

Bruno Schulz – “Text Photosynthesis” and Sign-plants. The Decoding of Hidden Orders

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The readers of articles by Karen Barad or Vicky Kirby will quite naturally be tempted to read Bruno Schulz’s stories through the prism of the concepts that arose in the circle of new materialisms. After all, Schulz anticipated the ideas of contemporary environmental thinkers, especially Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway. He consistently perceived the world as a network of tentacle-like connections between human and non-human beings, as a superspecific substance, prone to changes, multi-shaped, constant-

ly renegotiating its internal chemical composition. From such a vision of the world, he also derived a particular formula of literature, understood in the spirit of Donna Haraway’s “compost” multispecies storytelling [10].

Schulz, as the author of “Treatise on Tailors’ Dummies,” is undoubtedly one of the heirs of Spinozian vitalism¹ – after Bergson and before Deleuze, Kirby, and Karen Barad. His formula, where “there is no dead matter,”² in a way precedes the conceptually developed theories of neo-materialists, according to which matter is radically open, non-identical with itself, fluid, as a manifestation of Deleuzian “indefinite life in itself.”³ Karen Barad – whose ideas will be the most important point of reference for me in the interpretation of Schulz’s prose – claims that matter undergoes constant reconfiguration, going beyond the contour of perspective grids,⁴ these

1 It should be mentioned that the interpretation proposed here comes into conflict with the quite numerous style of thinking about Schulz as a neo-Platonist, a eulogist for the essence, absolute, and pure ideas. The classic essay by Jan Błoński, “Świat jako Księga” [The world as a Book] and his commentary, in which the researcher states that “to seek vitalism and pantheism in Schulz [...] would be rash and careless on the part of a critic,” is certainly representative of this trend in Schulzology” [Błoński 75].

2 As much as has been written about Schulz’s fascination with matter, it seems that no references have been made to the in-depth theoretical background now provided by new materialism. Cf. [Chwin; Czajkowska].

3 The Deleuzian definition of life immanence seems particularly valuable in the context of understanding temporality, which I develop in the following paragraphs of the text, hence, it is worth quoting it here. The author of *The Fold* writes: “This indefinite life does not itself have moments, close as they may be one to another, but only between-times, between-moments; it doesn’t just come about or come after but offers the immensity of an empty time where one sees the event yet to come and already happened, in the absolute of an immediate consciousness.” [Deleuze 29]

4 “Ontological indeterminacy, a radical openness, an infinity of possibilities, is at the core of mattering. [...] Matter in its iterative materialization is a dynamic play of in/determinacy. Matter is never settled matter. It is always already radically open.” [*What Is the Measure of Nothingness?* 16].

inept anthropocentric cognitive matrices facing the radical alienation of the material world. Hence, we are only a step away from the conviction, which is also close to Schulz, about life as a force that is unrepresentable and undepictable. Matter in the thinking of these authors is alinguistic,⁵ iconoclastic, and amorphous – all these diagnoses seem fundamental to Schulz's writing practices.⁶ In such terms, it is possible to interpret the constantly recurring theme of changing the status of objects, the condition of the "liquid signifier" that is present both in a tailor's dummy and in a heap of organic rubbish, in birds and on the surface of the human body⁷ (actually, numerous bodies with inconstant identities). By taking down the boundaries between "natural" and "manufactured," the life essence eludes the act of representation, being caught within the frames of an allegorical image or the convention of mimetic reflection. Anti-representationism has serious consequences for the thoughts of the authors evoked here. In the case of Schulz, it is addi-

5 The dispute over the relationship between matter and language marks one of the axes of debates within neo-materialism. In fact, the prevailing view is that the direction begins with an anti-linguistic shift in the humanities, but Karen Barad's concept of "mattering" (matter + meaning) or Vicky Kirby's attempts to create a Derridian variety of posthumanism have established an important break from this tradition. See [van der Tuin 278–279].

6 Jerzy Jarzębski recognizes that the image of "exuberant growth of matter" belongs to the repertoire of "scenes-images" fundamental to Schulz's creative imagination, constituting specific patterns, stereotypes (aside from the images of an experimenter, a creature entering life, the maze, etc.). Unfortunately, the author does not define the concept of "matter". In fact, he understands it in line with the anthropocentric paradigm, otherwise the image of matter would have a wider scope than that proposed by Jarzębski [Jarzębski 45–47].

7 One of the examples of new materialism's instruments being used creatively in literary studies seems to be an essay by David Tagniani devoted to mystical poetry. The author makes the starting point for his interpretation the concept of a subject in which the corporeality (of the poet and the reader) is the basis of self-awareness and mystical experiences. See [Tagniani].

tionally visible in the formal shape of the stories, in the lack of contours, and in morphics, specific to this prose, which would discipline the ontological codes of the world. Due to the problematic status of matter, both in Schulz and Barad’s texts, the dualism between existence and emptiness is nullified. In the philosophy of the author of *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, the void is always full of potential beings, cognitively intriguing “virtualities”; it is a field of tensions bursting with proto-life forces.⁸ According to Barad, the void is primal and fundamental to the order of being. Schulz, as it has been argued many a time, has a similar perception of this set of figures and meanings. The author of “A Night in July” positively evaluates deprivative motifs and figures, silence, the emptiness of the night city, the absence of the Father or the mythical Book, the blurring and disappearance of forms. The void is a shadow of matter, its life-giving source (a fiction of source?). It performs the function of a peculiar laboratory of matter, a place for trying and testing forms.

The approaches towards temporality also seem to be analogous. The idea of diffractive time [“Troubling Time/s”] derived from quantum physics is conceptualized by Barad as time broken into particles, scattered, tousled, and dispersing in a number of directions. It is “leaking” and unstable time that exceeds continuously redefined limits. It is also multi-valued, combining disproportionate measures, as well as visual and linguistic

8 “The vacuum is no doubt doing its own experiments with non/being” [*What Is the Measure of Nothingness?* 8].

images of time. Temporal diffraction is a manifestation of extreme indeterminacy, which allows particles, events, and beings to exist simultaneously at different times. These temporal events-moments are contained within each other (“they inhabit each other,” as Barad puts it), producing a stream of differences that Barad understands as “inclusive differences,”⁹ directed inward (and not excluding, causing ostracism and stigma).¹⁰ The difference does not become a political difference, but is used to maximally complicate the status of the world and expand its dimensions.

It seems that this concept of time – which takes the form of a swirling prism of events and, simultaneously, the possibility of their materializing – establishes a very interesting philosophical context for Bruno Schulz’s work. Not only because it clearly corresponds with the concepts of temporality, well-known to Schulzologists, such as “a branch of time,” “additional, surplus month,” circularity, “side path of events,” “pseudo-autumn,” or “exfoliating time” (like layers of an onion). It also suggests a temptation to transfer such thinking about temporality to other spheres of life and evaluations.

From floralization to “sign photosynthesis”

Schulz displays a great ingenuity in detailing the idea, akin to the concept of diffractive time, by embedding

9 Barad says: “Diffraction is a matter of patterning attuned to differences. [...] However, from the perspective of quantum physics [...] difference is a matter of differences within, not the ‘apartheid type of difference’” [“Troubling Time/s” 65].

10 It is worth mentioning that Barad uses the term “diffraction” also in relation to literary studies, formulating a thesis about the possibility of diffractive reading and writing.

it in the tissue of the text [Stala]. Temporal constructs, similar to Barad’s time, appear, for example, in the short stories “Spring” or “Cinnamon Shops”. In these fairy-tale-allegorical works of prose, individual phases of time, seasons, and months are contained within each other, “they inhabit one another ontologically”: spring is hidden in winter, it also exists in a latent form in the early spring period (“The air pulsed with a secret spring” [“Cinnamon Shops” 96]). The subsequent moments marking the fictional events do not follow a teleological order; instead, they are dynamic “knots in the passage of hours” [92] or “whole empty periods” [92]. Time appears here as discontinuous, convoluted, unequal, not so much spiral, but irregularly layered like organic forms, such as flower buds or bulbs. The relations between the layers are unobvious, labile, and enveloping. Temporality in “Spring” shortens the course of longer processes, presenting the history of bioevolution or the succession of more developed ecosystems in a condensed form. “Quantum time” finally reveals itself where events and persons exist in a state of ontological vagueness, indeterminacy, like “the age of genius” that simultaneously happened and did not happen [“The Book” 42], thus testing the durability of modernist oppositions.

In search of a pictorial-philosophical dominant, in which the theories discussed here would accumulate, one should put forward the thesis that the pictorial exponent of temporal diffraction and – more broadly – of “emanation of eternal life” (*zoe*) in the Schulzian world

are different varieties of *floralizations*. In the processes of dynamic semiosis, the advantage and “productivity” of descriptions of thriving vegetation are clearly visible. They are present on many levels of the textual organization, semantically and materially entwining their structure in order to change their own status in a flickering way, oscillating between the softness of chlorophyll and the inorganic, “stiffness” of an ornament.¹¹ Floralizations are an important element of the presented world. Cast as a strong agent, they are the causative factor of events and narratives (such a function can be attributed to, for example, the vision of a lush garden grown wild, full of monstrous charlocks, comprising the scenery of the story “Pan”).

“There, spread out before him, was a large, overgrown garden. Tall pear trees, broad apple trees, grew there in profusion, covered with silvery rustling leaves, with a flaming white glinting net. Thick tangle grass, never cut, covered the undulating ground with a fluffy carpet. Common meadow grasses with feathery heads grew there, wild parsley with its delicate filigrees; ground ivy with rough wrinkled leaves, and dead nettles smelling of mint. Shiny sinewy plantains spotted

11 It seems that Schulz represents an attitude in modern art, which Aleksandra Jach refers to as “biophilia”: “The notion of biophilia covers various artistic and philosophical stances relating to nature or considering biology a paradigmatic science – that is one whose language and categories explain the rules of reality. The boundaries of what is considered natural used to be far from obvious. For some, nature manifested itself in ‘wilderness’ and ‘non-humanity,’ something that people have withdrawn too far from [...]. Biophilia exhibits an aspect integrating all these standpoints; a sense of dependency on the environment, deriving from the human inclination to pursue all living things, to focus on life processes and attribute life to all that is organized by opposite rules (i.e. non-living matter)” [43].

*with rust shot up to display bunches of thick redheads.
The whole of this jungle was soaked in the gentle air
and filled with blue breezes” [“Pan” 78].*

The vision of a chaotically lush garden is not a silent background of events. It enters the foreground and acquires an aggressive, “imperial” subjectivity that conquers and subjugates species, types, and organisms. The only representative of humanity that seems consistent with this world is a bizarre, antisocial, uprooted man, embodying the abjectified values, beyond the horizon of the ordered bourgeois world [Markowski].

Moreover, floralizations are a part of the comparisons, from those more traditional in form – such as the line about twilight, which manifests as the (world) overgrowing with mold, lichen, and moss, or a well-known fragment in which the mythical Book is compared to a rose [“The Book” 17] – to constructions that go beyond the usual comparative compounds. In the vision of “the wallpaper [which] [...] wilted, [...] shed its leaves and petals” [“Visitation” 39]; in the figure of an ear taking the shape of a coral, in the images of pseudo-flora and pseudo-vegetation, the processes emerge significantly more radical, exceeding, so to speak, the framework of poetics. These are no longer comparisons, animations, personifications, respecting the existence of pre-established world borders; instead, they are inter-species transgressions, intra-actions that undo the rigid and inviolable binarisms of positivist sciences. The

dense texture of enumerations, chiasmi, and extreme paratactic periods break beyond the contractual mimesis, gaining somehow extra-textual vivacity.

Floralizations, turning into pseudo-vegetations, precede the text, create a secret dimension of writing. In other words, they become a kind of pre-writing. The constructions of Schulz's texts also seem to take the form of plant tissue: the proliferation of images, enumerative sequences, visually exuberant metaphors somehow materialize, entwine the story, parasitize on it like an ivy, only to take over its competences and vantages.

In the neo-materialist reflection, matter is defined as causative in the production of knowledge, which fits in with the postulates of nullifying the matter/culture dichotomy. The representatives of this trend follow the intertwining of matter and sense [Jones 244–247], consonance, and mutual differentiation of discursive/text-forming practices and materiality.¹² Barad's concept of mattering, even at the auditory level, presents a specific flickering of a sign and material reference, taking the form of a mutual exchange of these values. Schulz's stories are a perfect example of the aforementioned theses and aspirations. In the works of the author of "The Age of

12 In this thread Marzena Adamiak sees the greatest innovation in Barad's thoughts. The former writes that, according to Barad, the hitherto discredited metaphysics should be replaced by a "performative reading of metaphysical concepts," a transition from discourse to discursive practice. Therefore, according to the American author, "matter is an active participant in the making of the world, its constant intra-activity. [...] Intra-activity differs from interactivity in that it occurs between particles that, in fact, have not been separated beforehand." [Adamiak 175].

Genius” the word is material – it has a tissue-texture. It almost evinces its chemical composition. “Pan” or “Visitation” are texts-reliefs that protrude above the surface of the message, creating layers, and levels of overwriting; they are text, a meta-text, and their materiality, containing all modalities of expression. One gets the impression that they are pictograms in motion, in the course of an ontological transformation of meaning into plant beings. At the same time, the relationship between the text and the plant is two-way and undetermined. The status of the source appears to be unstable, volatile: sometimes the letter transforms into a “living ornament” (“The Night of the Great Season,” “The Book”), in other stories (“Spring,” “Treatise on Tailors’ Dummies: Conclusion”) – it is the structure and growth of plants that become the pattern of the text, the matrix for its potential vivacity.

“How boundless is the horoscope of spring! One can read it in a thousand different ways, interpret it blindly, spell it out at will, happy to be able to decipher anything at all amid the misleading divinations of birds. The text can be read forwards or backwards, lose its sense and find it again in many versions, in a thousand alternatives. Because the text of spring is marked by hints, ellipses, lines dotted on an empty azure, and because the gaps between the syllables are filled by the frivolous guesses and surmises of birds, my story, like that test, will follow many different tracks and will be punctuated by springlike dashes, sighs, and dots” [“Spring” 73–74].

Hence, it could be said that in Schulz's work, processes of a certain "textual photosynthesis" occur. Significant particles, letters, syllables, words – these are "sign-plants," specific carriers of knowledge about the (fictional)world of Schulz. They derive their formative energy from the extra-textual, cognitively opaque work of vegetation that resists representation. The meaning and shape of a letter emerge in Schulz's texts from the sublimation of matter, which never depletes and keeps the writing in a state of rickety ontological undecidability. It is also subject to principles typical of plant life: growth, unintellectual expansion, and superspecific mutations.

"A future of No Future".

Dialectics of diffractive time

Writing about Karen Barad's concept of diffractive time, we have somewhat delayed discussing the essential context of this theory; a context that is obvious in light of Bruno Schulz's biography. Diffractive time emerges from Barad's reflection as a side effect of the post-nuclear era, existing in the shadow of a catastrophe, the vision of a local and global apocalypse. The symbolic artifact of quantum time that Barad uses to explain her theory is the Doomsday Clock. Run by the board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists at the University of Chicago, the Doomsday Clock indicates the "x" units of time that hypothetically separate us from a nuclear catastrophe. Thus, according to Barad, diffractive time is time synchronized to "a future of No Future". It is time related to the moment of invalidating time as such; time

irreversibly heading towards destruction. This concept of time reveals a deeply hidden truth about the condition of contemporary civilization, masked by an attachment to the anthropocentric-Enlightenment models of temporality.

Barad analyzes the essence of time diffraction, treating the report by Kyoko Hayashi *From Trinity to Trinity* as a starting point. The account explores the post-nuclear landscapes of Hiroshima and the Trinity Site (a town in New Mexico, where the first atomic tests were carried out). Analyzing the unusual narrative mode of the book by the Japanese author, Barad states that the nuclear catastrophe causes a shock reaching the core of time and becomes a catalyst for its radical transformation. The philosopher describes post-atomic time as dispersed (in the irradiated body of the so-called *hibakusha* – a survivor of a nuclear attack), as a stratified temporality, absorbing the structure of the void, receding and – most importantly from the narrator’s point of view – enabling an evasion/erasure of certain past events (but only in the narrative). The time of a nuclear-catastrophe survivor most fully corresponds to the concept of diffraction developed in the framework of quantum physics – this time is “fluctuations of the quantum vacuum” [“Troubling Time/s” 77], which destroys the therapeutic, optimistic assumption that the trauma can be worked through or at least partially healed (thus, destroying the utopia of “metabolizing trauma,” as Barad, quoting the Japanese author, calls the mechanism of processing trauma).

This thread of Barad's philosophy reveals new areas of resemblance to Schulz's literary imagination. The affirmation of life, expressed by floralizations, does not dominate the prose of the writer from Drohobycz indivisibly. In his stories, the aforementioned unbridled eruptions of vitalism collide with opposing registers of language and imagery; an antinomic circle of meanings dominated by strong affects (paroxysm, madness, tumult, terror, wild screaming); disturbing images of obedience training, torture, oppression (a thoroughly ambiguous theme of the dominatrix Magda Wang from "The Book" [34]), and finally, the motifs of annihilation – which emerges unexpectedly, breaking the logic of the narrative – as well as disintegration, decay, and incineration (e.g. the character of Aunt Perasia who "oxidized into a petal of ash, disintegrating into dust and nothingness" ["The Gale" 123]). There are many such visions. They create an aura of subcutaneous anxiety, like a pogrom atmosphere that builds up, accumulates, and seeks a violent outlet. These images evoke significant historical associations and impose the mode of a retroactive reading, prompting the use of extra-textual associations related to the Holocaust and the death of Schulz in the interpretation.

Attempts to read the work of the author of "Cinnamon Shops" as if through the prism of the "long shadow of the Holocaust" have an established tradition [Wilczyński; Prokop-Janiec]. Often, however, they have been accused of methodological limitations, functioning al-

most as popular science attempts and simplifications assuming the existence of a straightforward symmetry between life and text. It seems that the ecocritical approach creates the possibility of disentangling from these methodological “blind spots” by replacing the simple template of teleological anticipation with the concept of decipherment, decoding the order of history; reading it under a thriving swirl of climatic, vegetative, and environmental events. It appears that the floral ornaments in Schulz’s prose hide “a text of the borderline experience” and its peculiarly supra-historical model. In other words, ecocriticism makes it possible to formulate the assumption that floralizations reorganize the military processes of history on the surface of the text, dismantle their cause-and-effect template, and then assign them to surprising stylistic or lexical conventions, locating the “sense of history” in a discontinuous, abrupt, and nonlinear notation.

This property of Schulz’s texts was aptly recognized by the contemporary American writer Jonathan Safran Foer, the author of the meta-Schulz novel *Tree of Codes*. Foer, an admirer of the prose of the Drohobycz writer, approached his literary fascination¹³ in an unusual way. Like a (post) postmodern *bricoleur*, he dismantled the text of the English translation of “Cinnamon Shops” by cutting it with scissors into narrow strips. Out of the existing, literarily

13 It is worth mentioning that Bruno Schulz was often the object of a deep fascination on the part of writers, for example, John Updike, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Bohumil Hrabal, to mention but a few. Often this fascination took the form of incorporating his characters or fragments of stories into new, original texts, see, e.g. *Under Love* by David Grossman or *The Messiah of Stockholm* by Cynthia Ozick. See [Fiut].

“pre-established” words, he created his own three-dimensional book, in which – using a specific code, capricious like a floral ornament – one can construct combinatorial, alternative narratives [Faber]. As a result, an extraordinary book was created, a true *objet d’art*, a book-sculpture that explores and elevates the essential properties of Schulz’s prose – rhetorical tortuosity, plot discontinuity, the primacy of narration over the event-layer, and anti-mimicry – to a metatextual (and also metamaterial) level. It is here that the most radical model of diffractive reading, postulated by Joanna Żylińska [279], emerges: reading the meanings embodied in the very materiality of the book, in its status as an artifact, whose “reistic body” we somewhat gloss over. By creating his “meta-Schulzian” book, Foer shows that a true re-reading of Schulz must be haptic, literally materialistic, and “corporal” (it should work on the “body” of the book).

The book radicalizes the status of the artifact through its three-dimensionality: sense emerges within it from overlapping words and cut-out “windows”. Since *Tree of Codes* is comprised mostly of empty spaces, small rectangular holes that pile up randomly, one gets the impression that the materiality of the book is marked by rape, aggression, and the violence of history. In this way, a ruin-book was created, (excessively) filled with material traces, allusively referring to the death of the author of *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*. Foer himself writes that he wanted to “exhume the words” [138], dig them out of a symbolic grave, and resuscitate them in the text – achieving the

effect of a bizarre creature, a zombie of Schulz’s literary legacy.

Referring to the avant-garde tradition of cut-up text popular in Anglo-Saxon literature, practiced, for example, by William Burroughs, Foer weakens its constitutive element of combinatoriality in favor of the plant logic of multidirectional branches of sense. Thanks to this, *Tree of Codes* can be considered a book that presents (and not describes or re-presents) the diffraction of the Schulzian world, its stratification, porosity, and ontological multivalence.

At the same time, the concept of using the ambiguous figure of the “tree” proves an excellent recognition of the internal world order of Schulzian literature. The “tree” leads in two directions: first, to the idea of the “mathematical tree,” which, from the time of Lamarck and Darwin¹⁴ to modern computer science, has been used to organize information; secondly, to the organic image of the tree, which in Schulz’s work plays an important role, although it does not appear as often as smaller plants, ivy, and lichens. In

14 Fae Brauer writes: “Trees had long been used to diagram genealogical relationships, even before the tree of life became a metaphor to designate the relationship between evolving organism. In his *Philosophie zoologique (Zoological Philosophy)*, first published in 1809, Lamarck deployed the concept of a tree to attempt to convey spontaneous evolution from singular organisms to increasingly complex ones and the ways in which this evolution entailed numerous divergences, which he represented as branches. Starting with worms at the top and ending with mammals, Lamarck’s tree was upside down. Since Lamarck did not consider there was a common line of descent shared by all life, many of his branches became separate parallel lines [...] Some thirty years later, when Darwin was tentatively ruminating upon how evolution appeared to work, he too drew an arboreal diagram to try to determine its mutations in a main line of descent alongside tangents that seemed to diverge, discontinue, and become extinct” [157].

Schulz's texts, the dendrological metaphors have a precise scope of meaning. Usually, it is associated with a deep, hidden, superseded semantics of the word, and with hidden narratives, "buried" under social taboo.

"When the tree roots want to speak, when under the turf a great many old tales and ancient sagas have been collected, when too many whispers have been gathered underground, inarticulate pulp and dark nameless things that existed before words — then the bark of trees blackens and disintegrates into thick, rough scales which form deep furrows" ["Spring" 112].

The tree, referring to the image of the "tree of life," mediates between the chthonic and aerial spheres. The dendrological symbolism – which Foer so successfully detected – naturally and coherently covers various levels of the archaeological cross-section of the world, its indivisible and material-sign nature. However, it also refers one to the surface/depth dialectic, abolishing it in the image of an organic cipher, which can be read with the help of an appropriate key – after rescaling the determinants of the anthropocentric vision of the world.

Let us return to the hypothesis that there is a "text of the borderline experience" hidden under the tangle of floristic narratives. This perspective makes everything seem to take on a new meaning here. Floralizations, dominated by the impression of an excess, thicket, and overgrowth, can be read as manifestations of rebellion against bio- and

thanatopolitics, against power over human and inhuman bodies. The essence of necropolitics, as Giorgio Agamben says, is to transform a “naked life” into a political element. *Homo sacer*, personifying the necropolitical *nomos*, is an outlawed body, a personification of marked out and excluded matter. Thanatopolitics gives itself the right to operate with the category of “worthless life,” to authoritatively link it to specific areas of reality and groups of people and non-people.

Since philosophy, focused on the exploration of abstract, pure consciousness, is identified as the basis and source of violence against the Other, it is floralizations – neo-materialist *twines of intra-active agency* – that play here an important role. The Schulzian method of lending forms of expression to matter – the great Other of the Cartesian-Kantian tradition – seems to be a strategy of resistance to universalistic, seemingly neutral cultural values, which in fact pave the way for genocide and lead towards a world of concentration. After all, in Schulz’s textual thicket, life never ceases; on the contrary, unlike in the “concentration universe,” it spreads, flourishes, accumulates possessions, taking over the competences of Agamben’s legislator/sovereign. Life itself is a law: it becomes a sovereign that blows up the pre-established conditions of all totality.

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