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VISUALITY ON DISPLAY. HENRYK SIEMIRADZKI'S “FETISHIZATION OF SIGHT”

Henryk Siemiradzki appears on the map of Polish 19th-century painting and art history as an extraordinary phenomenon – a celebrity enjoying international success, garnering favorable comparisons to members of the European academic elite. Well-rounded, educated and recognized, abreast of the latest archeological discoveries and up to date on the trends for orientalism and plein-air painting, he also unwittingly exemplified all of the complexes of Polish art at that time. Ever since Romanticism, Polish painting was charged with the trauma of national wounds and distinguished as the domain of the spirit. Writing on the “Polish spirit” stripped of a body was the writer Julian Klaczko,¹ who saw in the vessel-less life of the nation a wealth of ideas for which great Romantic literature was the vehicle. Consequently, the critic articulated a distrust of fine art, it being the domain of the visual. In fact, the visual is always more universal than literature because of the latter’s reliance on language, a tool that is ethnically restrictive.

In the era of Poland’s partitions, performing a consoling and integrating function in Polish art were the Sarmatian myth and reminiscences on the Polish Republic of yore, with its tradition of noble

1] Julian KLACZKO, *Sztuka polska. Przedruk z „Wiadomości Polskich”* [1857], L. Martinet, Paris, 1858, p. 19. Quoted after: <https://polona.pl/item/sztuka-polska,NjM4NjU/0/#info:metadata>.

democracy, military triumphs, and cultural successes. The Romantic notion of the “sacred struggle” found worthy illustrators in Jan Matejko and Józef Brandt, who furthered the chivalric and noble image of Polish national identity. The agenda promoted by domestic critics maintained that the artist must draw from the resources of national history, from the colorful palette of the Polish peasantry and domestic landscapes to fortify the national identity, which, in the socially, ethnically, religiously and linguistically diverse Republic, was rather a fabrication than a category reflective of the reality. Siemiradzki defies the homogenous model of Polish national art like he defies the identity stereotype founded on strictly defined boundaries – in terms of language, his intellectual and visual connections, his professional ties, and, ultimately, his subject matter, inspired by the universal canon. He eludes the firm divisions of cultural geography being a sort of European identity “on the move”. Though already in the 19th century historians labored to find a meta-language camouflaging patriotic undertones in his antique themes,² Siemiradzki remained an artist in the European fashion and he respected the rules of the public taste. In antiquity, he saw not only the Greek ideal of classical beauty, a humanist cultural template or a paragon of southern landscapes and light, but also decadence and its pitfalls, violence consorting with eroticism – the dark element of human nature explored by Friedrich Nietzsche.

The period’s arguments against Siemiradzki (arising in defense of the sublime content in painting) paradoxically expose a number of unexpected strengths in the artist’s work, revealing him as not only a revivalist and erudite who grasped the essence of Hellenism or Roman decadence, but also as a modern painter capable of satisfying the needs of his contemporary audience.³ As I try to argue, this was part of a deliberate strategy of an artist cognizant of not only archeological findings and new Christian research,⁴ but also of the viewing habits of his day. Sensationally attracting throngs of viewers, his academic

2] See: Katarzyna NOWAKOWSKA-SITO, *Wokół Pochodni Nerona Henryka Siemiradzkiego*, “Rocznik Krakowski”, 1992, vol. LVIII, pp. 103-119.

3] To the aesthetics of reception has already referred Agnieszka Kluczevska-Wójcik who wrote about the “implied viewer” in Siemiradzki’s paintings – Agnieszka KLUCZEWSKA-WÓJCIK, „L’effet de réel”. *Fragments of reality in Henryk Siemiradzki’s works* / *Effet de réel. Fragments of reality in Henryk Siemiradzki’s works*, “Sztuka Europy Wschodniej”, 2017, vol. V, pp. 45-52.

4] See: Jerzy MIZIOŁEK, *Dirke chrześcijańska i inne tematy all’antica w twórczości Henryka Siemiradzkiego. Uwagi i rozważania*, „Sztuka Europy Wschodniej”, 2016, vol. IV, p. 23; Dorota GORZELANY, *Zabytki rzymskie źródłem inspiracji malarskiej w Pochodniach Nerona Henryka*

tours-de-force like *Christ and the Harlot* (1873, State Russian Museum), *Nero's Torches* (1876, National Museum, Krakow), *Phryne at the Festival of Poseidon in Eleusis* (1889, State Russian Museum), *A Dance among Swords* (1881, 2nd version, State Tretyakov Gallery), or *A Christian Dirce* (1897, National Museum, Warsaw), conceptualize the act of observation. They reflect the 19th-century predilections and the modern praxis of viewing which became a social ritual in the 19th century. Visuality, the look and the eye – as noticed Øystein Sjøstad – are crucial in the that century.⁵ According to Stanisław Witkiewicz a crowd flocking to a painting or sculpture for an experience seeks in the artwork “an emotional jolt” and “an illustration of one’s own notions”.⁶ It seems that, in spite of the critic’s objections, Siemiradzki perfectly understood this social function of art as he set the stage for the specific viewing process and wooed a sensual reception of the things he painted, which seem to reflect the refined and eclectic taste of 19th-century esthetes. In these objects painted in the antique *trompe l’oeil* fashion, the public was inclined to see the realest of jewels pasted into a painting. “Siemiradzki the painter sees in the world only the gleaming surfaces of metals, rays of light diffracted in crystals of topaz and ruby, the sheen of silk, the smoothness of ivory, the iridescence of mother of pearl, and the heft of marble or granite, mustering all his might to reap an illusion of these materials from his paints,” writes Witkiewicz.⁷ In his visual descriptive language, the critic created something of an equivalent to the painter’s illusionistic finesse, virtuosity, the new role of beautiful things, details presented as the collection of precious objects; paradoxically, by evoking visual, tactile and even olfactory sensations, he highlights the sensual and seductive force of the paintings – the power of images. His famous description of a fire as “barely adequate to fry a piece of tenderloin on” indeed conjures some macabre associations.⁸ Though Witkiewicz criticized Siemiradzki’s

Siemiradzkiego, accessible online: https://www.academia.edu/8513258/Zabytki_rzymskie_źródłem_inspiracji_malarskiej_w_Pochodniach_Nerona_Henryka_Siemiradzkiego.

- 5] Øystein SJÅSTAD, *A Theory of the Tache in the Nineteenth-Century Painting*, Taylor & Francis Ltd, London 2016, accessible online: <https://books.google.pl/books?id=aikxDwAAQ-BAJ&pg=PT18&dq=Visuality+in+19th+century+painting&hl=pl&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi2kYmox-TbAhXHZ1AKHVphB64Q6AEIJzAA#v=onepage&q=Visuality%20in%2019th%20century%20painting&f=false>.
- 6] Stanisław WITKIEWICZ, *Henryk Siemiradzki*, in: idem, *Wybór pism estetycznych*, introduction and selection by Józef TARNOWSKI, Universitas, Kraków 2009, p. 165.
- 7] S. WITKIEWICZ, op. cit.
- 8] S. WITKIEWICZ, op. cit., p. 166.

work as aimless and relying on technical trickery, his reviews hit on those traits in Siemiradzki's vision which ultimately attest to the model of reception the artist had anticipated. According to Barbara Ciciora, the artist realized a wide spectrum of emotions that can be shown and evoked by the image during his Munich years, while working on the *Roman Orgy from the Imperial Era* (1872, State Russian Museum). Imitating the „effect of suspense” present in the painting of the admired Paul Delaroche Siemiradzki began to look for new ways of showing “action”.⁹

Siemiradzki's *Nero's Torches* (fig. II) was denounced as illegible, devoid of tension and narratively stagnant – the viewer must search for the scene's subject, with difficulty locating the pillars on which hang the bodies of martyrs because the composition is littered with “material glut, the entire expanse overflowing with Nero and his courtiers”.¹⁰ The critics accused the work of missing a crucial point, composition's center: the viewer's attention had to wander around dozens of painted square meters.¹¹ It is true that the crowd of spectators takes center stage as Siemiradzki eschews the romantic convention of the suffering protagonist dominating the composition and puts in question the “romantic agony” and expression. He chooses to focus on portraying the observers awaiting the spectacle's savage finale – he captures not the action itself but its perception; not the heroism of doing but the passivity of looking on. This “most fiendish error”, as Vladimir Stasov called it,¹² did little to curtail the popularity of the canvas, which by all accounts attracted masses of viewers. The Roman audience in this picture reflects the voyeuristic and hedonistic public arena hungry for sensation, for “a sight of others in torment” as a source of entertainment, seen from a distance. Becoming apparent here is a fascination with theatre, set design, choreography and even public space – a gallery in which a sort of performance unfolds, with the observers becoming the observed. We participate in that juxtaposition of sights. Here, the observer who becomes a new kind of figure in the second

9] Barbara CICIORA, *Wpływ malarstwa monachijskiego na twórczość Jana Matejki i Henryka Siemiradzkiego*, in: *Ateny nad Izarą. Malarstwo monachijskie. Studia i szkice*, ed. Eliza PTASZYŃSKA, Muzeum Okręgowe w Suwałkach, Suwałki 2012, pp. 237-238.

10] S. WITKIEWICZ, op. cit., p. 166.

11] NEMO [Kazimierz Waliszewski], “Kraj”, 1891, no. 20, p. 6, quoted after: Waldemar OKOŃ, *Stygńska planeta. Polska krytyka artystyczna wobec malarstwa historycznego i historii*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2012, p. 145.

12] Quoted after: Józef DUŻYK, *Siemiradzki. Opowieść biograficzna*, Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1986, p. 59.

half of the 19th century (whom Charles Baudelaire calls "a convalescent enjoying the sight of the passing crowd", „a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes")¹³ acquires subjectivity and is given a monumental scale. The gaze became a subject of naturalists and impressionists, who discovered the bourgeois in his world,¹⁴ the man of leisure, who enjoyed free time. He was usually depicted as a spectator at the opera, in the museum, at the races. The corruption of Rome, a subject depicted, among others by Karl Theodor von Piloty, became a frame for the allegories of modern times, as the *Romans of the Decadence* by Thomas Couture (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), the success of the Salon of 1847, represented the degenerate France of Louis Philippe.

Siemiradzki's canvases appeal to the senses and sensibilities of the contemporary viewer versed in the power of photographs, panoramas and dioramas, stimulated by paintings from past eras circulating in the public sphere through reproductions, historic novels and stage works whose authors tried to outdo each other in creating a "fiction of authenticity" and literary slight-of-hand. They corresponded with the works of contemporary artists, such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, Karl Theodor von Piloty, Lawrence Alma-Tadema. He painted the 19th-century fantasy of ancient Greece and Rome in a living, tangible form through his virtuosity with light, masterful placement of flares, and material sensuality, all of which are evidence of his adopting certain premises of naturalism.¹⁵ In naturalism, we may also seek a justification for the reluctance Siemiradzki manifests toward dramaticism in a scene, his avoidance of psychoanalyzing and his expressive restraint. These, in fact, were criticisms flung not only at the so-called "marble painters" but also at Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier, Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas. The same „negation of expected significance",¹⁶ neutralization of the expressive focus characterizes the controversial painting by Édouard Manet: *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* (1868-69, third version, Kunsthalle, Mannheim). The picture shows – although in a radically different idiom – the same motif of the horrors of suffering, violence, execution observed by the crowd of onlookers; here also the

13] Charles BAUDELAIRE, *A Painter of Modern Life*, in: idem, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, transl. P. E. Charvet, Penguin Books, London, 1972, p. 400.

14] Werner HOFMANN, *Degas. The Dialogue of Difference*, Thames & Hudson, London and New York 2007, p. 119

15] See: Piotr SZUBERT, *Akademik zmodernizowany. Kilka uwag o Henryku Siemiradzkim*, "Sztuka", 1979, no. 4/6, pp. 49-54.

16] Georges BATAILLE, *Manet*, Skira, Geneva 1983, pp. 73-76.

victims are situated farther from the viewers than the firing squad, on the edge of the composition in an inexpressive „indifferent” way, missing drama.¹⁷ In *Nero's Torches*, as one of the critics wrote, we feel almost on the side of the executioners,¹⁸ and even – we smell the burnt human body.¹⁹ Susan Sontag, analyzing the photograph, noticed that the appetite for images depicting the tormented bodies is almost as strong as for the images of naked bodies.²⁰ The same rules of consumption concerned paintings depicting death and nudity. They were to attract attention, to surprise and amaze, sometimes arouse voluptuous curiosity, though, as writes Maria Poprzęcka, there was no place for a female nude in a Polish painting meant to be “national” or “home-grown”.²¹ Siemiradzki, meanwhile, makes it an epitome of antique culture, under the noble “costume” of mythology making way for sexual (male) viewing pleasure²² – as the object of delectation becomes the youthful and attractive female body, being a work of art, a “fashionable mannequin,” a commodity and object of oppression. A critic for *Prawda* had this to say about *Phryne*: “the handmaid of salacious passions, the poisonous flower, servant of debauchery, promiscuous hetaera continues to remain the subject of art because she is... beautiful.”²³ A “crypto-pornographic” angle can be attributed to any image of nudity, but in Siemiradzki’s visions this exhibition of sexuality, to use Foucault’s term,²⁴ is subjected to public discourse and judgement; the act of peeping is revealed by the presence of the viewers. This subject has already appeared in Gérôme’s painting *Phryne before the Areopagus* (fig. 32), which depicted a stylized beauty, an undressed obscene „doll” in front of the lecheries, as condemned the

- 17] Cf. the interpretations of the painting in: Michael FRIED, *Manet's Modernism or, The face of Painting in the 1860s*, The University of Chicago Press, London 1996, p. 354.
- 18] Tadeusz PRUSZKOWSKI, *Wystawa H. Siemiradzkiego w Zachęcie*, “Gazeta Polska” 14 Aug. 1939, quoted after: K. NOWAKOWSKA-SITO, op. cit., p. 111.
- 19] W. GARSZYN, *Nowaja kartina Siemiradzkiego „Swietoczi christianstwa”*, “Nowosti” 1877, no. 72, p. 18-19, quoted after: Dariusz KONSTANTYNÓW, *Wystawy „Pochodni Nerona” Henryka Siemiradzkiego w Petersburgu (1877) i Moskwie (1879)*, “Biuletyn Historii Sztuki”, 2000, vol. LXII, no. 3/4, p. 443.
- 20] Susan SONTAG, *Widok cudzego cierpienia*, transl. Sławomir Magala, Wydawnictwo Karakter, Kraków 2010, p. 52.
- 21] Maria POPRZĘCKA, *Akt polski*, Edipresse Polska, Warszawa 2006, p. 21.
- 22] Griselda POLLOCK, *Modernity and the spaces of femininity*, in: *Vision and Difference: femininity, feminism and histories of art*, Routledge Classcis, London 1988, p. 71.
- 23] *Fryne Siemiradzkiego*, “Prawda”, 1889, no. 23, p. 274.
- 24] Michel FOUCAULT, *The History of Sexuality*, transl. Robert Hurley, New York, Pantheon, 1978, p. 71.

critics.²⁵ The ambiguity of the female act, which is a figuration of physical and moral beauty, was fully revealed by the photography of that time. „Les daguerréotypes de nu inventaient un oxymorone esthétique, celui d'une chair réelle et vraie, image d'un corps vivant mais aussi reflet d'un fantasma chimérique, reproduction d'un corps existant soumis aux canons académiques.”²⁶

Phryne and the triumphant Venus dancing between swords are aware of this game of glances because the figures have a role to play: Phryne takes on the role of Aphrodite, being both a model for Praxiteles and the object of the crowd's desires, while Venus takes part in a re-enactment of the judgement of Paris and, dancing between the swords, she performs a display of acting and dance for the crowd of onlookers. Yet, they both play roles imposed on them by the 19th-century gender hierarchy: of beautiful objects to be admired by men. It is no wonder then that the author of *Sztuka i krytyka u nas* (*Our Art and Criticism*) responded caustically to Phryne's impersonation of a hetaira and her androgynous features: “her massive shoulders and arms, next to her frail and narrow hips and thighs, deprive her of femininity. She is some sort of hermaphrodite, a half-way being, the power of whose feminine allure is unconvincing.”²⁷ Sexual ambiguity was a source of anxiety. This was true not only in the figurative sense – in Siemiradzki's *The Vase or the Woman?* (1879, private collection) the woman beset by men's stares becomes a mere upscale bauble. To witness how closely this situation mirrors the 19th century reality, one needs only to look back at a clever experiment conducted once by Linda Nochlin (focusing on *The Painter's Studio* by G. Courbet, [fig. 57]), in which she rearranged the gender roles, placing a nude man as the object of female attention.²⁸ The Christian martyr woman playing the role of the mythological Dirce (fig. VI) in the Roman circus brings to mind not only the ancient sculptural group Toro Farnese and Ernest Renan's *The Antichrist* (1873), relying on the accounts of ancient authors in chronicling Nero's theatrical games, but it also

- 25] Maria POPRZECKA, *Akademizm*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa, 1977, pp. 180-181.
- 26] Dominique de FONT-RÉAULX, *Peinture et photographie. Les enjeux d'une rencontre, 1839-1914*, Flammarion, Paris 2012, p. 223.
- 27] Stanisław WITKIEWICZ, *Sztuka i krytyka u nas*, introduction Maria Olszaniecka, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1971, p. 409.
- 28] Linda NOCHLIN, *Courbet's Real Allegory. Rereading "The Painter's Studio"*, in: Sarah FAUNCE, Linda NOCHLIN, *Courbet Reconsidered*, exhibition catalogue, Brooklyn Museum, New York 1988, p. 37.

stimulates comparisons with 19th-century quasi-pornographic photography showing nude models reposed on animal skin rugs. Quite striking in confrontation with the naturalistically rendered bull's carcass is the artificiality of the smooth-skin and sculptural body of the dead Dirce, reminiscent of a wax figure. She reminds of many naked women – usually unaware of their erotic attributes, painted by academic painters, like Paul Baudry, Alexandre Cabanel, Henri Gervex (fig. 66), Jean-Léon Gérôme (fig. 32). Women in the guises of Venus, Diana or Odalisque were represented as young bodies, the representations of nature.

Ernest Renan wrote in his *Antichrist*, that also old *matronas* “suffered their last agonies” during the displays of cruelty on the Roman circus, disguised as the mythological protagonists.²⁹ Siemiradzki chose for his Dirce a young girl to emphasize the innocence and Angelique character of the Christian martyr. Is she really the model of virtue? Here, in fact, she is a model – admired by the prurient artist Nero, who “sizes up” the girl with his eyes. Interestingly, a similar contrast was devised some decades earlier by Gérôme at the 1847 Salon with his *The Cock Fight* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris): “The young Greeks are of marble, the cocks of blood and bone; the human figures are painted in the manner of Gleyre, the birds from nature,” writes Jules Champfleury.³⁰ In both cases the cruelty of the game deconstructs the myth of the “beautiful human being” and exposes a vision of the barbarity of antiquity.³¹ In Siemiradzki's painting, the body of blond innocence slung over the massive wild animal has the potential to be perverse and dreadful. It invites a two-fold interpretation, as a figure evidently incurring suffering and as the object of sadistic delectation for a far-away decadent excited by the sexual allure of the moment of death. Faint, sick and murdered women remained, after all, the aesthetic objects. The white body of the Christian virgin looked attractive against a black bull. The confrontation of the naked martyr and imperial ruler unknowingly reflects a gender hierarchy of that time: women are represented as bodies (opposed to male culture) – that is passive, available, possessable, powerless. Men are in the position of dominance.

29] Ernest RENAN, *Renan's Antichrist*, transl. and introduction by William G. Hutchison, Walter Scott, Ltd., London 1900, accessible online: <https://archive.org/details/renansantichrist00renaiala/page/94>.

30] Quote after: M. POPRZECKA, op. cit., pp. 187-188.

31] Cf. Emily BENNY, *Blood spectacle. Gérôme in the arena*, in: *Reconsidering Gérôme*, ed. Scott ALLAN and Mary MORTON, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles 2010, pp. 40-53.

"The images reproduce on the ideological level of art the relations of power between men and women."³²

In case of Siemiradzki the viewer is drawn into the space of the painting and offered a vantage point like that of the spectators thanks to the structure of the space. The scene's cropped perspective and its oblique structure – as in *Dirce* – seem to be the means of transposing the subjective view and suggest the viewer's presence. This kind of angles is typical for the impressionist painting (e.g.: Gustave Caillebotte, *The Pont de l'Europe*, 1876, Petit Palais, Geneva), especially that depicting the theatre and public space, in which one observes the alteration between „being seen” and „seeing”, but also for the naturalist mode of academic painters, like Gérôme (e.g.: *Pollice Verso*, 1872, Phoenix Art Museum) or Sándor Wagner (e.g.: *The Chariot Race*, 1882, Art Gallery, Manchester).

Though the primacy of ideology over form, of moral discourse over visual aspects, is an immanent component of the Polish thinking on art in the 19th century, Siemiradzki-*Ausstellungskünstler*, to use Oskar Bätschmann's term, understood the rules of perception and exposition.³³ His painting manifested the 19th-century attitude to art within the system of public exhibitions, provoking the bourgeois morality with his seductive visions. As reported by Siemiradzki's critics, he had a strong impact on the masses, the crowds lined up in front of his paintings that evoked emotions, people were staring at them in order to sympathize and suffer with his heroes.³⁴

Siemiradzki's illusionist painting, appealing to the sense of sight of its beholder, represented the climax point of the 19th century, when art had concealed its medium. The famous term „fetishisation of sight”, used by Rosalind Krauss to describe the pure visuality of modernist painting (which acknowledged its limitations), paradoxically, can be applied to an academic painter.³⁵ Independently of moral, social or national notions, discussed in his paintings, Siemiradzki exposes the peculiar pleasure of perception, the act of perception itself. This artistic strategy coincided with the new standards of representation and artistic innovations of modern naturalist painting, defined by Baudelaire in

32] Rozsika PARKER, Linda NOCHLIN, *Old Mistresses. Women, Art and Ideology*, I.B. Tauris, London, New York 2013, p. 116.

33] Oskar BÄTSCHMANN, *Ausstellungskünstler. Kult und Karriere im modernen Kunstsystem*, DuMont, Köln 1997.

34] D. KONSTANTYNÓW, op. cit., pp. 440-444.

35] Rosalind KRAUSS, *Antivision*, "October", 1986, vol. 36, p. 147.

his essay *The Painter of Modern Life* as the passionate experiencing the world in optical terms.³⁶

Siemiradzki reflected in his works the predilections of the 19th century „society of spectacle” (its religion of art, boredom, fascination with sex, naked body and cruelty), the desire of the bourgeois salon audience for entertainment, leisure and display. From this perspective also the concentration on the non-discursive, but visual effects and sensual beauty of the material world, is a part of a „game” – a model of communications with the gallery spectators. Even in his small genre-painting he depicts the free time. Antiquity is a kind of decoration – *fête galante à l'antique*, depicting the attitudes of haute-bourgeoisie: the predilections for beautiful things, boredom and private time. Siemiradzki successfully satisfies the „desire of show” in the „visual age”,³⁷ constructing a new model of narrativeness.



66. Henri Gervex, *Rolla*, 1878, oil on canvas, 176.2 × 221.3 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux. Photo in public domain.

36] Ch. BAUDELAIRE, op. cit.

37] W. HOFMANN, op. cit., p. 120.