to morphine. The dialogues are interrupted by a mysterious voice which appears to be that of Leon's father. The following scenes integrate a progressive absurd chain. Sofia, for instance, hyper-excited and accompanied by two men, confesses to being a prostitute and to using cocaine. Leon asks the wife's lovers for a little cocaine and soon all the characters, including the mother, engage in a drug orgy. The mother dies soon after that and following an uncanny and brief speech, ignoring his mother's death altogether, the son says: "We shall lay you on the sofa. It is always better [...] And now we shall drink more and have more of this wonderful dust which allows us to escape from real life drama or alternatively perpetually postpone it" (WITKIEWICZ, 1972, p.88). All the characters reassemble in the dining room and resume their drug orgy.

The third act, in the form of an epilogue, constitutes an original dystopic staging of bourgeois theatre. In an entirely black space, the mother's body lies centre-stage on a pedestal. In this room, Leon delivers an incoherent and confusing speech to the audience. Besides the completely altered space, the character's soliloquy is illustrative of another scene, another dimension, another *u-topos*. Once again, the audience is invited to determine the meaning (if there is one) and to acknowledge an imaginary spatiality. After the monologue, applause is heard, a curtain opens and reveals all the characters of the previous acts and a few unseen ones, such as Leon's parents albeit young. They are all caged within an unknown time-space dimension, as though they were on an island of imaginary utopia in the middle of the theatrical scene. Theatre, as Witkacy would have it, is an intersection of utopias and dystopias. The scene which follows is a combination of dream, nightmare, reality and fantasy, in which multiple levels of actions are shuffled within the same time-space unity. The survivors exit through a secret door. At the end, Leon is strangled by workmen and swallowed by a black tube which appears on stage, a scene which is nothing short of

the sci-fi produced in Witkacy's times. Witkacy's theatre is the dystopian recreation of ludic terror in a real world, disguised by phantasmagorical and absurd utopias, that is to say, a possibility of philosophical reflexion on the end of reality and the mechanisation of the individual.

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Both prophetic and experimental, the novel *Insatiability*, unanimously reputed to be Witkacy's masterpiece, narrates the adventures of a young Polish man whose fate coincides with the collapse of Western civilisation following a Chinese communist invasion. Witkacy's dystopian novel proved to be a horribly precise prophecy of what would become a reality to Eastern Europe in the end of the 1930's. Fighting against the two ideological poles of Nazi fascism and Soviet communism, *Insatiability* is one of the most representative and prophetic uchronic fictions of European literature of the thirties. Dystopia and uchronia converge in Witkacy's peculiar style, which, owing to his inventive and acid humour, create a utopian-grotesque novel.

As prefaced, Witkacy did not conceive of *Insatiability* as a work of art. Actually, the author appears to shun fictional composition patterns and the chaotic action of the plot is interwoven with the most extravagant philosophical considerations, in addition to surprising psychological insights. Besides the prophetic politics, the ponderations on drug use and eroticism endow the novel with a utopian and visionary architecture.

The plot of *Insatiability* adheres to a catastrophic idealism, a pessimistic utopia picturing the last stage of Western civilisation, in a process of utter annihilation of individuality. Written in his maturity, after having developed his most important theories on painting and drama, Witkacy engages in a dramatised version of himself, unidentified, in the figure of the omnipresent narrator. With his subjective comments, Witkacy is the controlling voice of the novel, which, given its moral and philosophical tones, inherits the dystopian reflexions of Evgueni Zamyatin and George Orwell.

The narrative unfolds in a future Poland which is preserved as a nineteenth century isle, while Europe is almost occupied by the Chinese, responsible for the implementation of a new communism. Along the pages of the novel, divided into two

parts- "Awakening" – (*Przebudzenie*) and "Madness" (*Obłąd*) – the reader is invited to embark on the sexual adventures experienced by the teenage hero Genezip Kapen, in addition to accompanying scenes of wild violence.

A dystopian work, unknown outside Polish cultural circles, *Insatiability* may be read as a one of a kind, *sui generis Bildungsroman* (education novel). In the beginning, the protagonist is subject to overwhelming fatherly influence. When his own father dies, this power is then transferred to an old general, of whom the young Genezip becomes assistant. In the second section of the novel, the situation is exasperated once the protagonist's mind starts to deteriorate. While Poland loses the battle against the Chinese, Genezip sinks into robotic unconsciousness, gradually losing his individuality, he becomes a murderer, besides succumbing to drugs which make him even madder. Overcome by irrationality, Genezip turns into an automatised zombie in the future society programmed by the Chinese.

*Insatiability* is a dystopian novel about the monstrous and the unspeakable. Witkacy creates an uncanny fictional frontier through multiple layers of observations and ruminations which entangle the characters, their actions and the narrative structure of the novel. The author seeks to shed light on the contradictory and hallucinatory states existing in the vast and vague domains of emotionally charged thought. *Insatiability* seeks to asseverate that the mechanised and standardised mind of the individual is the most dangerous space for the materialisation of dystopia.

*Insatiability* is equally a gigantic uchronia. Witkacy fashions delirious times, situated between past and future. The Chinese communists, seen as visitors of the future and ready to devour the European continent, represent the most apocalyptical external menace. The paranoid cliché about the Chinese, used by Witkacy, is the "motionless yellow wall". It is on this collision course with Poland that the hero and his world will lose their last vestiges of individualism.

The Witkacian dystopia is confirmed by a grotesque and comical anticlimax, for the great battle between Polish and Chinese troops does not actually take place. Instead, a great party, a feast, which seems to be reminiscent of a joyful, non-existent Cockaigne, is held. The dystopian atmosphere of *Insatiability* is perceptible



throughout the narrative. Towards the end, a ruthlessly bloody scene of the collective decapitation of Chinese officers, blamed for tactical errors of a battle which did not even happen, represents symbolically the total annihilation of individuality. The hands of the officers are not tied, and they placidly accept their fate. While their heads roll and blood squirts and oozes away, the onlookers cheer euphorically. The scene is revealing of the abdication of reflexion on the part of the individual in favour of a collectivity which renounces their freedom. And, despite not being beheaded like the majority of European representatives of old regimes, Genezip is assimilated by collectivity, renounces his thinking and acts subserviently, a prisoner of the new domineering society. By abandoning his individuality and refusing to think for himself, Genezip annihilates his own consciousness. Genezip therefore, commits the biggest crime against nature, according to Witkacy's convictions, who attributed to the human mind one's most elevated virtue, the one which should never be renounced regardless of social conformity. In 1939, nine years after the publication of *Insatiability*, when German troops advanced on one side, the Russians invaded the opposed Polish frontier, Witkacy commits suicide, adamant about the materialisation of his prophetic and dystopian vision. History coincided with the tortuous progress of his dystopian narrative. *Insatiability* is therefore the anti *Bildungsroman*.

While Witkacy's early works gravitate around the possibility of art as utopia, both in literature and in visual arts, his more mature creations, such as *The Mother* and *Insatiability* are fraught with pessimistic, apocalyptic visions telling of the reflexions of War and the development of Post-War politics in Europe. Due precisely to this late and more experienced production, Witkacy came to be known as a "catastrophist" thinker, the ideal mind, as criticism would have it, of an artistic group which appeared in Poland in the interwar period.

The growing mechanisation of life is the recurring dystopian theme in Witkacy's oeuvre. This concern equally featured in his theoretical treatises. The idea of robotisation is not only associated with the threatening emergence of dehumanising technology but also with the movement of social conformity and psychological control. On one hand, Witkacy's utopian conception is to be found especially in his

theoretical texts, that is to say, in his wish to provide the reader with a "metaphysical" experience, in the sense of the experimentation of the "Mystery of Existence". On the other hand, the disruptive and corrupt versions of the future in his novels and plays hold a rather modernistic dystopian appeal. Witkacy leaves his ambiguous perspective of utopia unsolved, enigmatic: alongside his idealisation, the Polish artist announces a dystopian view of art and prophesied the great themes to be approached by the likes of Ray Bradbury and Margaret Atwood.

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