

Portraits of Shadows by Witkacy

Summary

In *Portrety cieni Witkacego* (Portraits of Shadows by Witkacy) I set out to analyze and interpret the meaning of shadow in paintings, photographs, theatre plays and literary works by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. The words used in the title of the book (*portrait* and *shadow*) refer to many scientific and artistic disciplines and to a variety of cultural contexts, and require reliance on diverse research methodologies.

Owing to the multitude of issues addressed and to the rich cultural history of *portrait* and *shadow*, the monograph has an interdisciplinary nature. All my analyses and interpretations of various paintings, photographs, theatre plays and films are based on theories developed by a number of research disciplines such as aesthetics, philosophy, cultural anthropology, sociology, literature studies, history of arts. The fundamental goal of *Portrety cieni Witkacego* is to present diverse possibilities of artistic means of expression of shadow in paintings, photographs, theatre and films. However, the deliberations are not limited to capturing and describing visual aspects of shadows and are often addressed in ontological, metaphysical and existential reflections. Various forms of shadows, such as streaks, see-throughs, contours, outlines and deformed shapes, allow one to observe psychological mechanisms of creative output and an artistic style verging on Witkacy's painting contemplation. The most important thing about the monograph is to underline the importance of the portrait and various visual values of shadows that help one discover Witkacy's artistic concept known as *Czysta Forma cienia* (pure form of shadow).

The aesthetics of shadow in the works of Witkacy emphasizes the coexistence of phenomena found on the borderline between light and darkness. Shadow itself owes its activity to both of them and confirms the manifestation of light, without which it would be unable to exist. The shadow phenomenon is an expression of the condition of each Particular Being, first and foremost including the artist stuck in the dark and constantly desiring to come closer to the light. Witkacy, as a painter and a writer, models each figure in the portrait using shadow in order to reflect a human image. In this way he registers various stages in the development of personalities of selected characters. This is how each of his portraits and self-portraits (whether painted, photographed or written) gains a spiritual dimension.

The artistic concept of shadow in Witkacy's works can be seen either as philosophical-aesthetic (creating the world using *pure forms* of shadow, experiencing *metaphysical emotions*) and psychological-aesthetic (perceiving the world through metaphors of shadow, understanding one's own *self*). All painted forms and language metaphors are an important element of poetic means used by Witkacy. His understanding of the world is expressed in how he captures three components: movement of shadow, visual projection and changes in awareness. Only after one opens up to the world and allows the language of images to manifest itself will one notice the moments of painted

epiphanies in which the *self* of the artist emerges, reveals itself and vanishes. Thoughts, whether philosophical, literary or painted (since the boundaries between them are not clearly drawn) on the existence of lights and shadows makes each cognitive act transcend towards the metaphysical.

The monograph *Portrety cieni Witkacego* (Portraits of Shadows by Witkacy) is divided into three parts: I - *Obrazy cienia* (Images of Shadow), II - *Iluzje cienia* (Illusions of Shadow) and III - *Projekcje cienia* (Projections of Shadow). Each part analyzes a different set of research material: part I – portraits and landscapes (both paintings and photographs); part II – images of illusion in theatre and film; part III – visual projections that activate or illustrate the psychological archetype of shadow.

In part I, the following chapters: I - *Portret malarski* (Portrait painting) and II - *Portret fotograficzny* (Portrait photograph) define shadow as a basic element used to emphasize the psychological study of selected characters. Chapters III and IV: *Pejzaż malarski* (Landscape Painting) and *Pejzaż fotograficzny* (Landscape Photograph) combine elements of impressionism and symbolism with weather aesthetics, allowing the reader to discover the shadowy (and thus ephemeral) aspect of nature and human existence.

In Part II, Chapter V entitled *Postać cienia* (Form of Shadow) presents a variety of shadow forms connected with the notion of trace, gradual vanishing and eventually disappearance of Particular Beings. Analyses and interpretations of character behaviors refer to various philosophical concepts (Plato, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger). Subsequent chapters (VI: *Cienie teatralne* (Theatrical Shadows)) and VII (*Cienie filmowe* (Film Shadows)) emphasize the relationship between shadow and a cultural imagining of specter and various directions in painting, including in particular expressionism. Newly developed illumination techniques in theatre and film made it possible to manipulate shadow images, thus inspiring the imagination and affecting the emotions of the audience.

In Part III, chapter VIII *Cień osobowości* (Shadow of Personality) is an attempt at analyzing the archetype of shadow as a fundamental component of human nature, both from the perspective of psychology (Carl Gustaw Jung) and literature (Joseph Conrad). All behaviors, instincts and mechanisms of the internal struggle show how the shadow structures of the psyche are being discovered, wrestled with and exposed, not only by the characters presented in paintings or novels, but also by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz as the author. Chapter IX *Barwy cienia* (Colors of Shadow) captures historical and psychological aspects of blue, a color used as a substitute for shadow in various artistic and aesthetic concepts: human emotions, agonies and imaginings of death. The last chapter X - *Transformacje cienia* (Transformations of Shadow) show a number of cultural imaginings of the human soul which after death undergoes diverse transformation from shadow (symbol of the night butterfly) to light (symbolic meaning of flame).

Portrety cieni Witkacego (Portraits of Shadows by Witkacy) is richly illustrated, which creates an additional and parallel narration that accompanies textual analyses and interpretations. However, the collection of illustrations presented in the book is not limited to Witkacy's works and includes paintings of other late 19th / early 20th century artists, thus presenting Witkacy's inspirations and interests and emphasizing the universal problems of human existence addressed by him. Similarly, Witkacy and his works subsequently inspired 20th and 21st century artists. The monograph also contain a multitude of references to other literary works, photographs, theatre performances and film scenes. In Witkacy's views, art influences the personal development of every single artist and additionally is a path leading to understanding the Mystery of Existence. Literary

works and their comparisons to painted works, diverse figures and faces shown in portraits take the audience into the realm of contemplative experience. The category of shadow in Witkacy's works is not limited to the level of an abstract painted figure or an element of stage choreography; to the contrary, it has a significant effect on the nature of the artist's personal experience, as it constitutes the fundamental component of the spiritual reality in the philosophical, cultural and psychological dimension.

Interestingly, the issue of shadow had never been addressed before by researchers studying the life and works of the author of *Pożegnanie jesieni* (Farewell to Autumn). Thus, *Portrety cieni Witkacego* (Portraits of Shadows by Witkacy) made a valuable contribution to that research and introduced many contexts in the area of visual studies and interdisciplinary reflections on the notion of image and shadow. The monograph in question was written with such audience groups in mind as literary experts, philosophers, aestheticians, teatrologists, film experts, art therapists, as well as anyone fascinated with the flamboyant biography and the diverse painting, photographic and literary works of Witkacy.