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CURTAINS BY HENRYK SIEMIRADZKI

Henryk Siemiradzki is the author of two theatrical curtains painted for the city theatres in Krakow (1894) (fig. VII) and Lwów (Lemberg, Lviv, 1900) (fig. VIII). These huge paintings (approximately 9 by 12 metres) sum up the epoch of mimetic painting. They push illusion to extremes. Anachronistic from the start, they resemble dinosaurs – but in this case the great beasts miraculously survive the period of great extinction.¹ They are intriguing and disquieting – even more so, when we realize the conceptual complications caused by the idea of ascribing a function of a veil to a painting.

In this paper, I suggest using Siemiradzki's curtains as a case study focused on the problems of representation and a symbolic system. It allows for recognizing their position in the history of painting – the point where painting loses its identity.

In spite of the obvious similarities, painted curtains are distinct from the rest of Siemiradzki's *oeuvre*. Their function amplifies the aporia, not so evident elsewhere. They seem to be a dead end, but if we treat them as a medium, as understood by Hans Belting, not in the ordinary sense, but in the sense of “the agent by which images are transmitted”,² we

1] Agnieszka KUCZYŃSKA, *Malowane kurtyny teatralne Henryka Siemiradzkiego*, TN KUL, Lublin 2006, pp. 17-36.

2] Hans BELTING, *Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology*, “Critical Inquiry”, 2005, no. 31/2, p. 302.

can realize that in a continuing history of images they constitute a moment of transition, the last moment of materiality. The next step is light and shadow of the cinema and, later, the pixels of digital images. The terms from the world of new media, such as “intermediality”, “invisibility of interface”, “immersive character” seem to describe old problems in a new way. Like academic painting, technologically sophisticated media search for maximum illusion, meet the limits of their possibilities and after a while – return as new avatars.

Siemiradzki eagerly used new technical devices and scientific discoveries to enhance the illusion created in his pictures. The first show of his allegorical painting *Light and Dark* was also the first presentation of the dynamo-electrical machine in Warsaw and the first presentation of electric light applied in displaying paintings. Electrical light had very practical and, at the same time, symbolic value in this instance. The triumphant Enlightenment and Progress personified in the picture by the procession of allegorical figures of Sciences, Arts and Inventions lead to the triumph of idealized Wealth, sitting on the throne in heavens – not even the old-fashioned extravagant Richness, but sensible, conscientious Wealth, defined by this image as the highest idea.

The goal of Siemiradzki was a rationally constructed, professionally made painting utilizing the newest technologies in a way that allowed achieving illusion as close to perfection as possible. Three-dimensional literality, enhanced by the use of photography, although extraordinarily suggestive, had nothing in common with real life. The point was an eye-catching simulation, in which constructs made with the help of photography, were applied onto a strictly measured visual field – a materialized phantasmagoria. A group of over 50 albumin prints, preserved in the National Museum in Krakow, which were used as a reference by the artist allows us to take a look behind the scenes.³ These photographs, from the point of view of Siemiradzki, were only half-finished products (fig.67), helping to construct a scene that never existed in reality. They are not “living images” reconstructed subsequently on the canvas. Their unfinished character is clearly visible. They recorded the scaffoldings, on which the figural groups were

3] Wanda MOSSAKOWSKA, *Pomoce fotograficzne Michela Manga do obrazów Henryka Siemiradzkiego (1872-ok.1884)*, “Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej”, 1984, no. 2, pp. 213-221; Светлана Л. КАПЫРИНА, *Путь к картине. Фотография в творческом методе Г. И. Семирадского (Svetlana L. Kapyrina, The Path to the Picture. photography in Henryk Siemiradzki's creative method by)*, “Sztuka Europy Wschodniej”, 2016, vol. IV, pp. 199-209.

placed, the supports helping the models keep their intended poses, imperfections of real faces and bodies. For practical reasons only fragments of scenes, chosen characters, sometimes a gesture, or a fragment of drapery were photographed. They helped the painter achieve maximum illusion, materialize his vision. Photographs were engaged in the process that in a specific way exploited their indexical relationship with reality – the process leading to the destruction of trust in the visual image. The process, which is obvious today, begun much earlier than digital technology. Photography used as technical help by academic painters enhanced the illusionistic value, “materiality” of their works, but by no means their authenticity, truthfulness to real life. Siemiradzki was not interested in such qualities. He sought to create a fascinating spectacle.

Siemiradzki, always trying to be *au courant* with the latest discoveries potentially applicable to his art, was also very interested in X-rays discovered by Wilhelm Röntgen in 1895. The early popular displays of X-rays had a character of a technological attraction. Not only their application in medical practice was interesting. Spectators connected X-rays to spiritistic experiences. Like electricity, X-rays were perceived as half scientific, half mystical invisible forces.⁴ A printmaker Jan Wysocki described a meeting organized in Rome by Siemiradzki, during which the painter made a speech about X-rays, titled *Radiation of radiating bodies*.⁵ The painter who obtained a scientific degree before enrolling at St. Petersburg Academy, was really interested in the newest scientific developments. Together with Julian Ochorowicz (Polish scientist, a pioneer of psychology and i.a. the author of a prototype of television) Siemiradzki organized spiritistic seances with the famous medium Eusapia Palladino.⁶ He tried to record photographically the invisible forces and make them available for scientific examination. The seances took place in Rome and in Warsaw and coincided with work on the Krakow curtain.⁷

Opening a curtain is one of the epistemological metaphors: it is a metaphor of an epiphany, of truth that is learnt not through reasoning, but face to face, through an image. The reality which it suggests is an analogical reality. The curtain, which is also an image, is a paradox:

4] Simone NATALE, *The Invisible Made Visible*, “Media History”, 2011, no. 17/4, pp. 345-358.

5] Edward WICHURA-ZAJDEL, *Śląski medalier Jan Wysocki*, RSW Prasa, Katowice 1961, p. 21.

6] A. KUCZYŃSKA, op. cit., pp. 88-91.

7] Julian OCHOTOWICZ, *Zjawiska medyumiczne*, Biblioteka Dzieł Wyborowych, Warszawa 1893, p. 13.

it makes us think of the image as an epiphany and, at the same time, the only epiphany provided by the image-curtain is a disclosure of its own illusory character. While the problem of the nature of reality is suspended.

A curtain is also associated with an anecdote from Pliny's *Natural History*, an anecdote about a contest of painters won by Parrhasius, who presented the curtain on his picture so cleverly that his rival, Zeuxis believed the illusion: he was fooled by the lie of a painting, he tried to move the curtain away.⁸ Only touch convinced him that the picture was a fraud. There was no other image behind the curtain. There was only the image of the curtain. The reality to which he reached out his hand was material reality: this applies both to the board he actually touched and the curtain which he intended to touch.

Siemiradzki's curtains revert the order from Pliny's anecdote. The picture by Parrhasius was an illusionistic representation of the curtain. This time, the illusionistic painting and at the same time the curtain, moving up, reveals its illusory character. Reality is multi-layered and ambiguous. The more so that with the shattered illusion, a theatrical scene appears and the next performance begins.

Siemiradzki used the *tableau vivant* convention that is, he created the image of a fictional show, where actors imitate a hypothetical painting which, in turn, also remained in some relation to reality. There seems to be no way out of this mirror cabinet. The ontological status of the image constructed in this way is extremely uncertain. Confrontation of illusion and truth loses its sharpness.

This uncertainty is accompanied by a perfect illusion of materiality, literalness of presented figures and objects. The Krakow curtain, in particular, is an excellent example in this respect. The space is determined clearly and distinctly. The image is perfectly composed – with vanishing point in the centre, an emphasized axis, two symmetrical, antithetically contrasted groups on both sides and a portico closing the view. Such a construction gives the impression of total control. Uncertainty as to the ontological status of the image together with exceptionally clearly defined spatial relations cause cognitive dissonance and anxiety.

“The simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true.” Jean Baudrillard

8] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Book XXXV, chapter 36, line 6251. Accessible online: <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseus-cgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=PerseusLatinTexts&query=Plin.%20Nat.&getid=1>.

uses this fictional quote from Ecclesiastes, at the beginning of his book *Simulacra and Simulation*.⁹ The difference between imitation and simulation consists in the fact that imitation repeats the previously existing model taken from real life. While simulation generates the appearance of a non-existent reality, it simulates something that does not exist and retroactively “denaturalises” reality itself, revealing the mechanism responsible for its own creation. Baudrillard recalls Borges’s “Map and territory” and writes about illusion brought to the level of absurd – a map that was so precise that it covered the entire territory, and then about the remains of the map under which the territory disappeared, and with it the whole metaphysics became a thing of the past.¹⁰

In both curtains Siemiradzki used allegories. In the painter’s entire *oeuvre* there are only a few allegorical paintings. Apart from curtains – plafonds in the palaces of Zawisza in Warsaw and Nechaev-Maltsov in St. Petersburg, the *Apotheosis of Copernicus* for the University of Warsaw Library and the decorative *panneaux* for the Warsaw Philharmonic. Like most of his contemporaries, Siemiradzki tolerated allegories only as a decoration, especially architectural decoration.¹¹ In Pierre Larousse’s *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX siècle* from 1866, we read that allegory “gave way to works inspired by the spirit of our, in fact realistic era”.¹² As it can be deduced from the further part of the extensive entry, realism means here basically a certain attitude combining rationalism, materialism and pragmatism with a conviction about fundamental importance of science and progress.

Siemiradzki had a lot of freedom both in the choice of the theme as well as its elaboration. The choice was dictated probably by decorative qualities of allegorical compositions and the tradition of placing such representations on theatrical curtains. However, the “realistic epoch” in confrontation with allegory caused serious problems. He chose the convention of a living picture, which seemed obvious in the theatre, and at the same time built a distance to the “ideal” meaning of

9] Jean BAUDRILLARD, *Simulacra and Simulations*, in: *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark POSTERP, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto 1988, p. 1.

10] J. BAUDRILLARD, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

11] Monika WAGNER, *Allegorie und Geschichte. Ausstattungsprogramme öffentlicher Gebäude des 19. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland. Von der Cornelius-Schule zur Malerei der Wilhelminischen Ära*, Ernst Wasmuth, Tübingen 1989, p. 77.

12] *Allégorie*, in: Pierre LAROUSSE, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX siècle*, vol. 1, Paris 1866, p. 209. Accessible online <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k205356p>.

allegory. He made every effort to make the image as rational and clear as possible. He translated the image into words: in Krakow and Lwów before the performance during which the curtain was first shown, printed explanations were handed out (in the case of the Lwów curtain they were funded by the painter himself). The explanations were also published in the local press.

These explanations constitute a very conventional, reasonably arranged lecture on the academic theory of art composed by means of allegories. Although, as the analysis points out, the starting point for both compositions was the most obvious theme in the context of the theatre, namely the Olympians – Apollo and the Muses, the explanation enumerates only allegories.

In principle, Siemiradzki did not depict the ancient gods. On the other hand, he often showed them indirectly, in quotation marks: as antique statues or heroes of theatrical performances depicted in the painting, or as allegories. He treated traditional iconography very freely and mechanically. Sometimes deities and personifications exchange attributes (for example, on the Lwów curtain the personification of Reason was presented in the costume of Minerva and with the scales of Justice). Sometimes the same figure appears twice in one picture for example, on the Krakow curtain Eros is crying in the foreground on the left side of the painting, and also appears behind the personification of Beauty in the central part of the picture).

Siemiradzki consciously avoided literal repetitions of traditional iconographic formulae. He created new compilations using the 6 volumes of the mythological dictionary *Dizionario d'ogni mitologia e antichità* (1819-1824).¹³ In the explanation prepared by Siemiradzki one can find the description of the allegory of Opera: a woman in the scarlet mantle, leaning upon the harp and looking at the figure of Inspiration. Poetry (with a lyre and a wreath on her temple) and Music depicted as a Siren: half-bird, half-woman. It seems that looking through the dictionary and searching for inspiration, Siemiradzki stopped at the entry "Siren", where we can read: "According to the Ancients, Sirens have a head and the upper part of a body of woman and the lower part took the shape of a bird."¹⁴ There is also a picture with this kind of Siren (fig. 68). We can read also that there are usually

13] Girolamo POZZOLI, *Dizionario d'ogni mitologia e antichità* vol. I-VI, Batelli, Milano, 1819-1824.

14] A. KUCZYŃSKA, op. cit., p. 99.

three Sirens and that their attributes are a double flute, a lyre and a scroll. On the curtain there are three figures personifying Opera: two of them carry exactly the same attributes as described in the dictionary. Allegories created by Siemiradzki were only seemingly new. It was like making up rebuses, arbitrary combination of conventional elements.

In the National Museum in Krakow there are three sketchbooks with rebuses drawn by the artist (no. inv. MNK III-r.a. 318 428/1-32, MNK III-r.a 318 430/1-36, MNK III-r.a 318 434/1-32). It was apparently one of his favourite pastimes. Thanks to the abundance of material we may become familiar with how they were construed. The matter is not easy: one rebus often used words in different languages (Polish, Italian, French, occasionally Latin) (fig.69); sometimes the picture is deciphered with a word in one language, its sound constitutes a part of an encrypted word in another language, its notation must be changed and an ending must be added already in this new language. Letters are sometimes treated like objects while maintaining the status of letters, sometimes letters are created from other letters and together gain additional meaning. *Signifiants* and *signifiés* interchange freely.

The elements of iconography are treated in a similar way. An example which is very complicated and very simple at the same time is a bearded old man in a warm hat on his head with a trident in his hand, leaning against an overturned pitcher, from which water spills out and which, in addition, entertains human legs. The solution is: “*Ob je nogi*” (The Ob river eats legs) which phonetically is equal to “*obie nogi*” (both legs). The old man is a combination of a river god, Neptune with a trident and Saturn devouring his own children. The inscription and warm cap informs that it is a river flowing in the north. We guess that it is the Ob river (here needed as a syllable); next syllable “*-je*” (eats, the spelling must be changed into “*-ie*”) and legs at the end (as can be seen). It is pretty difficult to guess. Fortunately, a very unobvious answer has been preserved. The solution to the whole puzzle is “if you’re to hang, hang by your both legs” (*Kiedy wisieć, to za obie nogi*).

It was made for fun. But the three sketchbooks filled with such rebuses are food for thought. It seems that the way of thinking about symbolic tradition, here in the amplified and much more pronounced version, resembles the way in which Siemiradzki worked on his serious allegories.

Rebuses were often too difficult, while allegories, whose goal was clarity and unambiguity, are painfully simple – so simple that they bring allegory to an absurd. The example being the allegory of Mathematics from the plafond *Light and Dark*: a female figure with a $2+2 = 4$ plate. Again, we may recall times which are much closer to us and postmodernism's poetics, "where allegory offers itself as a tool for exploring ontological structure and foregrounding ontological themes".¹⁵ Postmodern artists, literary as well as visual, find in allegory's overdetermined signs and overburdened artifice a way to undermine and destabilize rather than reinforce universal truths. "At times, postmodern allegory mocks its own form by setting up overly simple correspondences only to reveal greater complexities than can be sustained by the superficial artifice, and the allegory collapses on itself."¹⁶

Siemiradzki's allegories – overdetermined, overburdened and at times much too simple – worked inadvertently in a similar way. They unconsciously pointed to the problems recognized and theorized quite recently.

15] Brian McHALE, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Methuen, London and New York 1987, p. 141.

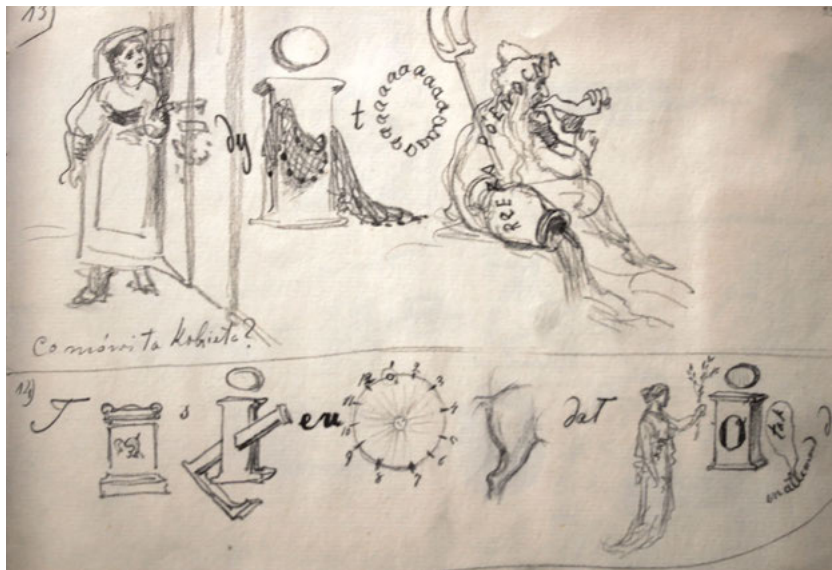
16] *Ibid.*



67. Model to the Allegory of Dance for Curtain of Theatre in Lwów, Photography, National Museum, Krakow no. inv. MNK-f-26918. Photo Museum.



68. Siren in: *Dizionario d'ogni mitologia et antichità*, Batelli e Fanfani, Milano 1809-1827.



69. Henryk Siemiradzki, Rebus from the sketchbook, National Museum, Krakow, no. inv. MNK 318 428. Photo Museum.