

Iconographic Images in the Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor

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Pictorial inspiration in the theatrical works of Tadeusz Kantor is rich and diverse. Kantor's theatre is overwhelmingly, obsessively visual, and he himself is by training and profession a painter and graphic artist. It is therefore hardly surprising that he can locate many antecedents and affinities from the fine arts for his stage creations. In fact, Kantor—lucid analyst and brilliant theorist of his own work—has pointed out these sources himself. From whatever provenance, Kantor's "borrowings" are always transformed into something uniquely his own.

Magisterially self-reflexive, Kantor incorporates motifs from his own art work into his theatrical compositions; he cites himself and plays new variations on images that he created earlier in different contexts. We can consider Kantor's three most recent major works—*The Dead Class* (1975), *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980), and *Let the Artists Die* (1985)—as a trilogy illustrating the quintessence of his iconography. Each had a long period of incubation, and collectively they represent the summation of the Polish artist's lifelong immersion in pictorial imagery.

The first of Kantor's iconographic sources is personal and self-perpetuating, as the artist repeats and modifies from event to event—exhibit, emballage, happening, theatre—certain objects and activities: chair, umbrella, suitcase, mannequin, packing, washing, journeying, which he has accumulated in his storehouse of images. A second type of inspiration we may call international. Kantor stresses his appropriation of whatever he could use at any given moment from the various twentieth-century avant-gardes: Craig, Appia, Futurism, Dada, Constructivism, Bauhaus, Oskar Schlemmer, Surrealism. Having studied these historical "isms" and absorbed their lessons, Kantor went beyond them, rejecting the institution of what he calls the "Omnipresent Avant-Garde," finding its routines as conformist as the orthodox theatre.

A third earlier pictorial tradition—that of symbolism—is one to which Kantor has remained loyal; he is a living part of this tradition and its present-day representative. In this respect he is the heir of a specifically Polish tradition in the fine arts associated with the city of Kraków. For all its international dimensions, Kantor's entire career and work have been centered around Kraków; Wielopole, the town where he was born and that serves as his nexus of memory, is not far distant.

It is Kantor as a Kraków artist drawing upon the city's unusual heritage that I wish make the center of this study of his iconography. Kraków, which had

declined from its former glory as Poland's capital in the Middle Ages and Renaissance into a sleepy provincial seat under the Hapsburgs and Austrian rule (during the partitions of Poland) came to life in the late 1890s and became the artistic breeding ground for innovation in the fine arts, particularly for the new modernist-symbolist movement. And it was the headquarters for a number of multi-talented artists, such as the painter-playwright Stanisław Wyspiański, whose play *The Wedding* in 1901 ushered in modernism in the Polish theatre, and the painter-poet Jacek Malczewski, who first studied and then taught at the School of Fine Arts. Stirring up controversy at the helm of the new movement was the playwright and novelist Stanisław Przybyszewski, back from Germany and Scandinavia to edit the new journal, *Life*. He also functioned as a pioneering art critic, introducing the work of his Norwegian friends, Edvard Munch and Gustav Vigeland, and helping to bring about the European discovery of El Greco and Goya, then little known outside of Spain.

As painter, artist, man of the theatre in the Kraków modernist tradition, in which poetry, drama, and literature are cultivated in symbiosis with the visual arts, Kantor can be seen as a custodian of the past, which he preserves by the radical transposition and deformation necessary to give it new life. Kantor's theatre is a theatre of retrieval—both of the artist's past and of the artistic past—in the form of iconographic images from the Kraków tradition. External resemblance is not the issue; Kantor does not aim to reproduce faithfully on stage celebrated paintings from the past but rather to refashion as his own aesthetic premises and purposes.

For Kantor, as for the turn-of-the-century Kraków modernists, art is a religion, theatre a spiritual voyage—a journey into the past undertaken by making contact with the dead. Instead of a *theatrum mundi*, Kantor, like his Kraków predecessors, creates a *theatrum mortis*. As it had been for the symbolists, his central theme is the interpenetration of death and life. The stage for Kantor is a special place, a point of transition between the other world and this world, a passage through which the dead can enter our life, not as ghosts or unreal figures, but as tangible beings. Shifting fragments of the past, floating images of a life that no longer exists are called up by what Kantor refers to as "the negatives of memory." The Polish artist himself, whose presence on stage violates a central convention of the theatrical illusion, is the master of ceremonies at a dramatic séance at which the dead are called forth.

In Kantor's dark vision, repetition plays a decisive role. The vicious circle of repeated brutality and boredom cannot be broken; the same sequences of trite words and gestures come back again and again, and the whole "show" assumes the form of a round dance or circular procession. The living dead appear tied to the endlessly repetitious rituals of Polish history and culture, to the fixed images of old myths out of which they would like to break but are unable. Determined by Poland's political history and the treasury of national memories, the *dramatis personae* cannot get off the treadmill of horrors. Here the weight of myth is oppressive, comprising patterns of national behavior and experience that have

perceived as an inescapable destiny. Archetypes spring from a national collective unconscious that enchains all Poles. In Kantor's theatre, history as fate is a notion to be demystified through irony, sarcasm, and humor.

The living dead and the circular dance are two interrelated motifs highly prominent in the iconography of the Polish turn-of-the-century modernists and symbolists that Kantor has made a central part of his theatre.

Now it is time to look more closely at the painters whose imagery appears reborn in Kantor's theatre. In the work of Jacek Malczewski, men, women, and children are portrayed as subject to an ominous and mysterious universe in which impenetrable forces control man's destiny. Yet in all his paintings the human figures are also rooted in concrete social and political times and places: nation, town or village, plot of land. In other words, Malczewski's view is both abstract and existential on the one hand and precise and contextual on the other.

The artist himself often appears in his own pictures, a wanderer attempting to return home to the lost paradise of his childhood and the house of memories where time past can be recaptured. Kantor will make a similar appearance. It is interesting to note that whereas the physical presence of the artist in his own work has long been accepted in the visual arts, it was always thought to be impossible in the supposedly objective form of drama—until the time of symbolism (for example, Mayakovsky's autoperformance in *Vladimir Mayakovski, A Tragedy*). For Malczewski and the Polish symbolists, significance is to be found in the autobiographical connection of the artist to a particular spot on this earth and to its local traditions and folklore. The process of recollection is nurtured by deep attachment to that past and those customs. Kantor continues this tradition, in *Wielopole, Wielopole* returning to his native town and the hidden forces that direct the creative life. For the first time, in the *Dramatic Personae of Let the Artists Die*, there appears the following character at the head of the list: "I, a real person, the Prime Mover," played by Tadeusz Kantor, who calls forth and watches three other selves. These are "I—Dying," "The Author of the Stage Persona," and "I—When I Was Six." Such interplay among different phases and parts of a single personality recalls the monodramas developed by Saint-Pol-Roux in France and Nikolai Evreinov in Russia at the turn of the century.

In Malczewski's country of memories, the artist-dreamer, surrounded by phantoms and lost in recollections, is no less obsessed by the nation's struggle for independence—and tormented by his inability to act in the face of Poland's tragic history and continuing enslavement. Consider Malczewski's large canvas, *Melancholy* (1890-94), cited by Kantor as a work he admires (Fig. 4). Its vortex of swirling human bodies provides an image of the ages of man's life (a favorite symbolist motif), from childhood through maturity to old age, but it also offers images of the suffering of Poland. For example, the elderly men wear the gray overcoats of those exiled to Siberia following the crushing of the Uprising of 1863. In *Wielopole, Wielopole* the figure of the deportee (cranking an old wooden musical instrument), who has returned from Siberia, is similarly dressed and alludes to the same historical experience.



Fig. 4. Jacek Malczewski, *Melancholy* (1894). Muzeum Narodowe, Poznań.

The contemplative painter seated at the easel in the background is Malczewski, the artist who is creating the scene, while the enthralled figure in the foreground is his double, who, unknown to his creator, is taking part in the whirling procession, the ever-renewed yet ultimately ineffectual struggle for freedom and independence. Beyond the open window—a frame for transitions from earthly life to another dimension of being—is the woman in black, both Polonia in mourning and also the figure of death looking in and waiting for the moment to strike. The woman behind the window is a recurring iconographic figure in Kantor, appearing in *The Dead Class* as well as in *Wielopole*, *Wielopole*. Claustrophobic in its anxieties, *Melancholy* shows mankind isolated in dreams and the artist imprisoned in his art. Each figure, each group is forever separated from those nearest. Rings of separation radiate outward concentrically, cutting off communication, as circles within circles enclose all within fixed boundaries of memory and tradition. The rings of history endlessly repeat themselves; art is such a ring, cutting off the artist from reality. In another large canvas, *The Vicious Circle* (1895-97) (Fig. 5), Malczewski again presents the dance of life that is a dance of death, while in a series of paintings entitled *Thanatos*, he explores the symbolist penchant for uniting Eros and Thanatos by portraying the winged angel of death as an attractive semi-nude androgyne, who often appears at a gate that serves as the threshold between this transitory life and eternity (Fig 6).

In *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* as well as in *Let the Artists Die*, Kantor has built a gate or door (that will be placed prominently at the rear of the stage) through which the characters out of the past seek admission, through which recollection flows, through which the dead can enter the "poor room of memory" and repeat the words they used in life. In *Let the Artists Die*, the androgynous angel, Thanatos, has been metamorphosized and degraded to a cabaret whore, on whose shoulders black wings are attached during the play, and who then rides a skeletal horse, waving the black flag of death—or perhaps of anarchy. In this image the whore becomes one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse, evoking the painting *War* by the Swiss proto-symbolist, Arnold Böcklin (and the various woodcuts of Dürer which were his inspiration).

Constant transformation is a cardinal principal of symbolist art; nothing stays itself for long or can be unequivocally defined. Likewise people and objects in Kantor's theatre undergo perpetual metamorphosis, change shape and size, become their own opposites, remain forever variable and ambiguous. The standing camera on a tripod in *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* used for taking portraits (of the recruits, of the bride and groom, or the family) becomes a machine gun. By taking photos, it kills; by fixing reality forever, it renders that reality dead. Art is death unless it does more than reproduce. In a reversal of this murderous shot from the camera-machine-gun, the faded old photograph of the group of recruits repeatedly grows animated.



Fig. 5. Jacek Malczewski, *The Vicious Circle* (1895-97). Muzeum Narodowe, Poznań.



Fig. 6. Jacek Malczewski, *Thanatos* (1898). Muzeum Narodowe, Poznań.

One of Kantor's most striking transformations occurs in *Let the Artists Die*, in which the late medieval wood and stone carver from Nürnberg, Wit Stwosz, who spent 12 years in Kraków doing a great altar for Saint Mary's Church, has turned into a fin-de-siècle bohemian artist wearing what Kantor calls a Toulouse-Lautrec or Picasso cape. As the artist and the prostitute dance the tango, they recall the black-clad couple in *We and the War* (1917-23) by the Polish Art Nouveau painter, Edward Okuń (Fig. 7). The idea of making Wit Stwosz a dramatic character came to Kantor when his friend, Dr. Karl Gerhard Schmidt, a banker and gallery owner, suggested his native Nuremberg as the site for the Polish artist's new production. The 450th anniversary of Wit Stwosz's death occurred in 1983, but Kantor, declaring that "art hates celebrations and anniversaries," wanted to establish an anti-commemorative and non-reverential tone. To avoid the expected, Kantor uses his technique of "associative montage"—a form of cultural syncretism whereby different personal, historical, and mythical layers are juxtaposed and combined. The title was provided by a remark ("Qu'ils crèvent les artistes!") made by an angry *fille de joie* to a gallery owner in Paris. Other elements come from Zbigniew Uniłowski's novel, *A Shared Room* (1932), that Kantor chanced upon. About the literary bohemia of Warsaw, the book gave Kantor the artist-hero Lucjan; the author himself, who died in 1937 at the age of 28, is another *poète maudit*, whose biography, alongside that of the medieval craftsman, is examined in *Let the Artists Die*.

Wit Stwosz is for Kantor a "found character," analogous to a found object (*objet trouvé*); he "came all by himself" halfway through the show. A visitor from the other world, out of his own age, but not yet of ours, the Nürnberg Master occupies a privileged position in the drama. The historical Wit Stwosz was a multitalented innovator, combining in his famous altar triptych both sculpture and painting, and capturing the life of the middle ages in his animated figures whose gestures were like those of actors in the theatre. For Kantor, he was "one of the most interesting artists of the period" and "a perfect illustration of the artist's conflict with society." When he returned to Nürnberg after achieving fame and fortune in Kraków, Wit Stwosz was imprisoned for serious financial irregularities, tortured and branded by the executioner by having his cheek pierced with a nail, deprived of his rights, and allowed to die in misery. In a series of surprising reversals, Kantor's decadent bohemian becomes a torturer and creates art by torturing; the literal imprisonment of the Nürnberg craftsman becomes the figurative imprisonment of the modern artist. The construction of the altar—the work of art as a prison—brings the actors to the pillory, revealing their situation in the theatre.

Let the Artists Die is called a "revue" by its creator; Kantor explains that while he was rehearsing in Italy, the last revue theatre in Milano closed and he wished to continue the tradition. The performance takes the shape of a circus or fairground show (Kantor cites Alexander Blok's *Puppet Show* as another source), in which dying artists are intermixed with members of a traveling theatrical troupe.



Fig. 7. Edward Okuń, *Wojna i my* (We and the war) (1923). Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa.

The greatest of Kraków symbolist artists whose line Kantor continues was Stanisław Wyspiański (1869 - 1907), a painter, book illustrator, and total man of the theatre. Like Kantor, Wyspiański looked to national folklore and to the village remembered from childhood for his imagery, and as an artisan he made by hand his costumes and objects (which are not props, but the real thing). Wyspiański likewise created a *theatrum mortis* in which death signifies, rather than simple biological annihilation, the torpor and immobility of being mired in the past. The linking of the dance and the wedding, prominent in *Wielopole*, *Wielopole*, has its origins in Wyspiański's *Wedding*, where at dawn the drunken guests, weary of waiting for the great revelation that never comes, put down the scythes with which they have armed themselves to fight for national liberation and begin a slow somnambulistic dance that becomes a powerful image of stagnation and hopelessness, death-in-life, the vicious circle from which Poland cannot escape. Presiding over these nocturnal revels is the fantastic figure of the strawman or mulch (the straw cover put over rosebushes in winter) who plays a halting dance melody on a broken stick and conducts a kind of séance. In his painting, *Mulches* (1898-00), Wyspiański had already created a haunting picture of these straw figures in the Kraków city park growing animate and joining the dance of death; they are images of the sleep of the captive nation during the long night of winter and of the dormant seed waiting to be reborn, according to the Eleusinian mysteries of which the painter was an adept (Fig. 8).

In *The Wedding*, Wyspiański draws upon folk motifs, village customs, and popular ceremonies, particularly the Polish *szopka* or Christmas puppet show featuring Herod, Death, and the Devil. The characters at the all-night celebration move like puppets and are in fact marionettes in the hands of larger forces, both historical and cosmic, that hover above them and pull their strings. Like Wyspiański, Kantor creates a total, overpowering effect by building the rhythm of his plays out of repeated and broken strains of music to which his figures move like mannequins. Analogous to the images, the music creates an associative montage, contrasting the sacred and the profane, the religious and the popular. In *Wielopole*, *Wielopole*, Psalm 110 (in a special version prepared by mountaineers from a village church) is juxtaposed to the Gray Infantry March and a fragment of Chopin's B Minor Scherzo.

In *Let the Artists Die* a striking effect is produced by the eight ashen-faced generals in faded silver uniforms and the skeletal horse on which the Commander rides to the accompaniment of a well-known march of the Pilsudski legions (Pilsudski was Poland's nationalist strongman in the 1920s and 30s). According to Kantor, the generals are patterned after his tin soldiers and childhood nightmares; they move like mechanical automatons, swarm over the room like cockroaches, and fall when pushed by the little soldier in the self-propelled wagon who is the artist at the age of six. The wagon, which his grandfather had bought him in Vienna, he remembered from his childhood. The Apocalyptic charger he had seen at Pilsudski's funeral in 1935, when the hearse was followed by the General's horse. Behind these dreams and reminiscences there is one of

Fig. 8. Stanisław Wyspiański, *Mulches* (1898-99). Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa.



Wyspiański's pastels, a preparatory sketch for stained-glass windows in the Cathedral at Wawel Castle in Kraków (never executed), showing Poland's fourteenth-century king, Kazimierz Wielki, in his coffin. The decaying corpse in royal robes, with crown and scepter, is a nightmare image of past glory forever gone and an emblem of *Vanitas vanitatum*.

These parallels between the theatrical images of Tadeusz Kantor and those of his Kraków predecessors at the turn of the century attest to the creative presence of symbolist iconography and aesthetics in the work of a living practitioner. It would be possible to find many other kinds of visual sources in Kantor's work: for example, in *Wielopole, Wielopole*, after the rape of the bride, when the soldiers throw the doll in the air, Goya's *Blindman's Bluff* is cited, and in *Let the Artists Die*, as the crucified artists on the barricade attack the public, Delacroix's *Liberty Guiding the People* is recalled. But above all it is to Polish symbolist roots that Kantor's theatre remains loyal. In its absolute freedom and originality it pays glorious tribute to the artistic ancestors that it invokes.

Postscriptum:

I first became acquainted with Tadeusz Kantor in the late 1960s after I began translating the plays of Witkiewicz. I remember receiving a letter from Kantor (with all the most important passages underlined in red, yellow, and blue) in which he maintained that only he knew how to stage Witkiewicz. At the time, such a grandiose claim struck me as the usual hyperbole of theatre artists, but since then I have become convinced that Kantor was essentially right—no one has understood Witkacy better or taken so much from him so intelligently. This acknowledgement on my part may seem surprising since Kantor himself has justly said of his productions, "We do not play Witkiewicz; we play with Witkiewicz," and in fact Witkacy's texts—the words, characters, and actions—were treated as separate tracks, unrelated to the actual performance being created by Cricot 2. But what Kantor discovered in Witkiewicz was something that lies behind and beneath the dialogue and surface of the plays. He penetrated to their underlying rhythms and theatrical mechanisms, and it was these Witkacian secrets that Kantor assimilated and made his own. Thus, it was that in his productions of Witkacy Kantor revealed the deepest wellsprings of Witkacy's art.

Here, I shall briefly mention a few of these theatrical devices and inventions that Kantor so brilliantly brought to the fore in his own art. The idea of the theatrical event as a dramatic séance and performance as a mediumistic summoning of the dead occurs repeatedly in Witkacy: in *The Pragmatists*, *Country House*, *New Deliverance*, and *Janulka* (where Der Zipfel is the director of séances). The risen corpse, returning to the world of the living not as a ghost but a normal human being, is central to almost all Witkacy's plays. The figure of the chthonic cook or servant, in touch with the dark forces of death and given to ominous entrances and exits, appears in *Country House*, *They*, and *New Deliverance*, forecasting Kantor's charwoman in *The Dead Class*.¹ Mechanical

doubles, cloned puppets, and marionettes figure prominently in *The Madman and the Nun* and *Gyubal Wahazar*. The theatricality of packing and unpacking the human body occurs when the mysterious Figure packs himself in *Metaphysics of a Two-Headed Calf* and the monsters are uncrated in *Janulka*. Witkacy's basic principle of characterization is decorative, based on repetition of gesture and sharply defined outline. And Witkacy's trashy rhymes and doggerel verse (ridiculed by the literati) were singled out by Kantor as grotesque intrusions and debasements of high art. Of course Kantor knew all Witkacy's plays better than anyone. In 1961, he had declared, "Witkacy, Witkacy, and once more Witkacy. He is such an interesting writer. He should have a theatre devoted to him, and we want to become such a theatre." Disregarding the outer trappings of Witkacy's dramas, Kantor grasped their inner physical theatricality, which corresponded closely to his own vision, and production after production he demonstrated the power of these conceptions. It is thanks to Kantor that the most profound aspects of Witkacy's art were realized on stage. Posthumously, Witkacy came back at Kantor's bidding. That is how two artists could work together even after one of them had died. And need I say that, in collaborating with Witkacy, Kantor became uniquely himself?

Note

1. Kantor may also have remembered Witkacy's description of death in *Insatiability*: "not as a goddess surrounded by a halo of rather dubious fame, but as some pedantic individual a little on the masculine side, with an insuperable passion for order, meticulous, insufferably boring, authoritative in a purely schoolmasterish sort of way, in short, death as a continuation in absolute Nothingness." See Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Insatiability*, trans. with an intro., and commentary by Louis Iribarne (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1977) 173.

