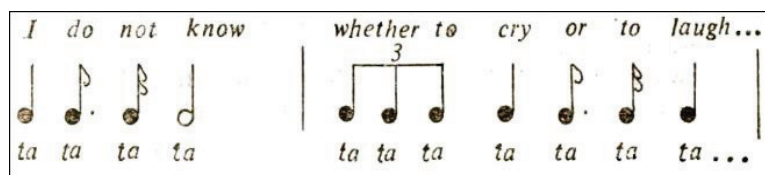


Andrzej Hejmej*

Stefan Themerson's Opera
(*St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio or Brother Francis' Lamb Chops*)

1

Do you know the anecdote about an elderly lady who after having been asked “can you speak Chinese” answered “I don't know. I never tried.” Some 25 years ago something similar happened to me. I was riding a London double-decker on Oxford Street and I asked myself: “can I write an opera?” To which the answer was the same: “I don't know. I never tried.” And before the bus turned on to Regent Street I took out a pencil and a piece of paper and it began to write itself:



And so to move forward I needed not a bus but a piano¹.

This history of the birth of the idea to write an opera as told in the letter (*List do Zespołu Św. Franciszka – Teatr “Wybrzeże”*) in connection with the stage production in 1981 is splendidly illustrative of both the peculiar course of

* Prof. dr hab., Jagiellonian University, Faculty of Polish Studies, Department of Theory of Literature; e-mail: a.hejmej@uj.edu.pl.

¹ S. Themerson, *List do Zespołu Św. Franciszka – Teatr “Wybrzeże”*, in: idem, *Święty Franciszek i Wilk z Gubbio albo Kotlety Świętego Franciszka* [performance programme, Scena Kameralna Teatru “Wybrzeże”, May 1981; dir. R. Major, musically arranged by: A. Bieżan], without pagination (see also in: *Świat według Themersonów. Szkice do portretu*, Z. Majchrowski (ed.), Trinum, Gdańsk 1994, pp. 93–95).

development as well as a the way of thinking of an avant-garde author. As the anecdote by Themerson reveals, what is most important here, is the musical source of the project (I think of an opera convention and of rhythmical phrase pattern “I do not know whether to cry or to laugh”, being the first and, in a somewhat modified variant, the last line sung by St Francis) but also – as a consequence – a musical rhythm of realization, an effort of composing. Taking into consideration the realities of the creation of *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio or Brother Francis’ Lamb Chops* in 1954–1960 and having within my reach the work printed in English in 1972 by Gaberbocchus Press and De Harmonie², Stefan Themerson was the author of the text and music for the two-act-opera (according to information printed inside). It is a different question whether he was the author of a rather atypical libretto and completely atypical music composition (avant-garde movies are the author’s only experiment on such a scale involving music). It is difficult to compare the final form of the notation with anything existing in musical theatre (opera) or dramatic theatre or even among avant-garde works of the second half of the 20th century. The published book, something that is visible already during the first viewing, constitutes an **intermedial collage**, a result so characteristic of Themersons’ work according to a rule “paste”³ as Agnieszka Karpowicz described it aptly distinguished; in other words, a collage fusing different kinds of art and media utilizing modern printing techniques. Apart from an ordinary font and facsimile of the manuscript, the original musical notation is used, as well as drawings by Franciszka Themerson with Stefan’s texts – *St. Francis* and *Paterfamilias*⁴ – published ten years earlier in the collection entitled *Semantic Divertissements* (Gaberbochus Press, London 1962)⁵. In this way the whole composition as a multimaterial hybrid lost its linear unity, multimedial transmission was thus extremely intensified⁶, as a consequence enabling different forms of perception

² *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio or Brother Francis’ Lamb Chops*, an Opera in 2 Acts, text and music by Stefan Themerson, drawings by Franciszka Themerson, De Harmonie – Gaberbocchus Press, De Harmonie – Gaberbocchus Press, Amsterdam–London 1972 (in: *Luxury edition* 50 copies with original illustrations by Franciszka Themerson were published).

³ Agnieszka Karpowicz identified three collage strategies: “paste” (Stefan Themerson), “copy-write” (Leopold Buczkowski) and “stick together” (Miron Białoszewski). See in particular A. Karpowicz, *Rękodzieło. Technika Stefana Themersona – “wklej”*, in: eadem, *Kolaż. Awangardowy gest kreacji. Themerson, Buczkowski, Białoszewski*, Wydawnictwa UW, Warsaw 2007, pp. 80–135.

⁴ F & S. Themerson, *Semantic Divertissements*, Gaberbocchus Press, London 1962 (*St. Francis*, p. 9; *Paterfamilias*, p. 8).

⁵ See A. Dziadek, *Tekst wielowymiarowy – przypadek “Semantic Divertissements” Franciszki i Stefana Themersonów*, “Przegląd Kulturoznawczy” 2009, issue 1, pp. 57–64.

⁶ A problem of “intensifying certain rules of composition” in the case of a literary collage (the effect of which being: discontinuity, ambiguity, metalinguistics, intertextuality) is commented on by R. Nycz, *O kolażu tekstowym. Zarys dziejów pojęcia*, in: idem, *Tekstowy świat. Poststrukturalizm a wiedza o literaturze*, Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, Warszawa 1993, p. 195. See also: E. Kra-

and becoming extremely difficult to receive. In such circumstances genological arrangements and speculations where Themersonian experiment could be located failed from the very first attempts at interpretations (naturally on totally different premises compared with those Benedetto Croce had once been driven by putting on “pure” expression and resigning from all typologies of all phenomena identified with art)⁷. *St. Francis...* is “a philosophical story”⁸ for some, while “a philosophical parable” for others⁹; Themerson wrote that it was “a drama – but it is hard to tell whether it is theatrical and for what theatre it is written”¹⁰ as some would say, whereas “he does not write drama actually”¹¹ as others would; some think that “Themerson wrote simply a cosmic opera libretto or rather perhaps a musical one”¹², others think that it was only a parody¹³ or “a pastiche of an opera”¹⁴ whereas others added that “a work of art can also be treated as a peculiar ‘visual opera’”¹⁵ or – finally – that *St. Francis...* “is neither a musical nor any other form of complete theatrical-opera.”¹⁶ There exists a consensus among many interpreters on one thing only – the Themersonian realization is an example of “a syncretic work of art”¹⁷, an attempt at enforcing the modern idea of total art that would be safest in a museum with an attached label: “the most ‘peculiar’ or radical in terms of form”¹⁸...

skowska, *Wielokodowość jako metoda twórcza*, in: eadem, *Twórczość Stefana Themersona*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo PAN, Wrocław–Cracow 1989, p. 117.

⁷ See. e.g B. Croce, *O przesądach w dziedzinie sztuki*, in: *Zarys estetyki* [1912], collective translation ed. S. Gniazdka, introduction Z. Czerny, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 1962, p. 70.

⁸ See. L. Erhardt, *Opera semantyczna Stefana Themersona*, in: S. Themerson, *Święty Franciszek...* [performance programme]; J. Cieślak, *Kotlety świętego Franciszka*, “Rzeczpospolita” 1991, issue 153, p. 4.

⁹ P. Chynowski, *Musical surrealistyczny*, “Życie Warszawy” 1991, issue 142, p. 7.

¹⁰ T. Kubikowski, *Semantyczna Wampuka*, “Teatr” 1991, no 10, p. 36. See. E. Kraskowska, *O dramatycznych i „dramatopodobnych” utworach Stefana Themersona*, in: *Teatr i dramat polskiej emigracji 1939–1989*, I. Kiec, D. Ratajczakowa, J. Wachowski (eds.), Acarus, Poznań 1994, pp. 160–166.

¹¹ L. Erhardt, *op. cit.*

¹² P. Chynowski, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹³ W. Cegłowski, *Śmiać się czy płakać?*, in: S. Themerson, *Święty Franciszek...* [performance programme].

¹⁴ T. Kubikowski, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁵ B. Śniecikowska, *Obraz – dźwięk – słowo – ruch. Intermedialność sztuki Franciszki i Stefana Themersonów*, in: eadem, *Słowo – obraz – dźwięk. Literatura i sztuki wizualne w koncepcjach polskiej awangardy 1918–1939*, Universitas, Cracow 2005, p. 405.

¹⁶ L. Erhardt, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ E. Kraskowska, *Wielokodowość...*, p. 115.

¹⁸ L. Erhardt, *op. cit.*

2

Stefan Themerson described the final result of several years of his work in the author's commentary, calling it a **semantic opera**¹⁹ or – **in a most succinct way – simply “opera”**²⁰ (he put the formula into inverted commas). **Actually, we come across a non-typical form if we take Umberto Eco's handy term: “a work of art in motion”**²¹, a **media hybrid**, and thus a non-classified, undefined, avant-garde realization *par excellence*.

It startles even those most devoted to Themerson and accustomed to his experimental activities (it should be stated in passing that it is known only by a few scholars of literary studies, musicology and teatrology). *St. Francis...* sentences the interpreter to various troubles connected with reception – above all to an inevitable musical perception, reading a complicated score/script and the need of intermedia interpretation. Themerson's actions, leading to the creation of a **modern “intermedium”**²², as Dick Higgins understood it, are difficult to understand as a conventional “intersemiotic game”²³. In this case a mutual interplay and a radical fusion of different media leading to phenomena that require explanations in an intermedial and transformational perspective, according to Jens Schröter²⁴ – that is, within the area of polimedial construction they are integrated or “coexist” as an inseparable unity: the text (the overture devoid of music; complex stage directions), verbal text (musical, realized through sound and recitation), musical text (with characteristic broken narration and exposed visual dimension as in graphical scores/scripts case), ending with drawings (“complete” or “dislocated” ones, that is existing as fragmentary quotations, carved into the musical text). The composition looks completely different from the classic opera, where – as Higgins emphasized – “music, libretto and scenography are completely distinct from each other”²⁵. Taking into consideration the very shape of *St. Francis...*, it would be hard to respect this intermedial scholar perspective. What strengthens

¹⁹ *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio...*, p. 9.

²⁰ S. Themerson, *List do Zespołu...*

²¹ U. Eco, *Dzieło otwarte. Forma i nieokreśloność w poetykach współczesnych*, transl. J. Gałuszka, L. Eustachiewicz, A. Kreisberg, M. Oleksiuk, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1994, p. 39 et al.

²² See D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, transl. M. & T. Zielińscy, in: idem, *Nowoczesność od czasu postmodernizmu oraz inne eseje*, choice and afterword P. Rypson, Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, Gdańsk 2000, pp. 115–133.

²³ A. Pruszyński, *O grach intersemiotycznych Stefana Themersona*, in: *Archiwum Themersonów w Polsce*, A. Dziadek, D. Rott (ed.), Fundacja “Pallas Silesia” – Redakcja “Gazety Uniwersyteckiej UŚ”, Katowice 2003, p. 36 et al.

²⁴ J. Schröter, *Intermedialität. Facetten und Probleme eines aktuellen medienwissenschaftlichen Begriffes*, „Montage a/v” 1998, vol. 7, issue 2, p. 136 et al.

²⁵ D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, p. 128.

this thesis is that this “semantic opera” was written in the 1950s – a time when not only similar works of art were created (just to remind such works as Gombrowicz’s *Operetta*²⁶) but when various intermediary works of art were developing expansionistically as well (such as happenings, performances, visual poetry, sound poetry, etc.); in the time that Higgins deliberately summarized using a meaningful commentary that opened his essay *Intermedia*: “It seems that the majority of the best works of art that are created nowadays combines various forms of expression”²⁷. The “late” Higgins – in his 1981 postscript to his famous essay – admittedly deferred from overestimating the phenomena of the new art and excessive assessment of intermedia (“the best work of art”). He signaled another important feature – **intermediality** which, in spite of being specific, in his view, for various manifestations of art from its very beginnings²⁸, decides particularly about the form and meaning of modern intermediality closely connected with a specific vision of socio-cultural relations.

An interpretation of the semantic opera *St. Francis...* as proposed here is situated in the intermedial perspective²⁹, emphasizing – first – the hybrid character of **the text notation** within a non-typical “musical-graphic” or “music-graphic-scenic” score/scripts. It’s worth noting that an intermedial trail is well known to present-day scholars of the Themersons’ work, substantially emphasized by, among others, Beata Śniecikowska, analyzing above all else their avant-garde movies³⁰ as well as by the participants of the scholarly session *Literary intermedia. Creative output of Franciszka and Stefan Themersons*. (Cracow, Bunkier Sztuki, 4 March 2007)³¹. This intermedial trail leads present day researchers straight into intermedial zones, provoking them into considering Themersonian suggestions as announcements of multimedia art³². This attempt at the interpretation of *St. Francis...* emphasizes – secondly – an obvious connection of semantic opera with the conception of Semantic Poetry (as with all aspects of Themersons’ works of

²⁶ W. Gombrowicz, *Operetka*, Instytut Literacki, Paryż 1966.

²⁷ D. Higgins, *Intermedia*, p. 117.

²⁸ This point of view is shared by present day intermedia theoreticians, i.a.: J.E. Müller, *Intermediality. A Plea and Some Theses for a New Approach in Media Studies*, in: *Interart Poetics. Essays on the Interrelations of Arts and Media*, U.-B. Lagerroth, H. Lund, E. Hedling (eds.), Rodopi, Amsterdam–Atlanta 1997, p. 296 or Konrad Chmielecki, *Estetyka intermedialności*, Rabid, Krakow 2008, p. 68.

²⁹ I do not, however, mean “a metaphorical usage” of this term as (among others) Pruszyński assumed in advance, A. Pruszyński, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

³⁰ See B. Śniecikowska, *Obraz – dźwięk – słowo – ruch...*, pp. 313–410.

³¹ Materials were first published in the special issue of “Ha!art” magazine 2007, issue 26: *Literackie intermedia. Twórczość Franciszki i Stefana Themersonów*.

³² As Agnieszka Karpowicz believed: “In this varied technical creative output we come across subcutaneous announcement of new media or even a premonition of a multimedia prefiguration on the printed sheet of paper” (A. Karpowicz, *Stefan Themerson i „literackie multimedia”*. *Słowo – obraz – dźwięk*, “Ha!art” 2007, issue 26, pp. 15–19).

semantic art) and especially its key connection with Themersonian ethics and, at the same time, with an original project of anthropology. Hence the author of the *Factor T*³³ essay (first published in 1956, written 1953–1955, when the idea of *St. Francis...* was born) not only repeated obsessive questions considering the boundaries of civilizing the stage of violence – putting to death. Remembering in a farcically-comical tone an ethical problem “forgotten” in the contemporary world, illustrated by a history of *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio*, he analysed in his own way – in an anthropological dimension – “**a primeval Tragedy**”³⁴, that is a scandal of existence, namely an inevitable rip, caused simultaneously by an aversion and desire.

3

Themerson’s semantic opera – in spite of using musical notation and in spite of the fact that it mainly requires the use of singing, in spite of conventional opera characters appearing on the stage (three sopranos, a contralto, two tenors, a baritone, four-voice choir and a group of dancers)³⁵ – in short: in spite of the fact that the composition resembles in a way a formal classic opera³⁶, it is a deliberate deconstruction from the very beginning. Assuming that *St. Francis...* is a realization of *à rebours* opera we come, above all, to a paradoxical statement that “the most extraordinary component is the score/script of this opera”³⁷ namely: a project (audio-visual) that is the result of combining various media. This score/script proves to be atypical, among other reasons, because of the **lack of orchestral notation** (there is only a “voice and the piano” study, a specific piano extract, which is referenced in the title page: “Score for Voice and Piano”³⁸). The iconic character of the work is also exposed by **the visual dimension of music notation**, because we come across many places where it becomes peculiar. For instance, the collapses of the stave “illustrating” the meaning of dialogue parts could indicate:

³³ Themerson himself stresses the strict connection of conceptions forced in *St. Francis...* and *faktor T* in his author’s commentary (see *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio...*, p. 9).

³⁴ S. Themerson, *faktor T* [1956], transl. E. Kraskowska, “Twórczość” 1990, issue 11, p. 67 (underlined – A.H.).

³⁵ *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio...*, p. 4. ref.: 662/1 R).

³⁶ *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio or Brother Francis’ Lamb Chops*, staged in Poznań Opera House, directed by Piotr Bogusław Jedrzejczak, music by Krzysztof Słowinski (premiere on 7.04.2010; as a part of the series of “Pocket opera”) show it perfectly. The recording of Poznań performance is in the archives of Poznań Opera House (S. Themerson, *Święty Franciszek i wilk z Gubbio czyli Kotlety świętego Franciszka*, DVD with ref. no.: 662/1 R).

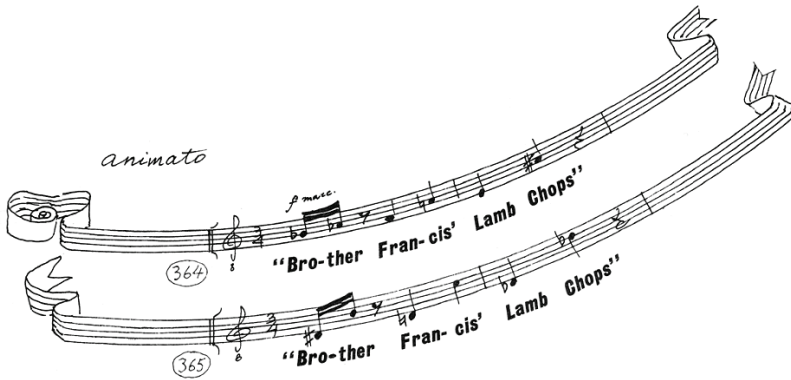
³⁷ B. Śniecikowska, *Obraz – dźwięk – słowo – ruch...*, p. 406.

³⁸ *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio...*, p. 4.

– falling off a high ladder³⁹



– a characteristic band⁴⁰, visible on the title page that imitates – in „the Era of Enlightenment by Advertising”⁴¹ – a label of a product signed by St. Francis:



³⁹ Ibidem, p. 26. See also: p. 13 (lines 21–22–23 and 24), p. 79 (line 363); p. 84 (line 400); p. 85 (line 402).

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 79 (line 364, 365).

⁴¹ S. Themerson, *Wstęp do poezji semantycznej*, transl. A. Taborska, M. Giżycki, „Literatura na Świecie” 1987, issue 7, p. 341.

The image shows a musical score for the phrase "He has no heart!". At the top, the tempo is marked "Meno Mosso" with a metronome marking of 120. The score is divided into four vocal parts, each with a circled measure number: 85 for Uncle, 86 for Aunt, and 87 for Father. The first Father part is circled 84. Each vocal line is accompanied by a piano part. At the bottom, there is a basso continuo line with the instruction "f tutti". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "f".

The script is also atypical on account of the **scenic dialogue completed with drawings** by Franciszka Themerson – original ones and those taken from *Semantic Divertissements* (*St. Francis* and *Paterfamilias*) as well as the “**framed**” **stage directions** (usage of facsimile from the manuscript) that serve to comment on the actions directly. Because of their character those stage directions and drawings of *St. Francis* and *Paterfamilias* – appearing as both complete and incomplete quotations⁴⁶, scattered on many pages of the semantic opera⁴⁷ – in the case of a traditional performance they would be unseen by a spectator.

It is beyond a doubt that this specific way of **musicalizing the text** prejudged the atypical character of the “musical-graphical-scenic” score/script – interrupted musical narration depending on the dialogue parts, concrete word sequences⁴⁸ (an

⁴⁶ Ibidem, pp. 8, 47.

⁴⁷ Speaking precisely: in the case of Franciszek and Uncle only verbal quotations are used from *St. Francis* (see *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio...*, p. 33–36, lines 144–165; p. 37, lines 168–171), in the case of Aunt – illustration (p. 38, lines 175–176), and in the case of Father (p. 39, line 182), Mother (p. 40, line 186), Sister (p. 41, line 193) and Brother (p. 43, line 204) – simultaneously illustration and text. *Paterfamilias* illustrated only Father’s questions: calling for fragments of illustration and text. (p. 48, line 228; p. 50, lines 236–237, 238–239; p. 52, lines 246–249) and fragments of the illustration in mirror image (p. 51, line 245; p. 52, line 249).

⁴⁸ As Artur Pruszyński noticed “it was not about its [music] emotional adjustment to lines spoken from the stage as it used to be in classical opera but about emphasizing the very construction of utterance in the whole work of art.” (A. Pruszyński, *op. cit.*, p. 63).

excellent example of that being the dialogue of Aunt and Uncle in the first act)⁴⁹. Themerson's precise explanations regarding the established strategy of "composing" became a unique program at the same time:

"As you will see – he anticipates in the author's commentary – a dead, one or two-second-long silence appears at this very moment (a pause to catch one's breath) between the end of one and the beginning of the next line of text. In this case an attitude of music to the text is sometimes the relation of color to a sketch. **The backbone of this work of art is made of words. Their meaning is important. Hence I have named this work of art a semantic opera**"⁵⁰.

Themerson's requests to performers were hints to the conception of semantic opera – with its overriding postulate *ben articulato* – the last one of those hints, included in brackets in his *Letter to St. Francis performing team – "Wybrzeże" Theatre*:

(Should it happen that singing will drown the voice, I'd rather prefer to put vocal parts to strings and make sense by means of spoken singing or sung speech)⁵¹.

4

The struggle for the word, its meaning, is announced in *St. Francis...* even by its genologic name: semantic opera, and its far reaching consequences are demonstrated by its **Overture** attached to the whole work of art, whose function is somewhat traditional from a formal point of view, that is a practice shaped in the long history of opera (overture meaning "opening", "introduction", etc.), somewhat avant-garde – because of its separate character. Though the formula used in the table of contents (*Overture: A street*)⁵² does not suggest any departures from opera conventions, it is the formula directly preceding notation of that part of "opera" – *Overture (wordswithoutmusic)*⁵³ – that reveals a radical decision by the author. An overture conceived as "words without music" (with elements of dance and usage of a film projection) – in a situation when an overture in the classic opera is traditionally an introduction performed solely by an orchestra ("music without words") and what is more, when all musical notation

⁴⁹ See *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio...*, pp. 20–21 (lines 71–79).

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 9 (underlined – A.H.).

⁵¹ S. Themerson, *List do Zespołu...*

⁵² *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio...*, p. 4.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 5 (underlined – A.H.).

is removed in the Overture – it is received as a gesture of distancing, accepting *à rebours* tradition. An over-assessing made by Themerson did not mean going from an endless discussion concerning two old statements regarding classic opera: *prima la musica, dopo le parole*⁵⁴ and *prima le parole, dopo la musica* (two colliding statements – on the one hand – thinking based on Monteverdi, on the other, the thinking in the last decades of the 16th century of the members of Florentine Camerata wanting to renew the Greek tradition of theatre and maintaining the primacy of word over melody). The author of *St. Francis...* did not oscillate between those two theories as Richard Strauss did in *Capriccio* (1942) but resolutely declared himself in favor of the second, restoring its semantic potential to the voice. That's why the Themersonian *Overture* is – by a specific act of provocation – a dramatic scene, a spoken scene or resorting to a deliberate oxymoron “**a textual overture**”⁵⁵ (Marcin Błażewicz's decision came as no surprise, in such circumstances, to when composing music to Themerson's libretto for the Warsaw production directed by Jaroslaw Ostaszekiewicz, propose his own “asemantic” overture)⁵⁶.

It was not only the *Overture* that eliminated the music layer, which must be emphasized clearly, which testified to the breaking with the convention of classic opera in *St. Francis...* The proof of that was the script/score of the whole work. It was not merely the bars but the dialogue parts that were numbered (518 in total), and the most important of them were completely devoid of piano accompaniment as, for instance, during the proposal of a pact with a Wolf⁵⁷ or in the first and – partly, besides one chord strengthening the word “cry” – during the last line by St. Francis⁵⁸.

⁵⁴ An expression “*prima la musica*” became prevalent because of *divertimento* in Antonio Salieri's *Prima la musica e poi le parole* (1786).

⁵⁵ B. Śniecikowska, *Obraz – dźwięk – słowo – ruch...*, p. 405 (underlined – A.H).

⁵⁶ Błażewicz's music – *Kotlety św. Franciszka* (1991) – composed for the production directed by Jaroslaw Ostaszekiewicz: *Święty Franciszek i wilk z Gubbio albo Kotlety świętego Franciszka* (Drama Theatre in Warsaw, premiere: 14.06.1991). A radio recording of Themerson's opera with Błażewicz's music was realized by The Third Program of Polish Radio (it is the composer's property now).

⁵⁷ *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio...*, pp. 71–72 (lines 320–332).

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 9 (lines 1–2), 103 (lines 486–487).

10 *Moderato*

① **FRANCIS** *I do not know— whe-ther to cry or to laugh,*

② *short presto*
O! I don't know whe-ther to cry or to laugh!

*Francis sings again the opening line.
 Now it has its full meaning.*

④86 **FRANCIS** *I do not know whether to laugh or to cry,*

④87 *O, I don't know whe-ther to laugh or to cry.*

The musical structure of *St. Francis...* is actually devoid of autonomous characters, being subjected to the structure of the word, scenic dialogue (using music to strengthen by means of “melodic contour” – intonational contour and the semantics of separate dialogue sequences). As a consequence of that, as Ludwik Erhardt noticed after the first production:

There are no arias, recitations, specific musical motifs or even any clear melodic structure. A peculiar arrangement of notes, patterned on a dialogue arrangement results from the fact that the author demands it be sung on individual lines between notes. But between the lines there are to be rests – as in ordinary scenic dialogue – not filled with music⁵⁹.

Themerson resigned thus – as a declared follower of the semanticity of the word which means a proponent of the **language** not of the seductive **opera voice** – from the musical element, flowing opera narration, *bel canta*, coloraturas, high tessituras etc., and consciously chose the most primitive way of “composing” (incidentally, writing *bien faite* opera was beyond his reach). Giving music a minor

⁵⁹ L. Erhardt, *op. cit.*

role or going from its primate beginnings allowed him to save – according to an elementary semantic opera convention – **autonomy/audibility of spoken parts**. The whole idea of the semantic opera is thus based on the demonstrative assumption that, “from two types of material, verbal and melodic [musical], it is the former that is more important”⁶⁰; in other words, it is founded on confrontation or – in the case of *Overture* – annihilation. This simple claim opens further interpretational perspectives while at the same time posing a question as to the purpose of the Themersonian “semantic” concept (obsession?) was employed in *St. Francis...* initially connected, as it is known, with the original theory of Semantic Poetry, which gained its first interpretation in telling – “a semantic novel”⁶¹ – *Bayamus*. Semantic poetry, as Themerson emphasized many times, was created in the 1940s for a specific reason: “so as not to allow oneself to be detached from reality”⁶². Semantic opera – written two decades later in completely different historical circumstances – seems to be a program too, being, in spite of substantial differences, a continuation of an old lecture, showing also realities that are beyond linguistics (and beyond music)⁶³.

5

In his semantic opera *St. Francis...* Themerson did not confine himself to an avant-garde model of bricolage and intermedia mosaic, nor did he confine himself to formal solutions only, as in his previous artistic undertakings. In the case of the author's opera both procedures are equally important: the procedure of composing and – above all – the intended purpose of a perverse treatment and the deconstruction of classical opera conventions, both a problem of autotextuality, namely a problem of peculiar intermedial “illustrative series”: a film entitled *The Eye and Ear* (Part 2 is entitled *St. Francis*) – a short story entitled *Bayamus* – an essay entitled *faktor T* – two illustrations from *Semantic Divertissements*

⁶⁰ E. Kraskowska, *Wielokodowość...*, p. 117.

⁶¹ Themerson's expression in the letter to Raymond Queneau from 1960, published entirely by Jas Reichardt (see *O Stefanie Themersonie i Raymondzie Queneau*, „Literatura na Świecie” 1997, issue 8–9, pp. 285).

⁶² S. Themerson, *Wstęp do poezji semantycznej*, p. 341. See also *Poezja nieprzerwana*, Gérard-George Lemaire rozmawia ze Stefanem Themersonem, transl. A. Taborska, „Literatura na Świecie” 1987, issue 7, p. 367.

⁶³ According to Themerson's statements: “Semantic Poetry is not composing poems or bouquets of flowers. On the contrary, Semantic Poetry exposes a poem and shows beyond linguistic reality that is hidden behind it. In Semantic Poetry, there is no place for hypnosis of rhythm and rhyme.” (S. Themerson, *Bayamus*, in: idem, *General Piesc i inne opowiadania*, ilustr. F. Themerson, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1980, pp. 101–102).

(*St. Francis and Paterfamilias*) – *St. Francis...*⁶⁴, as – and above all – a result of a philosophical-grotesque interpretation of the 20th century reality in one of the stories that was centuries old. (Themerson was interested in chapter XXI of *The Little Flowers of St. Francis – Of the most holy miracle of St Francis in taming the fierce wolf of Gubbio*)⁶⁵. In other words, the characteristics of the work were defined by, on the one hand, the exposure of multi-material by the author **and** an intended primitiveness of semantic opera – **antiopera** – in the formal plan, while on the other hand – the eventual consequences of philosophizing, wrestling in the modern world “with a peculiar problem of St. Francis”⁶⁶. It is only through such a perspective that we can see and better understand the sense of Themerson’s actions, why the Themersonian “opera” in 2 acts with the attached overture cannot be juxtaposed with an opera about St. Francis by Olivier Messiaen *Saint François d’Assise* (written for the Paris Opera between 1975–1983, along with his libretto).

The author of *St. Francis...* was interested in the story of St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio in connection with a paradox of civilization hiding in its bud a fundamental and tragic contradiction, to put it strictly: in the connection with civilization bringing an insoluble conflict caused by the (necessary) simultaneity of aversion and desire, the reluctance to kill and the simultaneous consent to it. Those biological conditions – as Themerson believed – are a contradiction, and analyzed taking St. Francis’s actions and conduct as an example (seeking an alternative solution for the problem uttered clearly in the sentence: “in order to live you have to eat, and in order to eat you have to kill”) is only one of the possible exemplifications of a much wider problem. It is (this tragic contradiction) present in the very logic of the world, manifesting itself in the permanent confrontation of contradictory forces, giving birth to an inevitable **tragedy**: “It is not a dramatic conflict. It is a conflict which – what a thoughtlessness of fate – cannot be avoided, so it is Tragic (T)”⁶⁷. In other words, the ethical dilemmas analyzed in *St. Francis...*, relating directly to the killing of lambs by a carnivorous Wolf, are not limited to the “archeology” of killing (they do not take place in the plane of nature – culture), but also illustrate a fundamental contradiction – the dialectical dimension of reality. Themerson – a sceptic and rationalist, a careful observer of changes in the perception of modern man – skillfully avoided simplifications of interpretation and prevented any formulations of unambiguous interpretations

⁶⁴ This “illustrative series” is complemented, among other things, by works by Franciszka Themerson, who was inspired by the semantic opera entitled *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio or Brother Francis’ Lamb Chops* – to create new collages and drawings between 1985–1986.

⁶⁵ See repeatedly reprinted translation of Leopold Staff from 1910 (*Kwiatki świętego Franciszka z Asyżu*, transl. L. Staff, Wrocław 2003, pp. 51–54).

⁶⁶ S. Themerson, *List do Zespołu...*

⁶⁷ S. Themerson, *faktor T*, p. 66.

of semantic opera. He remembered the mythicized in the European culture story of St. Francis and proposed his own interpretation in a modern version – not only turning the idealism of his character (“I am a young human being” / „Ja jestem młody homo sapiens”)⁶⁸, being in a state of more and more disillusionment (“I was a young human being”⁶⁹ / „Byłem raz homo sapiens”), but in the scandal of existence expressed succinctly in *Katedra przyzwoitości*: “Tragiczna konieczność jest w Naturze, zło – w kulturze” / “Tragic necessity is in Nature and evil – in culture”⁷⁰.

It is Beyond doubt that “semantic opera” – moving beyond the proper history of St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio, written in the 14th century – is a perverse, grotesque comicality of the interpretation of ethical and philosophical views. It is trenchantly presented by the Wolf’s conclusions appearing at the end of the opera that generalize **a dilemma of choice in the modern world**:

Lambs, or wolves, or peasants,
Or slaves, or nations, or race...
Make your choice.
You can choose WHOM to devour,
But a choice you must make,
Because there is no Alternative⁷¹.

(Owce czy wilki, czy chłopów,
czy narody, czy rasy...
Wybierz sam.
Możesz wybrać sam KOGO chcesz pożreć,
Ale nie wybrać nie możesz,
Nie ma innej alternatywy)⁷².

Themerson’s interpretation showed – what is equally important – that the social opinions and ideology as well as the politics that are expressed fully in the final lines of St. Francis’s protagonist⁷³ (and the nearly ritual repetition of the choir lines)⁷⁴ exposes the purposes of an inevitable confrontation and the need-less scenes of fights between “classes”, “races”, “nations”, scenes of violence

⁶⁸ *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio...*, p. 33 (line 144 et al.).

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 81 (line 383 et al.).

⁷⁰ S. Themerson, *Katedra przyzwoitości*, transl. A. & P. Bikont, „Literatura na Świecie” 1987, issue 7, p. 359.

⁷¹ *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio...*, p. 107 (lines 500–505). Special attention is focused here on the use of capital letters: “WHOM” and the underlining by Themerson of one word: “must”.

⁷² See Stefan Themerson, *Święty Franciszek i wilk z Gubbio...* [performance programme].

⁷³ See *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio...*, p. 109 (lines 510–514).

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 110 (lines 515–516).

known from other sources such as Girard's concept of "scapegoat"⁷⁵. In this light *St. Francis...* appears to be a final anthropological depiction of the contradictory forces (different aporias) ruling the world, similarly to the essay *faktor T*, where Themerson collided two positions – that of St. Francis and of a toreador⁷⁶ – and made it universal as the soil of all culture mechanics (Regardless of the fact whether your /A/ version relates to killing or risking your life in a fight or having offspring [...] – *faktor T*, a primeval Tragedy, remains unchanged and must be accepted as a fact⁷⁷). In the context of elucidation contained in *faktor T* it must be added finally that an all-encompassing logic of contradictions is concealed in *St. Francis...* not only by one of his stories finding its expression in his obsessive question "I don't know whether to laugh or cry" but also the title construction (the formula using the "or" conjunction that enables only one apparent alternative: *St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio or Brother Francis' Lamb Chops*), the typography of the title card (colliding a neutral notation with voice script), the name "semantic opera" (in fact oxymoronic, meaning domination of word over sound) and the chosen convention of composing (leading to music being subjected, somewhat according to the rule *prima le parole, dopo la musica*), finally – in the most radical way – a purely spoken *Overture* (the concept of "words without music"). The question: why was this opera chosen? – ceases being enigmatic. Themerson gave an indirect answer in a book entitled *O potrzebie tworzenia widzeń* (*Of the necessity of creating visions*):

In opera words don't kill music. Music kills words, distorting them so that they are beyond any recognition. If we know the libretto it does not disturb us that we do not pick out words anymore – it is enough to listen to vowels⁷⁸.

In semantic opera – to paraphrase Themerson – music does not kill words. It is words that kill music...

⁷⁵ See R. Girard, *Kozioł ofiarny* [1982], transl. M. Goszczyńska, Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź 1987. See also idem, *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, avec J.-M. Oughourlian et G. Lefort, Grasset, Paris 1978.

⁷⁶ S. Themerson, *faktor T*, pp. 72–73.

⁷⁷ Ibidem, p. 67.

⁷⁸ S. Themerson, *O potrzebie tworzenia widzeń*, transl. M. Sady, CSW Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw 2008, p. 41 (see also idem, *The Urge to Create Visions*, Gaberbocchus – De Harmonie, Amsterdam 1983). It is also worth noticing that a book version of *O potrzebie tworzenia widzeń*, written in the 1940s, was preceded by an essay under the same title published in the pre-WWII magazine "f.a" [artistic film] (1937, issue 2, pp. 36–48).

Bibliography

- Chmielecki Konrad, *Estetyka intermedialności*, Rabid, Kracow 2008.
- Croce Benedetto, *Zarys estetyki* [1912], collective translation S. Gniazdka (ed.), introduction Z. Czerny, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 1962.
- Dziadek Adam, *Tekst wielowymiarowy – przypadek „Semantic Divertissements” Franciszki i Stefana Themersonów*, “Przegląd Kulturoznawczy” 2009, issue 1, pp. 57–64.
- Eco Umberto, *Dzieło otwarte. Forma i nieokreśloność w poetykach współczesnych*, transl. J. Gałuszka, L. Eustachiewicz, A. Kreisberg, M. Oleksiuk, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1994.
- Erhardt Ludwik, *Opera semantyczna Stefana Themersona*, in: Stefan Themerson, *Święty Franciszek i Wilk z Gubbio albo Kotlety Świętego Franciszka* [performance programme, Scena Kameralna Teatru “Wybrzeże”, May 1981; dir. R. Major, musically arranged by: A. Bieżań], without pagination.
- Girard René, *Kozioł ofiarny* [1982], transl. M. Goszczyńska, Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź 1987.
- Girard René, *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, avec J.-M. Oughourlian et G. Lefort, Grasset, Paris 1978.
- Gombrowicz Witold, *Operetka*, Instytut Literacki, Paris 1966.
- Higgins Dick, *Intermedia*, transl. M. and T. Zielińscy, in: idem, *Nowoczesność od czasu postmodernizmu oraz inne eseje*, choice, afterword by Piotr Rypson (ed.), Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, Gdańsk 2000.
- Karpowicz Agnieszka, *Stefan Themerson i “literackie multimedia”. Słowo – obraz – dźwięk*, “Ha!art” 2007, issue 26, pp. 15–19.
- Kraskowska Ewa, *O dramatycznych i “dramatopodobnych” utworach Stefana Themersona*, in: *Teatr i dramat polskiej emigracji 1939–1989*, Izolda Kiec, Dobrochna Ratajczakowa, Jacek Wachowski (eds.), Acarus, Poznań 1994.
- Kraskowska Ewa, *Twórczość Stefana Themersona: dwujęzyczność a literatura*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo PAN, Wrocław–Cracow 1989.
- Kubikowski Tomasz, *Semantyczna Wampuka*, “Teatr” 1991, issue 10, p. 36.
- Nycz Ryszard, *Tekstowy świat. Poststrukturalizm a wiedza o literaturze*, Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, Warsaw 1993.
- Poezja nieprzerwana*, Gérard-George Lemaire rozmawia ze Stefanem Themersonem, transl. A. Taborska, “Literatura na Świecie” 1987, issue 7, pp. 367–371.
- Pruszyński Artur, *O grach intersemiotycznych Stefana Themersona*, in: *Archiwum Themersonów w Polsce*, Adam Dziadek, Dariusz Rott (eds.), Fundacja “Pallas Silesia” – Redakcja “Gazety Uniwersyteckiej UŚ”, Katowice 2003, pp. 57–64.
- St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio or Brother Francis’ Lamb Chops*, an Opera in 2 Acts, text and music by Stefan Themerson, drawings by Franciszka Themerson, De Harmonie – Gaberbocchus Press, Amsterdam–London 1972 (in: *Luxury edition* 50 copies with original illustrations by Franciszka Themerson published).
- Śniecikowska Beata, *Słowo – obraz – dźwięk. Literatura i sztuki wizualne w koncepcjach polskiej awangardy 1918–1939*, Universitas, Cracow 2005.
- Świat według Themersonów. Szkice do portretu*, Zbigniew Majchrowski (ed.), Trinum, Gdańsk 1994.
- Themerson Franciszka, Stefan, *Semantic Divertissements*, Gaberbacchus Press, London 1962.
- Themerson Stefan, *Bayamus*, in: idem, *General Piasec i inne opowiadania*, illustr. F. Themerson, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1980.
- Themerson Stefan, *faktor T* [1956], transl. E. Kraskowska, “Twórczość” 1990, issue 11, pp. 63–79.

Themerson Stefan, *Katedra przyzwoitości*, transl. A. and P. Bikont, "Literatura na Świecie" 1987, pp. 342–267.

Themerson Stefan, *List do Zespołu Św. Franciszka – Teatr "Wybrzeże"*, in: Stefan Themersonidem, *Święty Franciszek i Wilk z Gubbio albo Kotlety Świętego Franciszka* [performance programme, Scena Kameralna Teatru "Wybrzeże", May 1981; dir. R. Major, musically arranged by: A. Biezan], without pagination.

Themerson Stefan, *O potrzebie tworzenia widzeń*, transl. M. Sady, CSW Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw 2008.

Themerson Stefan, *The Urge to Create Visions*, Gaberbocchus – De Harmonie, Amsterdam 1983.

Themerson Stefan, *Wstęp do poezji semantycznej*, transl. A. Taborska, M. Giżycki, "Literatura na Świecie" 1987, issue 7.

Andrzej Hejmej

Stefan Themerson's Opera

(*St. Francis & The Wolf of Gubbio or Brother Francis' Lamb Chops*)

(Summary)

The paper focuses on the experimental work of Stefan Themerson (*St. Francis and The Wolf of Gubbio or Brother Francis' Lamb Chops*, an Opera in 2 Acts, text and music by Stefan Themerson, drawings by Franciszka Themerson, De Harmonie – Gaberbocchus Press, Amsterdam–London 1972) and the question of intermediality in general. An interpretation of the 'semantic opera' (written in 1954–1960, as a continuation of *Semantic Divertissements* [1962] and *factor T* [1956]), places Themerson's idea in the context of the aesthetics of intermediality. The author signals a terminological confusion connected with the understanding of *St. Francis and The Wolf of Gubbio* (semantic opera; hybrid work; intermedial work, etc.) and argues that the aesthetics of intermediality appear to be an important and inspiring context for the interpretation of Themerson's text and life. In this case, considerations on the subject of textuality show, on the one hand, different relations between literature, painting, music and theatre (artistic intermediality), and, on the other, the phenomenon of intermediality as the aesthetics of existence.

Keywords: Stefan Themerson, Franciszka Themerson, *St. Francis and The Wolf of Gubbio or Brother Francis' Lamb Chops*, semantic opera