

Knowledge in the Shadow of Catastrophe

Polen in Europa

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Knowledge in the Shadow of Catastrophe

*Key Thinkers of Polish Humanities
in the Post-War Era*



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Introduction

Knowledge in the Shadow of Catastrophe

Paraphrasing Theodor Adorno's dictum about the impossibility of lyric poetry after Auschwitz, we are hereby posing a question about the (im)possibility of the humanities after the same catastrophe. We inquire not so much whether such knowledge is possible, but ask how we may study the details of its existence.

The question is formulated from a very specific perspective, from the Polish periphery, which differs from all others in that it territorially encompasses Auschwitz; and the answers are therefore sought in this local intellectual tradition. Here we need also to refer to the vicinity of Ukraine, which, as this volume is being sent to press, has been repelling Russia's illegal invasion for over a year. Once again, we have been witnessing a catastrophe unfold, including genocide, the use of rape as a weapon of war, and the mass killing of civilians. Through the crisis of the present, the answers we are looking for transgress their local and peripheral status; and this is because the local has become universal. This is precisely why we are convinced these same answers deserve to be gathered together and made available to an international English-speaking audience, so that they may resonate with a wider range of readers, and their concerns.

We are convinced, in turn, that the proposed representation of Polish intellectual history of the 20th century will make itself heard, and will draw attention to the developments and trends originating in given particular intellectual, historical and political contexts. We have thus selected examples which show convincingly how new challenges, risks and threats have been creatively addressed by intellectuals whose life experience shaped both their thought and their societal engagement. We thus sought to reach for texts commonly considered canonical for their own disciplines, such as history, sociology, literary criticism, philosophy, art history, and cultural studies. We have been impressed by the resonance of these texts, both in their academic and social contexts. Some sound almost like manifestos, and indeed a number of them are manifestos of sorts; whereas others initiate new paradigms both in their scope and in their form. In that sense, they are truly revolutionary and reconstructed modes of thinking and conceptualisation.

This selection can also be treated as a certain intergenerational dialogue where scholars whose work and worldview were to a large extent shaped by the experience of the 1989 political transformation, a period which also

brought to the fore the works of their predecessors whose attitudes and ideas emerged in the aftermath of World War II. We regarded these efforts as a kind of declaration of genealogy, a self-conscious choice of heritage and influence. To this end, we concentrated on reflections of various forms of memory and mnemonic experience; on experiences as such with their historical, political, public, private and traumatic shades; on material and visual cultures; and on self-deconstructive and self-critical gestures which bolster intellectual activity.

What lies at the centre of this collection is political and historical turbulence—the experience of the horror of war (as in the case of those authors who survived conspiracies, ghettos, and uprisings), always a point of reference for any form of political, intellectual or existential engagement. Already a glimpse at the table of contents proves that theory in this case bears the mark of biography: ideosis, newspeak, phantasm, KZ-syndrome, witnessed history, attempted testimony ...

It is not without justification that the collection opens with an essay by Stefan Amsterdamski, entitled “The Development of Knowledge and the Ideals of Science” (1983/Eng. 1992), where ideals are understood as “a set of views about the goals of scientific activity and of views defining both the method and the ethos of science at a given period.” Referring to this concept, we thus ask whether there is such a thing as an ideal of knowledge that defines Polish post-war humanities: one that offers an ethos with distinct features. This question remains open and invites all the readers to follow their own intuitions.

We present here examples of what we regard as truly engaged humanities, created by public intellectuals who proved their commitment both in their writing and political practice, whose thought marked not only the academic but also the social life of the country as the horizons of their activities, affecting an amelioration of both individual and collective lives in the face of the traumas of history. All texts gathered here share at least two general features: anti-dogmatism and scepticism, providing a necessary framework for thinking after the catastrophe.

The selection offered is nothing other than an interpretation of the history of Polish 20th-century humanities, or should one rather say, the humanities in Poland. We are well aware that this history could be written differently, and it should be done so. Our collection represents the opening of a discussion and invites all possible continuations. It is not so much an attempt at creating a canon, but rather a commentary on the canon itself.

We would like to explain a couple of issues, which might immediately raise questions. First of all, we excluded texts by authors who were active before the war, such as Stefan Czarnowski, Bronisław Malinowski and Florian Znaniecki. Secondly, we omitted those whose numerous works are already available to

the English-speaking readers (as in the case of Zygmunt Bauman or Leszek Kołakowski). Thirdly, as editors we were greatly influenced by our own disciplines. Beyond these scopes, we present the criteria dictating the choice of texts for this publication:

- **Historical experience.** We chose texts by the authors for whom the experience of World War II was direct and personal, and who worked during the times of the People's Republic of Poland (PRL), responding to the specific historical contexts that they found themselves in. We assume that what all the authors have in common is a certain shared historical and political (ideological) experience, which influenced their academic activity;
- **Innovativeness.** We tried to pick texts which offer original analytical categories and innovative theories; manifestos of sorts. Hence, many scholars were omitted whose work concentrated mostly on research, or indeed on the popularisation of foreign theories;
- **Topicality.** While selecting texts, we paid attention to trends in contemporary international humanities and social science. We thus present a compilation which will be of interest to many contemporary scholars who work in memory studies, material culture, visual culture, Holocaust and genocide studies, postcolonial studies, or even post-humanities.

Our aim has not only been to offer presentations and self-presentations to English-speaking academic audiences, but rather to provide samples which would illustrate and demonstrate in no uncertain terms that, when it comes to critical thinking, the division into centre and periphery is no longer justified.

Reconfiguring Social Thinking

The articles collected in this part of the anthology come from various periods of time. Their authors also represent diverse academic disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, literary studies, or history of art. Consequently, while selecting the articles, we paid attention not to chronological or disciplinary boundaries, but affinities pertaining to the issues discussed. In the case of the three authors: Bronisław Baczko, Jerzy Szacki, and Krzysztof Pomian, this affinity is not coincidental. The authors represent the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas, which also included Leszek Kołakowski and Andrzej Walicki. Historians disagree whether the aforementioned scholars constituted an academic "school" as such. However, we can definitely talk about a distinct community of opinions, perspectives, and even of an intellectual union of sorts.

What connects all these intellectuals was also a common historic and generational experience. Their childhood and youth coincided with World War II; and they all entered adult life under the yoke of Stalinism. Their way of thinking would be influenced by Marxism, which they later questioned and rejected.

The Warsaw School of the History of Ideas was an alternative to the traditional history of philosophy also because it considered philosophical issues in the context of literature, art, religion, and politics. This strong historicism offered a remedy for the then dominant dogmatism. As a consequence of the events of March 1968, Baczeko and Pomian (similarly to Kołakowski and plenty of other non-compliant intellectuals) had to pay for the independence of their opinions with their own university positions, ultimately choosing to emigrate to the West in order to pursue further their academic careers.

Although the articles collected in the first part of the volume deal with distinct subjects unrelated to the aforementioned characterisation of the group, they do have a common denominator. No matter if the central category constitutes social imaginaries, tradition, living history, semiophores, ideosis, or newspeak, they are all connected to an interest in the collective imaginarium; and within it, in particular, the ways of perceiving, creating and drawing on the past. For the past two decades, this has proven to be a very popular subject matter for analysis, occupying a central position in the dynamically developing interdisciplinary area of memory studies. Whilst presenting a less obvious, marginalised genealogy of these studies, the focus is put not only on reconstructing the popular methodological tradition, but on proposing, or re-proposing, current and attractive analytical categories.

In the article “Social Imagination, Social Imaginaries” (1984), which opens this part, Bronisław Baczeko approaches the causative and performative dimension of communal ideas, as well as their significance in creating social identity, especially in the context of newly emerging nations. As he claims, power can only be effectively exercised when it controls collective representations. These include various emblems, symbols, banners, anthems, and monuments, over which continuous “imaginary battles” are fought. Baczeko locates his reflection at the intersection of the histories of mentality, art, political and social thought, and ideas.

The article, “A History of Culture as the History of Semiophores” (1995), by Krzysztof Pomian, will be of particular interest to scholars interested in the study of material objects; an area which is particularly popular in contemporary humanities. The author differentiates between two perspectives: pragmatic and semiotic. The first one deals with the material and visible aspects of things: the ways things are created, used, spread, etc. The second focuses on the sign dimension. In his proposition of the history of culture, understood as the

history of semiophores, Pomian suggests combining these two perspectives. Consequently, semiophores are the visible objects that carry signs. Among them, we can distinguish written texts, ideas, substitutes for goods, orders, badges and exhibits. Like Baczko, Pomian is preoccupied with collective representations; but he simultaneously recognises their material and objective character. His theoretical proposition is both powerful and current as applied to various research on objects and mentality.

The next article, “Three Concepts of Tradition” (1969), by Jerzy Szacki, offers insightful approaches to the ways in which we understand tradition. It should be remembered, however, that besides the works of Maurice Halbwachs, concepts such as “les lieux de mémoire” or “invented tradition” were unknown at the time. Szacki’s considerations should thus be located in the times when the studies on collective memory were still *in status nascendi*. Nonetheless, the typology proposed by Szacki has not lost its validity. The first way of understanding tradition as proposed by Szacki and called “functional”—though nowadays we would call it performative—concentrates on the process of social transmission from one generation to another. The second one, called “objective,” deals with the essence of such understood transmission, i.e. on the content of the transfer. The third one, known as “subjective,” focuses on the way societies relate to and assess the past.

The relationships between the past and the present are also fundamental for “Living History (Historical Consciousness: Symptoms and Research Proposals)” (1963), by Nina Assorodobraj-Kula. The chapter contains a project for a new analytical discipline, one that would contribute to both historiography and sociology. It assumes studying “living history,” i.e. forms of historical presence, or all references to the past, in the present. Nowadays, such an interdisciplinary analytical area functions as memory studies; and it is thriving, as research projects, conferences and publications demonstrate. And yet, similarly to Szacki, Assorodobraj-Kula’s article anticipated the emergence of American and European arms of the discipline.

The last two articles demonstrate research on the communal imaginarium. “Polish Ideosis” (1984), by Andrzej Turowski, is the outcome of an important conference on the history of the arts in Poland, which took place in Warsaw in 1984, and which induced paradigm transformations in research on contemporary art. Ideosis, a neologism introduced by the author that echoes neurosis, is an ideological sphere, replete with power structures, which penetrates through subjects determining their thoughts, opinions, choices and inner experiences. This area—resembling Baczko’s sphere of social imaginaries—is both stable and prone to change; it is external to objects and interiorised by them. Although Turowski refers to Michel Foucault’s concept of power and

knowledge and Louis Althusser's notion of ideology, he is primarily interested in the operations of totalitarian power. Ideosis thus represents an all-embracing context that strips every artist and every piece of art of their claim to innocence. Making recourse to this category, the author analyses post-war cultural politics, as implemented by the communist authorities and applied to the visual arts.

Lastly, an article devoted to the relationships between totalitarian power and social imaginaries (this time at the level of linguistic practices) is "Newspeak" (1978) by Michał Głowiński. Analysing the political discourse used by the authorities of the Polish People's Republic, the author decodes the rules for the party's language that was called "newspeak," after George Orwell. Głowiński not only catalogue its manifestations, but also pays attention to the structural elements that establish the rules for newspeak texts, reportages, commentaries or slogans, with which the party had flooded Polish society in the post-war period. As a result, Głowiński proposes analytical categories derived from literary studies that can be successfully employed in analysis of diverse linguistic practices in the public sphere. In spite of their temporal and geographical situatedness, Głowiński's categories can be directly applied to the various contemporary discourses, retaining as they do their validity and cogency.

Testimonial Experiences

In this part of the collection, we present articles which are directly linked with the experience of World War II. What they have in common is the conviction that the experience of war was something more than participation in a historical event; and that it needs to be addressed and analysed in a very specific and unique way. These texts, more than anything else, provide testimonies of an encounter with the extreme and the limit of human existence, of representation, of history, etc. However, the problem of representation is not crucial in most of these texts—probably least of all in that of Jerzy Jedlicki, whose title signals the tension between experience and testimony—as they argue that the war experience uncovered an important truth about the human condition. This truth touches upon that which is inhuman in humans; and becomes a source of knowledge about ourselves as members of a specific community which shares very specific experience and memory (as Strzelecki explains); of a Polish community which passively looked on as the Holocaust unfolded (as in Błoński's texts); of humans more generally (Pawelczyńska); for whom the lesson of Auschwitz left the human psyche out of kilter (Kepiński).

This section opens with Jan Strzelecki's "Attempts at Testimony" (1971). The apparent lightness of the author's style contrasts with the gravity of the problems addressed. Strzelecki uses the first-person plural form, which designates not only his fellow conspirators, those with whom he shared the events, but also a certain generation. The identity of this community is defined not only by the shared experience but also and most importantly by the way they thought and interpreted. What was characteristic for this intellectual formation was the defence of the moral viewpoint, based on a world without any guarantees or roots in codified moral norms or stable value systems. People can only count on themselves in their search for the right way, guided solely by a sense of responsibility for the other. This text is not wholly a reconstruction of the war experience of the Polish intelligentsia; but it rather projects a certain ethical community, which may be constructed on traumatic ruins.

Another essay, "The Mechanisms of Adaptation and Self-Defence," is a chapter from Anna Pawełczyńska's *Values in Auschwitz* (1972/Eng. 1979), the first book in Poland (and one of very few in general) which looked to address the experience of being held in a concentration camp in sociological terms. The author assumes an objective, academic position even though she herself was an inmate of Auschwitz and other camps. The experiential basis of Strzelecki and Pawełczyńska's texts is similar, just like the date of their publication; however, the cognitive perspectives and styles differ. What they do have in common is not so much the content, as the message. The "social experiment" of Auschwitz (testing the limits of the human world rather than imposing an inhuman perspective) revealed the power of human resistance in times of horror; where the conditions of the possibility of subjectivity are threatened. The author refers to the "chink of light representing freedom" still present under oppressive conditions. Even though both these texts refer to the past, they could be well read as having an eye towards the future—as a call for resistant subjectivities and moral communities.

Jerzy Jedlicki's essay "History Experienced and History Witnessed" (1978) addresses most directly the question of representation—one of key questions facing the humanities after the linguistic turn. The author does not inquire into history as such, but rather considers a specific episode: that of war, ghetto, and camp. We are not offered a systematic theory of historical representation, but a quest for the *truth of experience* in testimonial literature; the quest full of engagement and avoiding simplifications and naiveté. Here the author wants to approach and understand, or at least approach an understanding of the experience of *enclosed zones* (as he himself calls them), and he sketches two possible paths: the literary and the historical. On the one hand, he frames the detail of *subjective* experience in an artistic form, on the other, he regards the

same framing as an always failed attempt to generalise and objectify. Jedlicki himself leans towards the literary—towards the truth of testimony, which in his opinion has enabled communication, even if partial and defective, between the excluded world and our own.

Jedlicki makes reference to the research of the Polish psychiatrist, Antoni Kępiński, who spent many years analysing the camp experience, and who discussed the results of his research in essayistic terms. In *KZ-Syndrome* (1970) Kępiński described the camp experience as a kind of *psychiatric experiment*, which revealed those traits of human beings that remain hidden in the “normal” times: *criminality* and *sanctity*. In a parallel way, he talked of the two extremes of a prisoner’s experience: the heaven and the hell of the camp. The essay we present here introduces and elaborates upon the concept of KZ-syndrome, which describes a set of psychiatric disorders, disturbing, and at times shattering the everyday lives of former inmates. Today, after years of trauma studies and research on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the concept of KZ-syndrome might seem too general; however, when it was first used, it represented a breakthrough for the diagnosis and treatment of victims of camp trauma. As editors, we consider this essay to be crucial not for its medical or historical importance, but as an innovative insight into the limits of experience and the price one pays for living through the limits of humanity.

This selection is crowned by the essay by Jan Błoński entitled “Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto” (1987), a text regarded for its rendition of Polish-Jewish relations during the war and the Holocaust. Inspired by Czesław Miłosz’s poems “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto” and “Campo di Fiori,” this text assumes an utterly different perspective. A witness here becomes a by-stander (a Pole) who looks upon the limit experience of the other (a Jew). Błoński poses a question on the responsibility of the one who stands nearby and witnesses extermination. He does not formulate a direct accusation of complicity in, or consent to, mass killing. The author rather questions the historical reasons for the alienation of Polish Jews, the enormous chasm between the two communities; and partially answers, pointing to the anti-Semitism of Poles and a constant tension in Polish-Jewish relations long before the war. One could go a little further and ask whether the anti-Semitic climate and the same tensions could have enabled the Holocaust under the Polish sky.

The above question seems still pertinent despite the fact that it has been nearly 30 years since the publication of Błoński’s essay, and today we know a lot more about the horrors of that war. This knowledge sheds a new and painful light on the Polish experience as by-stander and witness to the Holocaust. No doubt, confronting this knowledge would not be possible without the texts published in this section.

For the majority, if not all, of the authors, the experience of World War II was of fundamental importance—personal and biographical, but also generational. For many of them it also became a key, sometimes constantly, recurring point of reference in terms of their intellectual activity. In the second part of the anthology, we present texts that directly refer to such constitutive war experiences. These references differ in each case; but not because they directly evoke the authors' autobiographies. What they have in common, and what was the decisive criterion for us as editors, is the authors' conviction, either expressed explicitly or taken implicitly, that extreme wartime experiences and being a witness to the suffering of others—were exceptional historical events to be studied and remembered “as a warning;” to invoke that well-known, naive incantation.

The war experiences to which they refer are not only historically unique, but, above all, constitute liminal situations—to use Karl Jaspers' well-known category. That is, they approach the limits of what humans can experience, what they can represent and what they can understand. The topos of the “irrepresentability” and “incomprehensibility” of the Holocaust shows well that there is no symmetry between these (im)possibilities. Perhaps it is the sense of their radical divergence that determines the *limitlessness* of experience.

However, it is not the problem of the representation of liminal situations that is the central theme of these texts—except maybe Jerzy Jedlicki's essay, which already in the title denotes a tension between experiencing and testifying. It is the conviction contained in all of them, most often implicitly, that wartime experiences—and perhaps in particular those of the Holocaust, the camps and the underground, revealed some important truths about the human condition and the interpersonal world. And if so, the testimony of what is “inhuman” in and between people is not just a warning that “it” should not happen again, but a source of knowledge about members of a certain community of wartime and a generational fate to have to contend with limit situations—as in Strzelecki's text. About those who looked passively at genocide—as in Bloński's text, and those who, in the concentration camps, revealed what they were capable of—as in Pawełczyńska's text. And who, from this camp lesson, inflicted on us, emerged permanently violated, with traumas and syndromes—as we see with Kępiński.

After these introductory comments, let us look a little more closely at each of the texts in this section. It opens with Jan Strzelecki's essay “Attempts at Testimony (fragments)” from 1971. What immediately strikes us is the light tone contrasting with the weight of particular words used to capture the wartime experience (values, dignity, fraternity, being with the other, responsibility, existence, freedom and being free, the limit situation, the circle of the last trial,

the question of the validity of principles, resistance against the world, acting in the crack of freedom ...). The subject of the text is the collective—"we" means not only the author's underground comrades, fellow participants in liminal situations, but also a certain generational community. Thus, the text can be read as a generational manifesto. The boundaries of this community are defined not only by wartime experiences, but also—and above all—by the way they are understood and interpreted.

What distinguishes his writing is its attempt to defend the moral subject, which has the strength to resist the pressure of the world, or an oppressive power, including a totalitarian one. At the same time, this is a subject embedded in a world without guarantees, a subject deprived of codified moral norms and stable value systems. He himself is in constant search of the right path; the orientation for his choices are not external norms, but responsibility for the other and for oneself.

Strzelecki's text is thus a manifesto of subjectivity—an objection to the oppression and determinism of the world, even the most acute, wartime, camp world. It is also an objection to theories that are too simple. Existence marked by liminal experience—unlike philosophical existentialism—is the support of the subject and the source of its strength. For Strzelecki, this empirically fragile base becomes the foundation of humanism and humanities. His text is not a reconstruction of the wartime experiences of the Polish intelligentsia (although in its historical layer, the essay evokes an important part of these experiences)—rather, it is a blueprint for a moral community that would be constructed on its wartime traumas. Read in this way, the text has remained formative for an important section of the Polish intelligentsia.

Another text in this section is a chapter titled "The Mechanisms of Adaptation and Self-Defense" from the book entitled *Values in Auschwitz* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1979) by Anna Pawełczyńska. It was the first attempts in the Polish humanities—and one of the few in general—at a sociological analysis of the camp experience. It was intentionally written in a scientific and objective language—this is how the author understands it—that generates a degree abstractions from the experiences. Her perspective is one of an outsider, an objective observer; which is all the more interesting because Pawełczyńska, born in 1922, was herself a prisoner of Auschwitz—as well as, earlier, of Pawiak prison and, later, of Flossenbürg concentration camp.

The experiential foundation, so to speak, of the texts of Strzelecki and Pawełczyńska, is therefore quite similar; and the moment of their creation—almost three decades after the war—is also very similar. On the other hand, the cognitive perspective and writing style of the two authors are completely

different—one reads like a manifesto, whereas the other is of a more scholarly bent. And yet they share a key essence.

Also in Auschwitz, which the author calls a “social experiment” (which is also meant to emphasise that the extremes of our interpersonal world, graspable, among other things, in the language of the social sciences, were tested there—and not some non-human and incomprehensible world was created) and there, in Strzelecki’s essay, the point is, ultimately, to show the power of resistance of human subjectivity under conditions that challenge all subjectivity. And this is not a cheap mode of consolation or moralizing; but rather indicates the possibility of the existence of an individual fissure of freedom—under the most oppressive conditions of enslavement. Although facing the past, both texts can be read “for the future”—as a call addressed to resist the tight grip of the world.

Another essay by Jerzy Jedlicki is placed in the middle of the section on experience and testimony for a reason. For it concerns one of the key questions for contemporary humanities—the question of representation. Yet, as if to contradict the overly general title of this text, it is not about the representation of the whole of history (whatever that whole is supposed to mean in a given context), but about the particular episode of wartime: ghettos and camps. What we get here, however, is not a systematic lecture on the theory of historical representation, but a committed search for the truth of experience in the testimony of literature—in particular, the so-called literature of personal accounts. The motives for this commitment are both ethical and cognitive.

After all, what is at stake is to understand, or at least come close to understanding, the experience of *enclosed areas*. He draws on two paths for this approximation—literary and historical (which can be extended to sociological, psychological).

The detail of subjective experience put into artistic form, coupled with the ordering of events, actions, attitudes and rationales, represent a move towards objectification. There: *survival* and *experiencing*; here: *research* and *ordering, generalisation*.

As can be seen more in the examples referred to by the author than in his direct declarations, Jedlicki is closer to the literary—that is to say, to the truth of testimony. This is because it is the testimony—in spite of, or perhaps owing to its clear subjective formation—that made possible communication, even if flawed and partial, between the *excluded world* and ours.

In his text, Jedlicki refers to the research of Antoni Kepiński, a Polish psychiatrist who for many years studied the psychological consequences of concentration camps. In his texts discussing this research, texts that take the free form

of an essay rather than of scientific study, Kępiński wrote about the camp experience as a psychiatric experiment. An experiment that exposed those human traits that remain hidden—*criminality and sanctity*. Elsewhere, he spoke in similar terms about the two extremes of the prisoner experience—camp hell and camp heaven. Thus, we can clearly see the convergence of his recognitions and interpretations with those discussed above. The camp is “there” and “here” a lesson in the truth about man in general. Here, exactly, it is primarily about psychological truth; or, if we prefer, about the search for and expression of this truth in the language of (humanistic) psychology.

Kępiński's essay, “KZ-Syndrome”, is the direct result of his long-term observations and research with a group of Kraków psychiatrists on former Auschwitz prisoners. He proposes and justifies the introduction of the then new psychiatric category of KZ-Syndrome, which describes a mental disorder that makes it difficult or even impossible for former prisoners to live ordinary lives. Today, after years of the popularity of trauma studies and clarifications of the characteristics of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the KZ-syndrome category may seem overly general; fuzzy even. We have decided to include this text not only for its historical or medical significance, but also for its insight into the experience of political violence, one that takes into account the psychophysical unity of human beings. And even more so by showing the price many former prisoners had to pay for the camp's initiation into the truth about human nature. Many would end up paying this debt for the rest of their lives.

We close this selection of texts about liminal experiences and witnessing with Jan Błoński's essay “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto” (1987). It is a text widely regarded as ground-breaking for the way Polish-Jewish relations were viewed during the war; and by extension the Holocaust. The witness here is not the subject of a liminal experience, one who tries to give an account of it. Now it is a bystander who watches the experience of the Others, and their annihilation. The bystander is a Pole, the Other is a Polish Jew, a victim of the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis. Błoński raises the question of the responsibility of the bystander in the face of the Nazi genocide. For there was not yet at that time (one needs to bear in mind, the essay was written more than a decade before the debate on the Jedwabne pogrom triggered by Jan Tomasz Gross's book *The Neighbours*) an open accusation of co-responsibility for the extermination of Jews during a war prosecuted against Poles. Rather, Błoński enquires about the historical reasons for the alienation of Polish Jews, the gap between them and Poles, who consider themselves to be the hosts on these lands. How is it possible that after centuries of neighbourliness on common land, we could stand by and watch the annihilation of our fellow residents?

Błoński provides a partial answer. We can ask whether this anti-Semitism and this tension were conditions of possibility, or at least contributing factors—if only one of many—to the Holocaust of the Jews, essentially carried out “here” on Polish territory by the Germans.

This question remains relevant today, although almost 40 years have passed since the publication of Błoński’s essay. Today we know much more about Polish-Jewish relations. This knowledge, unfortunately, brings with it a new and painful truth, about the dark dimensions of the Polish “witnessing” of the Holocaust. Its acceptance requires a painful examination of collective conscience and memory, a task that still remains to be pursued.

Realities and Materialism of the Imagination

The essays collected in this section were written by two artists, an art historian, a philosopher and a literary historian and critic. The texts were conceived in disparate political and historical contexts; thus they vary on many levels. However, one may say that they are linked by specific humanist engagement, as well as a shared critical vision of the world and history. The authors address, each in their own way, within the discourses of art, philosophy and literature, issues of human agency, history, ethics and reality; through such categories as: phantasm, consciousness of seeing, open form, iconosphere, and meatiness. They courageously transgress the boundaries of disciplinary thinking and experiment with styles of writing that reach towards liminal spaces where theory is being negotiated. Imagination, creativity, responsibility, stress put on the material conditions of existence and the inter-relatedness between humans and non-humans can be found to produce alternative modes of experience and knowledge, showing how human subjects are affected and how they affect the world. These essays question the hitherto dominant modes of thinking pertaining to the visual, psychic, bodily and sensual aspects of human existence, historicity, imagination, relations between the subject and the object, the flows between pre-history, history and contemporaneity.

Behind the decision to combine works by artists and theoreticians stands the assumption that it is through such creative exchanges that a broad perspective on how the world is formed and reformed by thought begins to open up. Essays by Strzemiński and Hansen became a source of inspiration for at least three generations of artists, both in Poland and abroad. Janion created a whole new school based on thinking about and analysing Romanticism, whereas Brach-Czaina introduced a new language and style to the rigid discourse of

philosophy and opened it up for new topics and experiences hitherto considered unworthy. Porębski, in turn, made a utopian attempt to analyse both the arts and all visual, sensual, conscious and unconscious phenomena, with the everyday experience, wherein both images and information play a key role.

In her 1991 essay, Maria Janion reveals a fascination with those writers and theorists who looked for the real beyond the “real,” into the experience of liminal aspects of existence. She follows Freud in his urge to develop an adequate set of concepts and methodological tools in order to grasp this newly discovered reality. Janion claims, in turn, that both humanities and pedagogy, should become acquainted with the anthropology of phantasms given their importance to human imaginative activities. Her project of phantasmatic criticism is aware of the conflict between the creative dimension of the phantasm and the lure of kitsch.

Strzemiński’s “A Theory of Seeing” was a work in progress from 1945 onwards, until the death of the artist in 1952, and published posthumously in 1958. Originally produced in the form of lectures on art history, and published only in fragments, it played a vital role in the debates on realism in the visual arts in the wake of socialist realism in the late 1940. It offers an unorthodox Marxist history of human ability to see: to turn the visual experience mediated by a work of art into knowledge, whereby art history becomes the history of a thinking eye, embodied in the concrete human subject and driven by social, political, and historical processes. The key category, “consciousness of seeing,” is defined as a process of work and exchange between the eyes (seeing), mind (thought) and body (its physiology and neurology), which gives birth to the moments of recognition of the core processes taking place in reality. This is not treated as a given but rather as an aim, as a way of witnessing reality. Consciousness of seeing is historical, progressive, teleological, embodied in psychic and neurological processes of the subject.

Oskar Hansen developed the idea of the Open Form over the course of his lifetime, both in his artistic and didactic practice. The manifesto “Open Form” that we publish here was presented for the first time during the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne in Otterlo in 1959. Open Form treats people as individuals in their complexity, desires and needs, cherishing the value of coexistence between humans and non-humans. Open Form, whether realised in a work of architecture, a monument or an artwork, engages people with their life experiences, treats them as active co-participants, and functions as a frame for human activities and transformations in their environments. Open Form, with its variability and fluidity aims at awakening a sense of existence and imagination, and a need for cognition and responsibility for the

world. After the calamities of World War II, it seemed like the most important task for many Polish intellectuals to rebuild faith in man and mankind. Strzemiński and Hansen attempted to reconstruct the possibility of human agency and responsibility from within (consciousness of seeing) and without (Open Form) treating art, culture, visuality and visual forms as the most important factor of human existence, experience, communication and political and social engagement.

The text of Mieczysław Porębski, “The Iconosphere” published in Polish in 1972, somehow reflects and transforms those attitudes, engaging a structuralist mode of thinking. The key category—iconosphere, he defines as the space of overwhelming images of various characters (verbal, bodily, audial, visual, conscious and unconscious). Stating that the iconosphere could be analysed synchronically and diachronically, Porębski looks for structures, functions and historical processes. Art in the iconosphere plays an interesting role. First, in the artworks one could see the most vital information flowing in culture and society, countering the accepted codes of communication. Secondly, art, according to Porębski, produces both its object and its subject; and thus always consists of transgressive elements and produces anxiety in the everyday modes of existence.

In the “Metaphysics of Meat,” a chapter from of her 1992 book *The Cracks in Existence*, Jolanta Brach-Czaina offers an innovative take on the philosophy of the body. She comes up with the concept of “meatiness” which provides the core of her philosophy of existence. It is through that concept that the philosopher offers her meditation not only on the human being in the world as human but of its interrelatedness to other beings, including non-human animals. It is a world without its skin, which opens up to the most intense and authentic experience, and which changes the coordinates of time and space. The very form of the essay, and the experimental language the author employs, allow her to introduce a very specific mode of thinking from within bodily, or meaty, existence.

Last but not least, Jerzy Topolski’s “The Paradox of Historical Truth” (1996) takes us back to general and abstract matters present at the beginning of this collection, providing not only a compositional frame, but also addressing a key problem of the truth of historical narrative, something that differs from the truth of the source material or single utterances about the facts of the past. Truth never comes from the sources alone, and it cannot be without these sources, meaning one needs to meander between the two. Thus, we are constantly dealing with a phenomenon that Topolski calls “the paradox of historical truth”: the conjunction of all true sentences does not guarantee a true picture of the past.

We trust that this selection of texts will offer a window onto the multidimensionality and heterogeneity of Polish humanities in the wake of war and genocide, and in the reality of oppressive occupation.

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