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Title: Maintaining Unity-in-Plurality: Toward a Reading of Witkacy's Theory of Subjectivity

Abstract:

Prolific and sundry, few things remained the same throughout the trajectory of Stanisław Ignacy “Witkacy” Witkiewicz's ever-evolving project, ranging from “pure form” compositions to mimetic portraiture, and from plays to ontological treatises. This inchoateness has made critical syntheses of his work somewhat weak and led to derogatory epithets: graphomaniac, dilettante. Yet some motifs and obsessions remain stringent through his work: his focus on “metaphysical experience” and its correlative historiosophical anxiety surrounding automatization and the loss of “humanity,” as well as his need to create a pure ontology. Arguably, the parameters Witkacy sets up to define both the work of art as well as “humanity” force him to never complete any project. This paper, however, reads Witkacy's project as built to remain inconclusive and to self-perpetuate through the creation, and upholding, of structural paradoxes. I argue that the teleology of this seemingly Sisyphean task is the effect of a subjectivity, maintained and replenished by being mired in (not-yet-choate, not-yet-automatized) humanity, for which art becomes a technology. These paradoxes – for instance: being between mystical experience and positivism, mimetic yet purely formal, making art after what he thinks of as the end of art – keep him in a seemingly creative state of tension and, if unraveled, force him to move on to a new formulation. To shed light on this “unity-in-plurality” (Witkacy's term) I make use of Jacques Lacan's idea of a “sinthome” that can hold together an otherwise psychotic structure. I discuss how the terms of the sinthome change throughout Witkacy's creative and philosophical enterprise, but focus on the portraiture, novels, and philosophy of his last period (late 1920's and 1930's) as the paradoxes become more complex yet, arguably, artistically more satisfactory. Beside Witkacy criticism and Jacques Lacan, this paper engages with the scholarship of Susan Buck-Morss and Roberto Esposito.