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## “Through a Microscope from a Telescopic Distance”: Witkacy, Cameron and the Photography of Faces

### Abstract

Witkacy was a central figure of the Polish art scene in the first half of the twentieth century. A painter, writer, philosopher, art theorist, and playwright, he also imaginatively played with the photographic medium. This article will show that the most significant part of his photographic practice, carried on since his youth, was centered on faces. Debating the prevailing view that tends to see Witkacy as a lone visionary, I will argue that Julia Margaret Cameron’s photographic portraits inspired the artist’s style and approach to the genre of photographic portraiture.

**Keywords:** Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939), Witkacy (1885–1939), Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879), portrait photography, close-up, Polish photography, modernity

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939), also known as Witkacy — a central figure of the Polish art scene in the 1920s and 1930s — in turns painter, writer, philosopher, art theorist, and playwright, was also an amateur photographer.<sup>1</sup> This aspect of Witkacy’s career attracted scholarly attention much later and has hitherto been insufficiently explored. Anna Micińska, a literary historian, published his

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\* This research is based on my master thesis *Witkacy and Photography. Points of Intersection*, which was completed at the Utrecht University in 2012, under the helpful supervision of Dr. Sandra Kisters.

1 To distinguish himself from his father (they bore the same first name), Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz invented a new identity for himself and around 1918 became “Witkacy”. The pseudonym was created by a conjunction of his last and middle names: Witkiewicz and Ignacy. For the purpose of clarity, in this article, I will use “Witkiewicz” or “Stanisław Witkiewicz” when referring to the father and “Witkacy” when discussing the son.

photographs for the first time almost thirty years after Witkacy's death. In 1962, she started using the section of the collection preserved in the Witkiewicz family house in Zakopane (now part of the Tatra Museum collection in Zakopane). In Witkiewicz's *Listy do syna* (The Letters to the Son), edited by Micińska, the photographs function solely as biographical illustrations.<sup>2</sup>

Urszula Czartoryska drew attention to the artistic value of Witkacy's photographs ten years later. In 1979, the first exhibition of Witkacy's photographs took place in the Museum of Art in Łódź; another decade later, in 1989, Ewa Franczak and Stefan Okołowicz published the most important album of Witkacy's photographs to this day.<sup>3</sup> In the following years, Witkacy's photographs have gained interdisciplinary and international scholarly attention and recognition.<sup>4</sup>

The existing body of Witkacy's photographs consists of Zakopane's mountain landscapes, numerous landscapes and seascapes from Brittany, Lithuania, and the Mediterranean, photos of locomotives, as well as various snapshots. He also made photo reproductions of his drawings and paintings: oil landscapes, watercolors, charcoal compositions, and hundreds of pastel portraits. Furthermore, there is a group of the so-called "staged photographs." Taken by photographers directed by Witkacy, they feature improvised scenes with Witkacy as the main actor. These photos appear in various memoirs of the artist's friends and might be seen as images of actions staged specifically for the camera or documentation of live performances, or perhaps the combination of the two. The exact character of Witkacy's "theatre of life" is more difficult to define and remains beyond the scope of this study.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, the most significant part of his photographic work, which began in his youth, centered on faces (his own, his relatives', his friends'). These faces were obsessively subjected to the artist's analysis through the use of varied viewpoints and distances.

2 B. Danek-Wojnowska, A. Micińska, eds., *Stanisław Witkiewicz. Listy do syna*, Warsaw, 1969.

3 G. Musiał et al., eds., *St. I. Witkiewicz–Fotografie*, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 1979; E. Franczak, S. Okołowicz, *Przeciw Nicości. Fotografie Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza. [Against Nothingness. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's Photographs]*, Krakow, 1986.

4 On Witkacy's photography as subject of interest for art historians see: J. Lingwood et al., eds., *S. I. Witkiewicz: Photography 1899–1939*, Third Eye Center, Glasgow, 1989; T.O. Immisch, ed., *Witkacy. Metaphysische Portraits. Photographien 1910–1939*, Fotomuseum im Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich, 1997; S. Okołowicz et al., eds., *Face au néant: les portraits de Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz*, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes, 2004; S. Lenartowicz, "Wpływ fotografii Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza na jego twórczość plastyczną", in: *Witkacy: Materiały sesji poświęconej Stanisławowi Ignacemu Witkiewiczowi w 60. Rocznicę śmierci*, ed. A. Żakiewicz, Muzeum Pomorza Środkowego, Słupsk, 2000, pp. 193–205; W. Sztaba, "Images from the Life of a Monad", in: *Witkacy i inni. Z kolekcji Stefana Okołowicza i Ewy Franczak. [Witkacy and Others. From the Collection of Stefan Okołowicz and Ewa Franczak]*, eds. B. Czubak, S. Okołowicz, Muzeum Pałac w Wilanowie, Warsaw, 2011, pp. 39–59; A. Żakiewicz, "Po trzecie–fotograf, czyli jak interpretować twórczość Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza", *Dagerotyp*, no. 11, 2002, pp. 11–17.

5 Franczak and Okołowicz, *Przeciw Nicości...*, p. 22. See also S. Lenartowicz, "Józef Głogowski's 'Witkacy Photographs' and his Friendship with Witkacy", *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, 54, 2000, no. 1–4, pp. 198–203.

This article focuses on Witkacy’s portrait photography produced before the outbreak of World War I and his use of the photographic medium as a new tool to capture reality in a two-dimensional print. His photographic practice is important because it contributed to the artist’s repository of images (for future reference in his painting and playwriting), and because it occupies a dual position between his life and art, thereby providing us with a new perspective on a key figure in the Polish art scene of the first half of the 20th century. I will argue that the artist’s style and approach to the genre of photographic portraiture might have been informed by Julia Margaret Cameron’s (1815–79) photographic portraits, to which Witkacy was introduced by his father, Stanisław Witkiewicz (1851–1915).

The first part of the paper presents Witkacy as an artist who reached his artistic maturity in a specific cultural context, but under universally defined circumstances of his times. I will bring attention to a few facts relating to his life in the search for a more conscious approach to this oeuvre. In the second part, I will show that faces formed a particularly persistent theme already present in Witkiewicz’s writings. With this writing as my starting point and main archival reference, I will specifically investigate the possible points of intersection between Witkacy’s and Cameron’s visual vocabulary. I will focus on a tentative reconstruction and analysis of his photographic portrait “formula”.<sup>6</sup>

Born in Warsaw, then part of Russian-occupied Poland, in 1890, Witkacy moved with his family to Zakopane, a mountain resort town in Galicia, the region then belonging to Austria-Hungary and spent most of his life there.

Witkacy’s mother, Maria Pietrzekiewicz, was a music teacher; his father, Stanisław Witkiewicz, was a painter, art critic, and an amateur photographer. A fierce opponent of all formal schooling, he shaped the young boy’s creative development. In the first years of his life, Witkacy was educated entirely at home by his father and various private tutors. Encouraged to develop his talents in many directions, young Witkacy very early began to paint and play the piano. He wrote his first plays when he was eight years old; at eighteen he completed his first philosophical treatise.<sup>7</sup> According to his father’s plan, young Witkacy was to become a part of the intellectual elite; in letter after letter (over five hundred letters exchanged between 1900 and

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6 I am aware of the challenges posed by this approach as there are no remarks explicitly on photography in Witkacy’s own theoretical statements; neither in his literary works nor in his philosophical treatises. Moreover, as most of Witkacy’s pictures, stored in his flat in Warsaw, was burnt during the German bombing of the city in September 1939, I am working only with a fraction of his photographic oeuvre. Fortunately, a considerable number of his photographic portraits – my main interest – was produced in multiple copies and distributed by Witkacy himself among his friends and relatives, thus, saved from the destruction. Nowadays, the largest collection of the photographs is held at the Tatra Museum in Zakopane and in the hands of private collectors.

7 For an English translation of Witkacy’s *Komedie z życia rodzinnego* [Comedies of Family Life] and his philosophical treatise *On Dualism*, see D. Gerould, *The Witkiewicz Reader*, London, 1992.

1915), Witkiewicz encouraged his son to become the best version of himself and distinguish himself from the masses.<sup>8</sup>

Witkacy did not trust the “Western” move toward capitalism and industrialization and expressed his horror at the advance of mainstream modernism.<sup>9</sup> Daniel Gerould, an American scholar best known for introducing English-speaking audiences to the writings of Witkacy, proclaims him to be a “total outsider” difficult to be placed in the context of his time and whose aesthetic orientation is “anomalous”.<sup>10</sup> Witkacy might have remained outside the avant-gardes of the period as he did not represent any of its movements<sup>11</sup>, but his exposure to the experiences and apprehensions of the modern period, namely revolutions in art, science, and society, naturally formed his identity and artistic persona, and in consequence his artistic practice.<sup>12</sup>

The intricacies of the history of photography in Poland will not be discussed in detail here since they were of little importance to Witkacy, whose photographic practice from the very beginning was developed and shaped on the fringes of the world of professional art photography. He did not engage with pictorialism, which almost entirely dominated the Polish photography scene in the interwar period, nor did he consider photography as a serious endeavor worth writing about. However, simultaneously, his photographic practice has its peculiar origins and unfolds in somehow familiar, if not entirely predictable ways, and as such, it should be reconsidered with a deeper understanding of its genealogy and shifting patterns.

Photography was introduced to Witkacy by his father as a useful tool that every artist should utilize. The highly intellectual atmosphere of the well-situated Witkiewicz house in Zakopane and the widespread amateur use of the camera (by those who could afford to own one) must have stimulated Witkacy’s interest in art in its variety.<sup>13</sup> Witkacy’s father wrote about photographic aesthetics and personally

8 The significance of Witkacy’s correspondence for the understanding of the artist’s biography and work was discussed in: A. Micińska, “Une oeuvre inconnue de Witkacy: sa correspondance”, in: *Cahier Witkiewicz*, No. 4: Actes du Colloque International “Witkiewicz” à l’Université Libre de Bruxelles, Novembre 1981, Lausanne, 1982, pp. 7–17; J. Degler, “Listopisanie Witkacego”, in: idem, *Witkacego portret wielokrotny*, Warsaw, 2009, pp. 311–332. For the list of Witkacy’s published letters see idem, “Spis opublikowanych listów Stanisława Igancego Witkiewicza”, in: *ibid.*, pp. 516–526.

9 S. I. Witkiewicz, *Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia*, Warsaw, 1919. For fragments of the text in English see Gerould, *The Witkiewicz Reader*, pp. 107–116.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

11 Only once, for a short but intense while, Witkacy became a part of the larger artistic group, the Formists, with Leon Chwistek (1884–1944), as the founder and main theoretician of this avant-garde movement.

12 Matthew S. Witkovsky calls Witkacy’s “a fully modern artist” and shortly discusses his “abiding but mistrustful, engagement with modernity”. M. S. Witkovsky, *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe: 1918–1945*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2007, p. 20. Particularly helpful reading on the central European artists’ engagement with modernist ideas and the character of modernity in central Europe is Witkovsky’s chapter “Starting Points”, in *ibid.*, pp. 11–23.

13 At that time Zakopane attracted many artists and writers who formed an eccentric group indulging in mountain sports, affairs, wild debaucheries. Witkacy’s father, and later Witkacy

experienced the medium's influence on his art, as we know of a few photographic studies that served him as an aid to his painting compositions. In his *Sztuka i krytyka u nas* (Art and Criticism in Our Country), he dealt extensively with the uses of this medium, comparing it to the practice of various contemporary painters.<sup>14</sup> He also mentioned his unrealized book project on photography and paintings where he was to present and discuss “dozens and dozens of photographs” had he ever fulfilled his ambition.<sup>15</sup> It is logical to go one step further and assume that Witkiewicz must have gathered some part of the material for his unfinished book project. Having been exposed to his father's writings on photography, Witkacy certainly was influenced by his parent's views on the subject. In 1899, when Witkiewicz published *Sztuka i krytyka u nas*, Witkacy was still being homeschooled at 14 years old and was most likely one of the book's first readers. We can also assume that he could have easily browsed through the visual material gathered by Witkiewicz for his work on painting and photography. In particular, he probably had the chance to see and discuss with his father Julia Margaret Cameron's photographs, mentioned on page 162 in *Sztuka i krytyka u nas*:

The present-day camera and contemporary films with far greater speed than any average human brain, are qualified to catch the tiniest glimpse of the human soul, which is directly expressed by a passing facial expression. However, even with no regard for this improvement, even with the ancient camera, one could create the High Art. An English-woman, Mrs. Cameron, a great friend of Tennyson, used her camera with such skill and artistry that her photographs are not only photographically accurate but in terms of their expression and the realization of the *concept* of portrait they are equal to Velasquez's [sic!] and Hals's masterpieces. “I [Cameron] handled my lens with a tender ardor, and it has become to be as a living thing, with voice and memory and creative vigor. Many and many a week in the year [18]64 I worked fruitlessly, but not hopelessly. I longed to arrest all beauty that comes before me, and at length, the longing has been satisfied.” Are these not the same words that an artist bearing in his hand a brush, chisel, or a pen instead of a camera lens, would use? And indeed, her portraits of Tennyson, Browning, Milsand, the old man Herschel, the astronaut, are incredible.<sup>16</sup>

Witkiewicz did not mention the source of Cameron's quotation nor did other researchers ever try to trace back its provenance or to establish how her photographs might have been discovered by the Witkiewicz family.<sup>17</sup> The text Witkiewicz quotes

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himself, were both involved in the local cultural activities and both were considered authority figures in this milieu. For discussion of Zakopane's elitist character see L. Sokół, “Zakopane jako przewrotna forma życia”, *Przegląd Humanistyczny*, 2005, no. 3, pp. 99–110.

14 S. Witkiewicz, *Sztuka i krytyka u nas, 1884–1898*, Lviv and Poznań, 1899, pp. 21–22, 68, 111–113, 151–154, 161–165, 181–182, 355, 388, 429, 451–456.

15 On Witkiewicz's plans to write the book on the history of photography see *ibid.*, p. 165.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 162, author's translation.

17 Stefan Okołowicz writes that Witkiewicz senior owned an album of Cameron's photographs, and both he and his son greatly admired her art. Matthew S. Witkovsky briefly mentions “English amateur Julia Margaret Cameron, whose work the Witkiewicz family owned and admired”. Neither provided a reliable source to confirm this information. Okołowicz, “Meta-

in his book is most certainly a fragment from her short autobiographical story, *Annals of My Glass House*, which, although written in 1874, was not published until much later. According to Julian Cox, a co-author of the monumental *Julia Margaret Cameron. The Complete Photographs* (2003), *Annals* was first published in April 1889, at the time of Cameron's exhibition at the Camera Gallery in London.<sup>18</sup> The text was then reproduced in 1890 in an American photographic journal, *The Beacon*, and, most significantly, in 1893 the text in fragments was quoted by Henry Herschel Hay Cameron (1852–1911) and Anne Thackeray Ritchie (1837–1919), in the book, *Alfred, Lord Tennyson and His Friends: A Series of 25 Portraits and Frontispiece in Photogravure From the Negatives of Mrs. J.M. Cameron and H.H.H. Cameron*.<sup>19</sup> Among the photographs reproduced there was all but one portrait mentioned by Witkiewicz.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, both Ritchie and Witkiewicz made a similar comparison between Cameron's photographs and famous Old Masters: Ritchie mentioned Hans Holbein, Leonardo da Vinci, and Raphael Santi, while Witkiewicz finds similarities between Cameron's images and works by Velásquez and Hals.<sup>21</sup>

One very likely explanation for *Alfred, Lord Tennyson and His Friends*... presence in the Witkiewicz home would be Witkiewicz's close relationship with Helena Modrzejewska (1840–1909). Modrzejewska was not only a celebrated actress and an authority figure for Witkiewicz, but most importantly a great family friend, a godmother to Witkacy, and a long-term pen-pal to his father. In one of her many letters, she mentioned her London visit with the Tennysons in 1880.<sup>22</sup> She gave a detailed account of some famous guests who were present, like Robert Browning, the granddaughter of Lord Byron, and John Millais, and she concluded that she

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physical Portraits", *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, 54, 2000, no. 1–4, p. 184; Witkovsky, op. cit., p. 18.

18 The exhibition included an unknown number of Cameron photographs and was most likely organized by her youngest son, Henry Herschel Hay Cameron. I was unable to locate the exhibition catalogue and its whereabouts were not specified by Cox. See J. Cox and C. Ford with contributions by J. Lukitsh and P. Wright, *Julia Margaret Cameron. The Complete Photographs*, Los Angeles, 2003, p. 75 (footnote 52).

19 *The Beacon: A Journal Devoted to Photography in all its Phases*, 2, 1890, pp. 157–60. H. H. H. Cameron and A. Thackeray Ritchie, eds., *Alfred, Lord Tennyson and His Friends: A Series of 25 Portraits and Frontispiece in Photogravure from the Negatives of Mrs. J.M. Cameron and H.H.H. Cameron. Reminiscences by Anne Thackeray Ritchie. With Introduction by H.H.H. Cameron*, London, 1893. Considered as a posthumous tribute to Cameron's oeuvre, this edition was limited to 400 numbered copies, 150 of which were for sale in the US. The *Annals* passages quoted in the book are not given in full and do not cover the exact words quoted by Witkiewicz in his book. This makes one believe that Witkiewicz somehow gained access to the full version of Cameron's text.

20 The missing portrait is Milsand's. To my knowledge, the whereabouts of the photographic portrait of Milsand remain unknown to this date. See an engraving made from a photograph by Cameron in: A. Thackeray Ritchie, *Records of Tennyson, Ruskin, and Browning*, New York, 1892, p. 159. Ritchie mentions Milsand's photograph briefly in another book: "M. Milsand, of whom there is a photograph by Mrs. Cameron in which he is made to look like an inspired prophet out of the Old Testament", see idem, *From Friend to Friend*, London, 1919, p. 103.

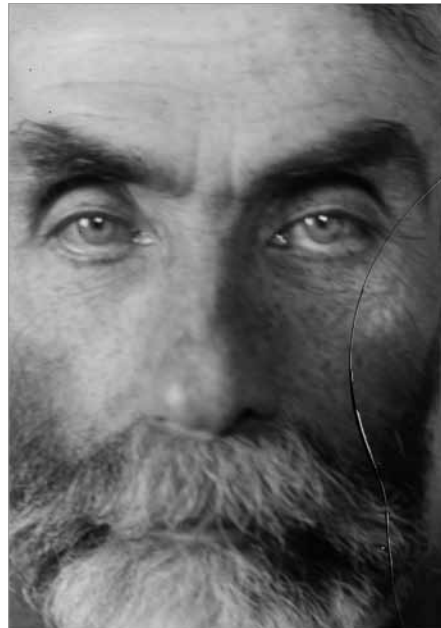
21 See *Alfred, Lord Tennyson and His Friends*..., p. 11.

22 The letter was reprinted in: J. Szczublewski, *Żywot Modrzejewskiej*, Warsaw, 1977, p. 309.

read Tennyson a lot and liked him tremendously for his poem, *Poland*. It is possible then that thanks to Modrzejewska, Witkiewicz grew more interested in Tennyson and somehow found his way to Cameron's famous portraits or, perhaps, it was Modrzejewska herself who told him about Cameron and her celebrity portraiture. Nonetheless, the clear reference in Witkiewicz's book to Cameron's photographs justifies a speculative guess that at least some of Cameron's portraits may have been familiar to Witkacy.

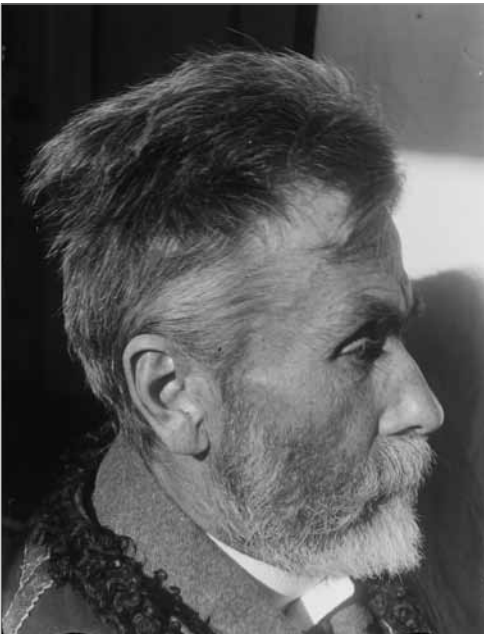
In her *Annals* (and in H. Cameron's Introduction to *Alfred, Lord Tennyson and His Friends...*) Julia Margaret Cameron clearly defines the purpose of photographing people as “recording faithfully the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man”; Witkacy's series of portraits, which will be discussed below, seems like an echo of that attitude.

In a photographic portrait of his father taken in 1913 (Fig. 1), Witkacy eliminated details such as the background, hair, shoulders and reduced the composition to a close-up of the face, which filled the entire frame. The disembodied face is pressed against the picture plane, its outline practically indiscernible. Attention is paid to the gleaming, expressive eyes; they are lit with the natural light and maintain their expressiveness despite the evident loss of focus. The tight composition, the contrast of light and shade, the blurring of the image, were intentional and resulted from Witkacy's entirely controlled photographic experiment, in which the sitter was acutely aware of the camera and acknowledged its presence through his gaze. The fact that the subject is the photographer's father undoubtedly contributed to the intimacy of the portrait.



**Fig. 1.** Witkacy, [Stanisław Witkiewicz], 1913, glass negative, 13 × 18 cm, The Tatra Museum, Zakopane.

If we look at this close-up portrait of his father in the context of the entire portrait series, we observe how the analytical aspect of one image clashes with the purely pictorial one of the other picture from the same series.<sup>23</sup> A profile portrait of Witkiewicz reveals the mix of respect and intimacy that marked the father-son relationship (Fig. 2). Witkiewicz was photographed against a dark background with an undefined display of light, presumably a sunlight reflection on the white wall, which suggests that the background was essentially irrelevant and the focus of the image rested on the photographed subject. The concentration on the head of the sitter, with almost no discernible background or period detail, makes the portrait seem timeless.

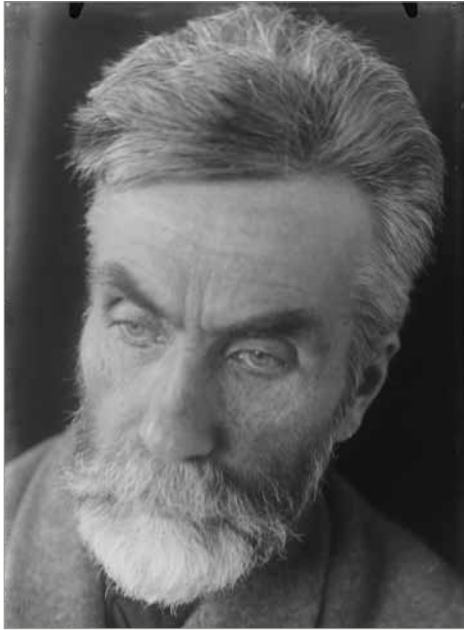


**Fig. 2.** Witkacy, [Stanisław Witkiewicz], 1913, glass negative, 13 × 18 cm, The Tatra Museum, Zakopane.

Another portrait depicts Witkiewicz turned in a three-quarter profile toward the camera, the head is slightly bent downwards, and the distance is diminished (Fig. 3). A similar photograph presents almost the same composition, with a change in lighting and the position of the camera, as the distance between the camera and the sitter is extended (Fig. 4). The head once again is shown in a three-quarter profile. The strong light illuminates the right side of his hair and face and comes off his right cheek with an intensity that practically bleaches out the detail from Witkiewicz's beard, in greater magnification both the skin and the beard blurs into the

<sup>23</sup> Witkacy created similar series with many of his subjects, for example his fiancée Jadwiga Janczewska (from the collection of Stanisław Okołowicz, see the images in Franczak and Okołowicz, *Przeciw Nicości...*, figures 151–152, 163–167.





**Fig. 3.** Witkacy, [Stanisław Witkiewicz], 1913, glass negative, 13 × 18 cm, The Tatra Museum, Zakopane.



**Fig. 4.** Witkacy, [Stanisław Witkiewicz], 1913, glass negative, 13 × 18 cm, The Tatra Museum, Zakopane.

same hazy mass of wavering lines. The eye resting in the shadows catches a glimpse of light and gains an unexpected liquid quality.

Importantly, considering Witkiewicz’s appearance and the discernible fragments of his attire, these photographs were taken during one sitting (once Witkiewicz is portrayed without his ram-skin coat). The attentive way in which Witkacy approached his model, taking pictures from various angles, showing the face in profile, en face, from a distance, and annihilating the distance between himself and the sitter almost entirely, recalls Félix Nadar’s “revolving” self-portrait. He characterized (and “described”) the model with directness and penetration.

Despite similar truthfulness and accuracy in depicting facial features, Cameron’s portraits cannot be considered as objective or evidentiary. Her photograph of Browning portrays him against a dark background, wearing some dark garment, with anything that might divert attention from his head and face systematically removed from the picture frame (Fig. 5). Cameron’s handling of the light, the right degree of blurring, and smudges to the borders bring our attention to the features of the poet. Browning, wearing monk robes, is turned three-quarters towards the camera, with only the upper part of his body visible; resting on the abdomen, cut off by the bottom edge of the print, is his hand, fingers pointing upward.



**Fig. 5.** Julia Margaret Cameron, [Robert Browning], 1865, albumen print, 25,4 × 21,8 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Tennyson, Cameron's close acquaintance and intellectual hero, was portrayed in almost profile, carrying a Bible-like tome, his bust wrapped in a coarse cloak (Fig. 6). Tennyson himself titled this half-length portrait the "Dirty Monk" due to his unruly hair, worn-out face, and dark circles under his eyes. Also mentioned by Witkiewicz in his book, Cameron's well-known portraits of Herschel focus on the impressive form of the scientist's head. We know of at least three photographs that were made during that one sitting in April 1867 at Herschel's home in Hawkhurst, Kent. In one photograph, his watery eyes look straight into the lens, another records him in a three-quarter profile, pensively staring into the distance, and the third shows a dramatic vision of Herschel lifting his head and eyes toward heaven. Two out of the three images depict Herschel's dramatically wind-blown white hair escaping from the dark-colored cap he is wearing.<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, for both Cameron and Witkacy it was the lens's properties/faults that allowed them to achieve the blurry image while at the same time approaching their models in a very attentive way, taking pictures from various angles and distances. In both cases the out-of-focus aspect of their work was intentional, but their aims were different.

<sup>24</sup> These photographs signed by Herschel became a commercial product. Cameron was acutely aware of the fact and quickly registered Herschel's portraits for copyright and started selling them through Colnaghi's gallery in London. See J. Cox, *In Focus: Julia Margaret Cameron: Photographs from the J. Paul Getty Museum*, Los Angeles, 1996, p. 56.



**Fig. 6.** Julia Margaret Cameron, [A. Tennyson / The Dirty Monk], 1865, albumen print, 21,1 × 25,9 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

The blurred effect in Cameron’s works is a very deliberate artistic decision, the result of long exposures of up to ten minutes when even the steadiest model would move. In the *Annals*, Cameron gave a retrospective account of her accomplishments in which the camera lens was her chief means of making artistic photographs: “it has become to me as a living thing, with voice and memory and creative vigor”. She also described how she focused her pictures: “My first successes in my out-of-focus pictures were a fluke. That is to say, that when focussing and coming to something which, to my eye, was very beautiful, I stopped there instead of screwing on the lens to the more definite focus which all other photographers insist upon”.

Cameron’s aesthetics resemble the high drama of the Old Masters’ paintings. She very often used one model for a series of pictures, but in her case, it was a tale-telling activity, which she aimed to pursue with her photographs “[...] your imagination conceives all that is to be done”.<sup>25</sup> Cameron considered the resulting photographs as Art, comparable to the painterly compositions they very often imitated. The suggestive titles she gave to her work furthermore suggested literary heroes and fictional characters in place of living and breathing people. By way of illustration, figure 7 presents a young woman emerging from a dark background (Fig. 7). She wears a medieval-style dress; the line of her hand touching the hem of the dress

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted from Cameron’s letter to Sir John Herschel, 31 December 1864, see C. Ford, *The Herschel Album. An Album of Photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron Presented to Sir John Herschel*, Wokingham, 1975, pp. 140–141.

and her loose hair falling behind one shoulder correspond to the lines drawn by the dark stripes of the dress. A Pre-Raphaelite beauty, by way of the title, is turned into Ovid's Echo from *Metamorphoses*. Through its subtle blurriness, Cameron's picture of Echo easily falls in line with the popular depiction of the ghost-like figure of Echo, who gradually fades away because the object of her affection, Narcissus, died of thirst while staring at his reflection.



**Fig. 7.** Julia Margaret Cameron, *The Echo*, 1868, albumen print, 22,7 × 27,1 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Almost half a century later, Witkacy had his camera's mechanism manipulated to reach the similar effect instantly, without the long process of focusing, "screwing on the lens", or subsequent manipulation of the negative. It is unknown what sort of camera Witkacy used. We know that in 1912 he probably had a lens made by the Steinheil company.<sup>26</sup> Although technically not macrophotography, Witkacy's method is similar to close-up photography in a variety of ways. When taking photographs of landscapes, Witkacy used rather small-sized glass plates (6 × 9 and 9 × 12 cm formats), and in case of his portrait close-ups, he used the 13 × 18 cm plates – which made the photograph of the face more or less a life-size representation, just like in macrophotography.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, macrophotography's method

<sup>26</sup> Stanisław Witkiewicz. *Listy do syna*, p. 553. Witkacy also mentioned on the back of one of his photographs another lens: Rodenstock Anastigmat f:6.

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, in 1866, Cameron bought a large-format camera for 12 × 15 glass plates and started a series of photographs, which in her letter to John Herschel she referred to as "A Series of Life sized heads". See Cox, *In Focus...*, p. 52.

is that of extending the distance between the lens and the negative by inserting an extension tube. Indeed, Witkacy strove to achieve a similar effect by attaching a water pipe to his Steinheil.<sup>28</sup> By using this piece of a plumber’s piping, Witkacy could bring the lens near the sitter’s face, which the regular camera did not allow.

In macrophotography, the following factors are important: magnification ratio, depth of field, perspective distortion, and illumination. Witkacy’s close-up portraits are nearly life-size flat images, thus the problems of a magnification factor and a potential perspective distortion are marginal. Yet, granted that Witkacy’s cameras could focus on subjects so close that they almost touched the front of the lens, it became very difficult to provide a sufficient amount of light between the camera and a subject. Thus, in figure 1, Witkacy very carefully positioned his father relative to natural light; it poured in from the side, probably through the window, and rested on the face illuminating the eyes, which became the focal point of the picture. Witkacy explored the possibilities offered by the fact that in his “macrophotographs” the depth of field was extraordinarily shallow. Elements that are even a millimeter farther from the focal plane are noticeably blurred. Following his father’s belief that photography extends one’s perception and multiplies possible points of view, Witkacy used his camera to explore the same face many times, with each picture being taken only once, and no selection of good or bad shots.

Cameron’s and Witkacy’s engagement in portrait photography is based on the same simple foundation of the long-lived assumption that there is something important to read from the face. Since its invention, with the aid of simple styling and few “props”, the photographic portrait of a person was transformed into the evidence of that person’s status, hence the growth of social and celebrity portraiture amongst the middle class in the nineteenth century (notably, a large percentage of both Cameron’s and Witkacy’s sitters were well-known men of science, letters, and the Church).<sup>29</sup> Witkacy also held this belief since, in his correspondence, he required pictures of the philosophers, he preferred to see their faces in a photo to help him understand their theories. To Hans Cornelius (1863–1947), a German philosopher and professor in Munich with whom Witkacy exchanged over one hundred letters between 1935 and 1939, he wrote: “Thank you for your extraordinary kindness which together with your picture (so very important to me!) [...]”.<sup>30</sup> Subsequently,

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28 In his letter to a female friend, Helena Czerwijowska, Witkacy described his plans to alter the camera. B. Danek-Wojnowska, ed., “Listy Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza do Heleny Czerwijowskiej”, *Twórczość*, 1971, no. 9, p. 29. According to Okołowicz at least 12 of the photographs that survived to this day were produced by this alternated camera. Franczak and Okołowicz, *Przeciw Nicości...*, p. 16.

29 Cameron lived in Dimbola Lodge, in Freshwater on the Isle of Wight, her next-door neighbor, Tennyson, resided at Farrington House. Tennyson brought friends to see Cameron, often celebrities, artists, poets, writers, who later acted as subjects for her portraits. Similarly, the Witkiewicz family’s house in Zakopane was an intellectual and artistic centre for the region, visited by the leading writers, artists and philosophers.

30 D. Gerould and J. Kosicka, “Witkacy: An Album of Photos a Bundle of Letters”, *Performing Arts Journal*, 7, 1983, no. 3, p. 74.

in his letter to Malinowski Witkacy wrote: “[...] I asked you to send me postcards with images of Carr, Russel, Whitehead, the late James Ward, and Wittgenstein. I’m writing about them, and yet I have no idea what their mugs look like – and that’s a matter of importance to me”. The need to possess philosophers’ portraits must have appeared somehow unusual to Malinowski because he misunderstood Witkacy’s request. In the subsequent letter one reads: “[...] I [Witkacy] sent an explanation that I’m not interested in getting autographs of Whitehead, Carr, Russel, and Ward, I only want their likenesses”.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to Cameron, who became known for her portraits of the celebrities of the time due to her practice of persistent exhibiting and publishing her works, the outlet for Witkacy’s investigation and experiments with facial features could be found not in the public displays of the photographs, but in his novels and screenplays where he gave meticulous attention to his characters’ surface appearances. He derived their characteristics from their physical façade, as in this description of Lord Arthur Persville, a character from Witkacy’s play *Tumor Mózgowicz*: “A youthful face of unusual beauty. Clean-shaven; black eyes. Brown hair, strong build, something between a true lord and a criminal type from the penal colonies. Distinguished gestures. His eyes never laugh but his beautifully drawn full lips, fixed in delicate, yet monstrously powerful jaws, have the smile of a three-year-old baby girl”. Or in the following literary image from Witkacy’s novel: “He had on his head a short crew cut, maintaining that this haircut makes the greatest impression on women, particularly in the southern countries. His green eyes, reptilian in their cold gaze from behind his seventeen-diopter pince-nez, made for unsettling contrast with the childlike smile of his huge, red lips of beautiful outline”.<sup>32</sup>

Naturally, Witkacy was the artist his father had raised him to be and he never forgot his painterly preoccupations with space and light. It is evident in the way he describes the characters in his writing, and in the way, he explores and models the sitter’s form and shape with light in his portraits. However, most readings of Witkacy’s close-up photographs rather consider them within the theoretical framework of his art and philosophy theory. They speak of his research into the inner soul of his sitters, or humans in general. Scholars saw in them an attempt to reveal a psychological truth about the model: his or her innermost personality in line with the principle “when you look into someone’s eyes you reach their souls”. Okołowicz argued that Witkacy did not want to record expressions of ordinary feelings, such as happiness or anger. His goal was to produce a portrait of a person “experiencing his

31 Letters dated October 1937 and March 1938. Quoted from an English translation of some parts of the correspondence between Witkacy and Malinowski in: Gerould, *The Witkiewicz Reader*, pp. 328, and 330–331.

32 First quotation from an English translation of the play *Tumor Brainiowicz*, in *ibid.*, 69; Anna Żakiewicz compares the second literary image with one of Witkacy’s portraits of Bronisław Malinowski, captured around 1912 in Zakopane (now in the collection of the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University in New Haven). See Żakiewicz, “Through the Eyes of the Painter”, *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, 54, 2000, no. 1–4, p. 170.

identity”.<sup>33</sup> Czartoryska claimed Witkacy’s photographs explicitly ask the question of what sort of information can the face reveal about man’s inner being.<sup>34</sup> More factual in his discussion, Szymanowicz notices that Witkacy’s interest in portraiture coincides with the period in which he was undergoing psychoanalytic therapy.<sup>35</sup> Hence, Witkacy’s knowledge of psychological theories may have influenced his approach to portraiture. Still, explaining Witkacy’s portrait photography in terms of his philosophical theories is quite difficult to defend. In his art theoretical treatise from 1919, he spoke of naturalistic painting, soon to be replaced completely by photography, explaining that whether the image depicts a face contorted with pain or adorned with a smile it is not art and hence not capable of revealing deeper metaphysical or philosophical truths, like the enlightening act of experiencing one’s true self.<sup>36</sup> While his father believed that even with the ancient camera one can create High Art, Witkacy did not consider photography a medium through which one could experience “the metaphysical feeling” and grasp the “mystery of existence”, neither was he an artist-photographer in the strict sense of the term. His complete lack of interest in sharing his photographs with a wider public, exhibiting them, or joining any of the photographic clubs that gained popularity at the time gives evidence to the claim that he had no ambitions for his photography to build up and/or illustrate his theory, be overly artistic or technically perfect. His photographs simply documented and preserved a single moment, and aided to his sharpened awareness of human faces; at times they proved useful for his varied artistic practice.

Hence, instead of philosophizing the issue and looking for dubious points of intersection between his portrait photography and his philosophy or art theory, Witkacy’s photographic practice should be placed next to his early studies of nature, for example, his sketch-like recording of the various arrangements of the rolling waves.<sup>37</sup> These photographic seascapes, of which the most startling are the ones with no background or line of the horizon, seem to be investigations into the sea’s expressions. By exploring the same scene or element many times, Witkacy trained

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33 Okołowicz, “Metaphysical Portraits”, p. 188.

34 U. Czartoryska, “Laboratorium ‘psychologii nieeuklidesowej’ czyli o fotografiach Witkacego”, in: *Fotografia – Mowa ludzka. Perspektywy historyczne*, ed. L. Brogowski, Gdańsk, 2006, p. 34. The theoretical model of Witkacy’s portraits as Czartoryska sees it is discussed in M. Szymanowicz, “In the Private Sphere: The Photographic Work of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz”, MoMA, 2014 (<http://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/assets/essays/Szymanowicz.pdf>)

35 Around 1912 Witkacy started attending psychoanalysis sessions conducted at that time in Zakopane by Karol de Beaurain. See *ibid.*, 7.

36 S. I. Witkiewicz, *Nowe formy w malarstwie...*, pp. 44–45. This kind of attitude towards naturalistic painting and photography was shared also by Leon Chwistek, with whom Witkacy shortly participated in the Formist group. See L. Chwistek, *Wielość w rzeczywistości w sztuce*, Krakow, 1921, pp. 68, 72.

37 Many of Witkacy’s photographic studies feature also wide shots of meadows, clouds, mountains, ponds, and valleys. The remarks on photographic studies and photographs of Witkacy’s painting studies in the father-son correspondence, e.g.: *Stanisław Witkiewicz. Listy do syna*, pp. 41, 53, 56, 131, 138, 147, 169, 174, 228, 247, 269, 272, 418, 431, 450, 478, 520, 535, 552, 555, 566–567, 571, 576, 577.

his skill in capturing the ever-changing nature of the sea; similarly, by photographing the same face from various viewpoints, he trained his hand and his eye in capturing the fleeting emotions mirrored in the face. He used his camera in place of a sketchbook.

Following what his father taught him, he used photography as a tool to explore the nature of things, which led to his better understanding of human nature and allowed him to bring these experiences and knowledge to his “real” art production, namely his writing and painting. And as such Witkacy’s photographic practice should be considered as a device that potentially allowed Witkacy to translate the experience of taking a picture and looking at photographs into the written text (a way of thinking) and painted composition (a way of seeing). Witkacy’s father wrote that “the effect of photography on art and the human mind in general, has not yet been looked at with enough scrutiny and gravity”.<sup>38</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this study to analyze photography’s impact on Witkacy’s oeuvre in its totality, one thing seems important to mention: by the end of the 1920s, Witkacy started painting only commercial portraits as a part of one of his most successful endeavors, a one-man business “Portrait-Painting Firm”. From this point forward he further developed “his obsessive interest in human mugs”, while experimenting with spontaneous drawing and drugs.<sup>39</sup> His sitters’ faces now emerged from a colorful background with their distorted mouths, enlarged eyes, and highlighted features and, most significantly, they seem to be saturated, distorted, and close to abstraction versions of Witkacy’s black-and-white extraordinary close-up photographs.

Undoubtedly, many different elements contributed to the astonishing style of Witkacy’s portrait photography. For this article, I focused on two: Cameron’s photographic portraiture and Witkiewicz’s influence on his son’s artistic development. The key to interpreting Witkacy’s photographic practice is to acknowledge and identify the patterns of idea diffusion that transpired in a small mountain resort town in Galicia around 1900. I tried to show how nineteenth-century practices conforming to which portrait photography was produced, looked at, and disseminated, moved, and were later transformed to a new set of ideas and practices in the Witkiewicz family home. Witkacy worked with them within the specific framework of his personal experiences immersed in the social life of Zakopane and the early twentieth-century extensive spread of amateur and professional photographic practice.

I close with a photograph that features Witkacy’s face, or rather the multiplication of his face. *The Multiple Portrait* was taken around 1916 in St. Petersburg with the use of a well-known trick to multiply the model through reflections in mirrors. Thus, the picture presents an illusion—five Witkacys sitting around the table. He

38 S. Witkiewicz, *Sztuka i krytyka u nas...*, p. 161.

39 Witkacy often looked for strong stimuli for his creativity in drugs or alcohol. In his portrait studio, he offered portraits of various kinds: A, B, C, D, E, plus variations of those. Type C now seems the most controversial: it was painted under the influence of alcohol and drugs (“executed with the aid of C–H–OH and narcotics of a superior grade...”). See “Rules of the S. I. Witkiewicz Portrait-Painting Firm (1928)”, in: Gerould, *The Witkiewicz Reader*, pp. 239–242.



wears an officer's uniform, there is a look of angry intensity on his face. Starting in the late nineteenth century, numerous photographic studios offered such pictures commercially, as curiosity pieces.<sup>40</sup> Witkacy took a multiple portrait just as many anonymous people had done before and after him. The photograph published for the first time in 1980, very quickly became famous and regarded as an iconic image of the artist, either viewed as a curiosity or a perfect illustration of the life and work of this Polish polymath.<sup>41</sup>

It is interesting that when one discusses the work of such an original and prolific artist as Witkacy, any cohesive image of him and his oeuvre falls apart very easily. Out of those pieces of his dissolved, deconstructed identity and work, one may try to build new configurations in which to see Witkacy's oeuvre. However, in the case of his photographic practice and given the character of the preserved photographs, the method will continue to resemble the act of looking, to use Witkacy's words, “through a microscope from a telescopic distance”.<sup>42</sup> In short, we look but we cannot see much. There is a desire to subject the artist to scrutiny and critique, to discover the essence of his work. However, just as in his multiple portrait, the artist remains entrapped by the surface of the photograph, text, or painting we choose to analyze; the figure is turned back to the viewer and reveals only one of his many reflections.

Witkacy's photography is challenging because it unsettles one's preconceptions about the artist. Presented with numerous close-ups of a face the viewer starts to doubt the straightforwardness of what he or she sees. Through techniques such as a close-up, a snapshot, or serial photography, Witkacy provided new perspectives on a supposedly familiar theme of portraiture photography. There is a sense of absolute freedom from a convention on his part but at the same time, one may also discern traces of a style and tradition that go back to the previous century.

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40 The method of taking such multiple portraits was first described by Albert Hopkins in his *Magic, Stage Illusions and Scientific Diversions, Including Trick Photography*, London, 1897.

41 The photograph gained a well-deserved attention also because it is the only one we know of from the period when Witkacy served as an officer in the Russian Army (born in Warsaw, at that time under Russian domination, he was a Russian subject). M. Giżycki and S. Okołowicz, “Nowa twarz Witkacego”, *Projekt*, 1, 1980, p. 2. For a discussion of the multiple portrait of Witkacy, see e.g. Okołowicz, “Metaphysical Portraits”, pp. 190–194; idem, “Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza Portret wielokrotny, Fotografia wielokrotna czy Fotografia pięciokrotna?”, *Rocznik Historii Sztuki*, 31, 2006, pp. 173–186; and K. Jurecki, “Witkacy. portret wielokrotny”, *Fotografia*, 17, 2005, no. 17, pp. 76–77.

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