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The One Moment: Photographing in Polish Poetry of the Twentieth Century.

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Photography has become a frequently used device in contemporary poetry, most likely because it allows access to scenes which, having already occurred, are unique and irretrievable. On the other hand, it is sometimes confusing as a subject, as it remains devoid of semantic suggestions. What has been presented is, in the words of Ewa Lipska:

captured on film
the one moment
in which there was no
time to think¹

The resulting aporia seems insurmountable; the choice between a direct reception of momentary image and providing an explanatory comment. The former is usually the case, hence the large number in Polish poetry of photographic ekphrases, which, however, leave to the reader the often difficult task of reconstructing their meaning.

In this context, a more interesting, though uncommon, trend seems to be the one which tries to solve this problem differently. Instead of solely focusing on captured image, it offers a reconstruction of the process that led to its creation. The image is presented from a genetic perspective, allowing for a more explicit and clear indication of the meaning of the one, unique moment. The purpose of this essay is to present

¹ Lipska, Ewa. *Zywa śmierć*. Kraków: Wydaw. Literackie, 1979. 49. Print. (translated by Paweł Pyrka)

three poetic texts that precisely for such reasons are not so much concerned with photographs as with photographing.

The poem *Mediumicznno-magnetyczna fotografia poety Brunona Jasińskiego* ("Mediumistic-magnetic photograph of the poet Bruno Jasiński")² by Tytus Czyżewski has long puzzled its commentators, who as a result have either completely ignored it or made an effort to familiarize it, by placing in the intersemiotic or intertextual spaces (the realm of painting³ or surrealism⁴, respectively). Undoubtedly, the poem requires a specific context, one that has been directly indicated in the title. A complete interpretation cannot, therefore, ignore the references to magnetism and mediumism, especially since these ideas were extremely popular (and recognizable) in the interwar period⁵. Czyżewski introduced them to the initial and final sections of his texts, thus tracing a "horizon" of sorts, upon which the photograph and photographing appear.

Participants in séances would invariably observe the appearance of a matter called ectoplasm in the proximity of the medium. Initially mist-like and formless, it would gradually take on the shape and properties of some (usually dead) person. However, according to the monographer: "

Not all mediums possess the ability to exude enough ectoplasm to materialize a full-sized human figure. Often they are only hands, heads or busts" (105-6).⁶

Thus, the initial sequence of images in which there appear several separated parts of the body, is the poetic equivalent of psychic ectoplasm. This hypothesis is confirmed by both the dynamic nature of each of these visions, as well as all accompanying phenomena: the spectral flames⁷ and a kind of telekinesis,⁸ used to activate the keyboard instrument (95-6; 94).

² Czyżewski, Tytus. *Noc--dzień: Mechaniczny Instynkt Elektryczny*. Kraków: Skład Główny: Gebethner I Wolff, 1922. 30. Print. (translated by Paweł Pyrka)

³ Cf. Pollakówna, Joanna. "Spełnienie Dwoiste (Uwagi O Twórczości Tytusa Czyżewskiego)." *Poezja* 1 (1969): 40.

⁴ Cf. Lipski, Jan Józef. "O Poezji Tytusa Czyżewskiego." *Twórczość* 6 (1960): 74-75. Print.; Śniecikowska, Beata. *Słowo--obraz--dźwięk: Literatura I Sztuki Wizualne W Koncepcjach Polskiej Awangardy, 1918-1939*. Kraków: Universitas, 2005. 120-123. Print.

⁵ As shown in numerous publications of the period. The most important include: *Mediumizm współczesny i wielkie media polskie* (Modern Mediumism and Great Polish Mediums), Kraków 1936, *Spirytyzm współczesny* (Modern Spiritism), Kraków 1936, both by Ludwik Szczepański and *Okultyzm i magia w świetle parapsychologii* (Occultism, Magic and Parapsychology), Lwów 1939, by Józef Świtkowski. It is worth noting that authors of those texts use the terminology introduced by Julian Ochorowicz at the turn of the century.

⁶ Świtkowski, Józef. *Okultyzm I Magia W Świetle Parapsychologii*. Lwów: Nakł. Red. Miesięcznika "Lotos", 1939. 105-106. (translated by Paweł Pyrka)

⁷ Ibid. 95-96

⁸ Ibid. 94.

Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

However, Czyżewski clearly modifies the course of the séance, using a simultaneous technique. He emphasizes three times that all of these “activities” take place at the same time, though (almost) each of them in a different location. There is even a parallelism that arranges both somatic and spatial components based in relation to the “center”. The farther the vision is located (adjacent room, kitchen, bathroom, corners of the living room), the more external parts of the body (hands, brain, eyes, legs, fingers, hair) take part in it, and vice versa: the closer to the medium, the more “inward” is the nature of the images (spine, lungs). However, the final vision seems to break this rule:

heart stops beating
and is at this moment
inside the chalice inside the tabernacle

Thus, the heart becomes the center of somatic order, while space is radically transformed: the interior of the house is replaced with the (secret) inner sanctum of a temple. This spatial shift is not dysfunctional, however, as it signals the passage into the sphere of another ritual. The eccentric spiritual séance becomes what Julian Ochorowicz called magnetic sleep (172-5).⁹ In fact, it probably always was magnetic sleep, especially if we interpret the onomatopoeia in the opening line as the sound equivalent of the magnetizer’s gestures designed to put the magnetized person to sleep.

In order, therefore, appears somatic center (heart), and the space is radically changed: instead of the house is shown (most secret) inside the temple. Special Weekend displacement is not dysfunctional, because it signals another move in the sphere of ritual. This *udziwniony seance* is in fact what Julian Ochorowicz called magnetic sleep. The onomatopoeia in the opening line most likely can be interpreted as referring to the sound equivalent of movements that the magnetizer makes as they magnetize the subject to put them to sleep (209).¹⁰

The further course is then related as follows:
you are telling me in your sleep
you are at the ceiling of a Gothic cathedral
and you cease to live
you drown in orange water
I wake you I wake you

According to Ochorowicz, magnetic sleep (as opposed to hypnosis) does not subdue people, instead leaving them active so they can experience their state internally and verbalize it, independent of the magnetizer. However, only the magnetizer can end the experience, interrupting the sleep in a similar fashion to how it was induced (thus, in Czyżewski’s poem, the graphic form of the last line corresponds to the distribution of the opening onomatopoeia).

⁹ Cf. Ochorowicz, Julian. *Psychologia I Medycyna. Cz. II*. Warszawa: Skł. Gł. W Księgarni Gebethnera I Wolffa, 1917, 172-175. Print.

¹⁰ Ibid. 209.

The poet brilliantly managed to combine two occult practices. Ectoplasmic visions turn into dreamlike images, thanks to the sacred space, in which the (psychic) séance “ends,” and (magnetic) sleep “begins.” The two rituals are different, use different means of articulation, but the extent of their experience seems to be similar. The difference is in the perspective; the original medium first materializes their experience on the outside, and then talks from the inside, relating their own sleep. Czyżewski chose Brunon Jasiński to be the “object” of both rituals in order to faithfully recreate the extreme sensations. They revolve around the slow yet inevitable fading of life. The first approach emphasizes the somatic aspect of death, causing disintegration of the body and the slow destruction of all of its parts. The second perspective on the other hand focuses on subjective sensations (anxiety) and experience of death, which, as in the case of drowning, comes too suddenly.

Only now the poet decides to introduce the device promised by the title:
I set the camera
light the magnetic aurora
and I see your face
lit from the side by the glow of fires
I bathe the film in golden water
I copy to bromide paper
and I conjure your spectral face

A parapsychologist would probably remark that photographing at that moment is already late. Taking pictures was essential, but was always conducted during the séance or magnetic sleep.¹¹ The goal was to produce objective and irrefutable evidence that paranormal phenomena exist,¹² and should therefore be systematically explored.

Czyżewski's intention is different. He does not intend to subject the photograph to science as the artistic effect of such an operation is always limited. Photos from séances present that which is extraordinary in terms of what is known and familiar. The avant-garde artist's strategy is exactly the opposite: Jasiński portrait is created “after” a series of extraordinary effects, but in a manner that makes it possible to recover them. That which is ordinary will thus appear as uncanny and amazing.¹³

¹¹ Cf. Szczepański, Ludwik. *Medjumizm Współczesny I Wielkie Medja Polskie*. Kraków: Nakładem Wydawnictwa "Nauka I Kultura", 1936. 65-67. Print. and Switkowski, Józef. *Okultyzm I Magia W Świetle Parapsychologii*. Lwów: Nakł. Red. Miesięcznika "Lotos", 1939. 125-130. Print.

¹² This was the function of the photograph of ectoplasm in Gabriela Zapolska's *Fin-de-sièclistka* (1897). Here Helena is trying to convince her adversary (translated by Paweł Pyrka):

“The photographs you see before you are not from the realm of wonders. They are positive and material objects. They are the shells of our material ‘self,’ which even though not visible to all, were quite apparent to Indian anchorites.” (Zapolska, Gabriela. *Fin-de-siècle'istka, Powieść*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1958. 446.)

¹³ Photographing appears to have a similar function in Antoni Słonimski's *Negatywo*, but here the object of interest is not a person.

Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

The very act of taking a photograph (flash of light) and its production (submerging the paper) contains metonymic references to the two rituals. The final result also exhibits this relation: dread caused by deathly sleep probably appears in the poet's eyes, while the face takes on a spectral quality – it is dead and separated from the body.

The mediumistic-magnetic photograph thus presents a synthesis, portraying death from the perspectives of the subject and of the object, simultaneously.

II

Stanisław Barańczak's *Widokówka z tego świata* (A Postcard from this World) is a poetic synthesis of the metaphysical and concrete experience; the clearer the presentation of "local" earthly reality, the stronger the emphasis on the metaphysical. The poem *Zdjęcie*¹⁴ (Photo) seems to be an exception to this rule, as it shows the eponymous situation in manner that is stereotypical, too brief and apparently devoid of genuine reference. It is probably for this reason that identification of its universal dimension is not obvious and still incomplete¹⁵.

It seems, however, that Barańczak deliberately used a schematic approach to indicate a larger number of phenomena. The process of cropping a picture, represented by the photographer's monologue, refers in fact to a whole range of other cultural practices that exist in American society, practices which the poet, as "stranger," immediately notices. In deciphering them we find most valuable the reflections of another "tourist," Jean Baudrillard, who was in American more or less at the same time.

They seem especially important when we consider that Barańczak, as befits a student of English metaphysical poets, chooses antithesis as the conceit of his poem. It is organized analogically to the process of photographing; the poet begins by adopting a negative strategy, outlining what will not be included in the frame, then moves to the proper presentation of what the photo will show. However, tensions can be observed not only between the two perspectives – both contain internal dissonances constructed using the technique of zooming in and out.

I will set up my tripod,
And with the hiss of magnesium
Take a huge negative
Turning clouds of day into everyday shadow
Pulsing poeticality into pounding of poetry
And walls of dust into cathedral gloom.

(Słonimski, Antoni. *Godzina Poezji*. Warszawa: Ignis, 1923. 63.)

(translated by Paweł Pyrka)

¹⁴ Barańczak, Stanisław. *Widokówka Z Tego świata: I Inne Rymy Z Lat 1986-1988*. Paryż: Zeszyty Literackie, 1988. 42. Print. (translated by Paweł Pyrka)

¹⁵ Cf. Kandziora, Jerzy. "Obserwator Zaświatów. O Wierszach Metafizycznych Stanisława Barańczaka." *W Drodze* 1 (1990): 98. Print. and Lubaszewska, Antonina. "W Daguerotyp Raczej Pióro Zmieniam." *Teksty Drugie* 4 (1999): 178-79. Print.

The first stage is as follows:
Don't move; yes, that's it;
I'll just wait for the people
to pass and issues too
with which you have too little
in common; oh, this is good;
let me just zoom in to
remove from the frame
millions of unnecessary
misfortunes and words

The act of removal is both physical (of people, words), and metaphorical, or internal (of issues, misfortunes). This parallelism implies, however, a certain vision that is worth reconstructing. If no other people appear around the photographed subject and all experience related to their presence disappears, it would mean the portrait is totally focused on the individual dimension of the person, making the representation idyllic. Instead of signs indicating a difficult experience, the face now probably shows a beaming smile.

Such an image is, on the one hand, typical (especially for photography), but, on the other hand, it suggests a specific “style of behavior,” functioning in American society. When Baudrillard wondered what the nature of the common phenomenon of showing joy was, he came to the conclusion that its artificial, studied character acts as a mask, at the same time covering and creating distance. In America, therefore, the following principle seems to apply:

Smile if you have nothing to say. Most of all, do not hide the fact you have nothing to say nor your total indifference to others. Let this emptiness, this profound indifference shine out spontaneously in your smile. *Give* your emptiness and indifference to others, light up your face with the zero degree of joy and pleasure, smile, smile, smile.¹⁶

Barańczak seems to agree with Baudrillard's diagnosis. By removing others from the frame (i.e. beyond the sphere of life), the resulting individualism becomes a paradox, since it produces a vacuum devoid of subjectivity. A chasm impossible to “cover” even with such a good strategy, the ubiquitous, self-satisfied smile.

In the second stage the photographer changes his method:
oh yes, stand still
just like that, let me just set
focus to capture your dream
while awake, your

shadow; yes, this is the
expression, the pose;
I'll just step back maybe
to blur a bit

¹⁶ Baudrillard, Jean, and Chris Turner (transl.). *America*. London etc.: Verso, 1988. 34. Print.

Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

the lines
in the face, on the wall in the background;
yes, great, these are the
thoughts, no others

The positive presentation shows even stronger dissonance. On the one hand, the portrait will be made accurately, so that, again, the external appearance will reflect the inner experience (dream, thoughts) of the subject. On the other hand, the presentation will be done from a distance, eliminating all details.

From a cultural perspective the dissonance is clearly weakened. The intention to capture a precise and multi-faceted image of a person seems analogous to the practice of detailed filming, which Americans, according to Baudrillard often cultivate. The essence of this activity, however, is pure self-reference:

Video, everywhere, serves only this end: it is a screen of ecstatic refraction. As such, it has nothing of the traditional image or scene, or of traditional theatricality, and its purpose is not to present action or allow self-contemplation; its goal is *to be hooked up to itself*.

Obtained in this way, the self-reflexivity reminds us of “a short-circuit which immediately hooks up like with like, and, in so doing, emphasizes their surface intensity and deeper meaninglessness.”¹⁷

Thus a photograph, even one focused on the “internal analysis,” also participates in the ecstasy of communication. It becomes a doubling, a mirror image of the same. Simultaneously, however, it remains “empty,” offering no identification or self-knowledge, only tautological repetition.

If so, then a photograph inevitably forsakes its unique, strictly individual aspect; a copy of one person is no different from a copy of someone else. All are equally silent, and thus could be seen as, paradoxically, the more accurate, the more blurred and unclear they are. By contaminating these two opposing “images,” Barańczak again exposes the nature of American illusions. Because if anyone can exhibit a narcissistic tendency (thanks to photography), then on a larger scale everyone is the same in this regard.

The strategy of demystification serves to integrate this antithetical poem and that is why the poet uses it consistently. The final part of the monologue reads as follows:

a snapshot: let time,
its laugh unsympathetic
be quiet
for a blink of a shutter;

yes, finally, stay this way a moment;
though it's already dusk,
and there's just one left
a single-use flash

The shift of focus from what will or will not be in the frame to the mechanics of the camera not only signals the final stage of taking the photo, but also presents its justification. The mechanism works like any other American device, whose principal purpose is to ignore the natural order; the snap of the shutter and the flash of light at dusk suggest the persistence of the mechanical. This is just an example of a broader phenomenon, one which so intrigued Baudrillard:

Everything has to be working all the time, there has to be no let-up in man's artificial power, and the intermittent character of natural cycles (the seasons, day and night, heat and cold) has to be replaced by a functional continuum that is sometimes absurd... You may seek to explain this in terms of fear, perhaps obsessional fear, or say that this unproductive expenditure is an act of mourning. (68)¹⁸

Thus photographs appear to not only generate narcissistic delusion, but in the final analysis seem to confirm the aspirations which aim to negate the passage of time and its consequences. However, this effort is as pointless as it is energetic; a photograph at the very moment it is taken becomes the proof of loss, a permanent work of mourning.

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In the poetry of Janusz Szuber photographs appear as frequently, as unambiguously. Regardless of whether they belong in the family album or not, their origin is always distant, often dating to nineteenth century. Viewing such images is sometimes risky, however, since, as Susan Sontag pointed out, most of them

do not keep their emotional charge. A photograph of 1900 that was affecting then because of its subject would, today, be more likely to move us because it is a photograph taken in 1900. The particular qualities and intentions of photographs tend to be swallowed up in the generalized pathos of time past. (21)¹⁹

Szuber avoids the nostalgic sentimentality by showing a dramatic contrast between what is old and what is current. He uses for this purpose two different techniques. The first, described by Andrzej Sulikowski,²⁰ carefully reconstructs the concrete elements of a photograph and its presentation is imbued with sympathy in an attempt to reach what is deepest in the people portrayed. The second method, and one rather rarely used, focuses on the intentions that accompanied the very act of photographing. An example of its implementation is the poem *Eliasz Puretż fotografuje uczennice z Wyższego Instytutu Naukowo-Wychowawczego w S. podczas majówki*

¹⁸ Ibid. 68.

¹⁹ Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador USA, 2001. 21. Print. N.B. Julian Tuwim's poem *Ryciny* (presenting 19th century daguerreotypes) is a good illustration of how pathos appropriates the viewer's perspective. (Tuwim, Julian. *Biblia Cygańska I Inne Wiersze*. Warszawa: J. Mortkowicz, 1935. 79-80. Print.)

²⁰ Sulikowski, Andrzej. "Twórczość Poetycka Janusza Szubera." *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2 (2004): 113-14. Print.