

# Inhabitants of the Non-Sites of Memory: A Guardian Mole (by Czesław Miłosz) and Crawling Death (by Zdzisław Beksiński)

Klaudia WĘGRZYN

**KLAUDIA WĘGRZYN**  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2891-5590>

Faculty of Humanities | University of Silesia in Katowice

**E-MAIL:** [klaudia.k.wegrzyn@gmail.com](mailto:klaudia.k.wegrzyn@gmail.com)

## Abstract

The aim of this study is to take a new look at artistic representations of the Non-Sites of Memory, proposing a comparative analysis of two creatures – presented as new survivors or old arrivals on the post-war/post-apocalyptic scene. A guardian mole (poem *Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto* by Czesław Miłosz, 1944) and Crawling Death (*Without title*, a painting by Zdzisław Beksiński, 1975) bring to life yet-human and sub-human figures and represent two ideas of being a witness/bystander, while also constituting a general commentary on the various ways that memory and remembrance work in the personal life of the artist.

**KEYWORDS:** *non-sites of memory, postwar, guardian mole, crawling death, Zdzisław Beksiński, Czesław Miłosz*

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** *nie-miejsca pamięci, powojenne, strażnik-kret, pełzająca śmierć, Zdzisław Beksiński, Czesław Miłosz*

*An unrecognizable persona whose present comes from no past, whose future harbors nothing to come, an absolute existential improvisation. A form born of the accident, born by accident, a kind of accident. A funny breed. A monster whose apparition cannot be explained as any genetic anomaly. A new being comes into the world for a second time, out of a deep cut that opens in a biography.*

Catherine Malabou (2012, 2)

## Old survivors and/or new arrivals

What happens a few minutes after a catastrophe? Who comes to witness smouldering ashes falling from destroyed buildings, or dead bodies? Whether or not it is a site of a recently liquidated ghetto, or moments after a city bombing, or mass execution. Who is considered a witness and who is a bystander? Who will tell the story, who will lie, and who will deny? Is it essential to assume it must be *a person*? What if we shift the optics and maybe question the surrounding nature, or even an animal passing by? What if said animal was once human? What if a person can turn into an animal? Perhaps it could be someone/something in-between? How does this kind of merged persona understand, process – and finally – remember? Knowledge of how memory/trauma works is largely based on (post)memory studies and is widely used by scholars not only associated with historical or social faculties, but especially within the humanities. This paper revisits the concept of the Non-Sites of Memory by applying it to two case studies – a poem and a painting – separated by 30 years, yet formulating two very similar representations of old survivors and new arrivals of witnesses/bystanders on the catastrophic, post-war stage.

Roma Sendyka uses the term Non-Sites of Memory – after Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de Mémoire* – site of memory. Offering the new approach and understanding of showcasing and/or hiding of abandoned locations witnessing the genocide, murders and mass violence:

The basic indicator is lack of information [...], of material forms of commemoration [...], and of reparation [...]. Non-sites of memory also have in common the past or continued presence of human remains (bodies of deceased persons) that has not been neutralized by funerary rites. These sites do not, meanwhile, share physical characteristics: they may be extensive or minute, urban or rural, though they are often characterized by some variety of physical blending of the organic order (human remains, plants, animals) and to the inorganic order (ruins, new construction) (Sendyka 2016, 700).



The Non-sites of Memory is an umbrella term gathering concepts – following another summary essay by Roma Sendyka (2017, 4–14) – recognising numerous studies and ideas: *contaminated landscapes, terrorscape, traumascapes, memorylands, difficult heritage, disfigured sites, bad places, voids, phantom-sites*. This paper does not represent an attempt to replicate or create an exact definition of the Non-Site of Memory. I adopt the general idea of a space that witnesses catastrophe during the Second World War, including the death of civilians, very often of Jewish origin. I do not aim to discover how the sites came to be and who exactly was involved on both sides. Instead, I aim to ask what happens at the post-tragedy site before the initiation of working memory, rationalisation, retribution, commemorating, next generation etc. Who/what comes first? Are there old survivors and/or new arrivals?

The two creatures indicated in the title of this essay are a guardian-mole (strażnik kret) from Czesław Miłosz's poem *Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto* (1944) and Crawling Death (*Pełzająca śmierć*) from Zdzisław Beksiński's painting *Without title* (1975).

We therefore have two Polish artists – Miłosz born in 1911; Beksiński in 1929 – who died sequentially in 2004 (Cracow) and 2005 (Warsaw). Both artists' lives were marked by the Second World War. In Miłosz's case there are no doubts of his experiences and background, his art linked directly to the pre- and post-war modus (Chwin 2011; Łapiński 2001).

In Beksiński's case the issue is much more nuanced – the artist himself was not consistent with the idea of *witnessing* and *remembering* the war times (Węgrzyn 2017). In regard of the Second World War itself, on some occasions, especially in his private correspondence, he claimed to have witnessed the gallows in the main square (Grzebałkowska 2014, 29); a carpet bombing (Grzebałkowska 2014, 26); the street flooded with blood and dead bodies (Grzebałkowska 2014, 26). On the other hand, he would say that 'the war was rather an unsuccessful undertaking – [...] not enough dead and not too many ruins' (Grzebałkowska 2014, 25). Regarding the Holocaust, he has said he was once falsely acknowledged as the 'consciousness of an era' and he would never dare to 'dedicate works to Jewish martyrdom' (Grzebałkowska 2014, 94). However, he would also state: 'Maybe, like most of the humanists, I have a trauma, remorse or something, regarding Jews, as if I am oversensitive (Grzebałkowska 2014, 124). Magdalena Grzebałkowska, in her 'Beksiński: Double Portrait' reportage (Grzebałkowska 2014), found a few of *the cracks of memory* – where we can see that Beksiński within his narratives and memories may be hiding some 'trauma and remorse'. The most



important piece of information for me is the one connecting the Beksiński family to the Eisenbachs – Jews who ran the local pharmacy and shared the Beksiński home in the pre-war period (Grzebalkowska 2014, 24). The history of the Eisenbachs, in conjunction with Zdzisław Beksiński's personal experience and art – in addition to another Polish artist-photographer Jerzy Lewczyński – created a history where the ghosts of memory and trauma were unexpectedly evoked and developed – just like old photography film and found a lost voice within the artwork (Węgrzyn 2020). One of the major drawbacks to the personal statements made by artist is that many people tend to know and believe in the negations rather than the possible denial/lapses of memory or being a witness. Close friends and general opinion are inclined to be 'guardians' of the late artist's memory, trying to dismiss difficult and painful potential within works, or simply the artist's testimony via art.

In the 2021 book *Reprezentacje Zagłady w kulturze polskiej (1939–2019). Problematyka Zagłady w sztukach wizualnych i popkulturze (Representations of the Holocaust in Polish culture [1939–2019]. The Holocaust in visual arts and pop culture)*, Beksiński's name is mentioned twice, only in relation to the medium of photography. Marta Koszowy mentioned a sketch/project of the photographic set where one of the photos includes 'Rzyd' ('Jew' with an intentional orthographic error) written on the wall (Koszowy 2021, 227), and Jerzy Lewczyński's artwork based on Beksiński's and Eisenbach's archive (Koszowy 2021, 234). The publication confirmed my belief that Beksiński only exists in a form of duality: as the creator of fantastical/metaphysical paintings showcasing rather superficial (even kitsch) visual messages (easily transformed into posters, puzzles or t-shirts) or as the creator of niche photographs or short stories<sup>1</sup> that slightly touch upon Second World War/Holocaust themes. Despite the author's hesitation (which nowadays may be read as traumatic denial) and general popular opinion (which has remained virtually unchanged in the last 20 years), I presume that his works of art are able to 'speak' on their own behalf (Mitchell 2013) and are able to tell the dreadful, universal, modern nightmare of the war.

I intend to compare the creatures brought into being by the poem and the painting – created thirty years apart in completely different mediums, yet with almost the same appearance. The former was described by a Nobel Prize winner, from first-hand experience in the epicentre of the German occupation,

<sup>1</sup> Short-stories were written by Beksiński in 1963–5 rather as a side hustle not intended for publication. Tomasz Chomiszczak, editor of the published book mentioned references to the Holocaust and Jews made by Beksiński in one of the stories (Chomiszczak 2015, 404).



who actively assisted Jewish people in Warsaw; the latter was painted by an outcast<sup>2</sup> artist who had experienced provincial warfare, a quasi-witness, nevertheless constantly repeating the Holocaust motives within his artwork (Węgrzyn 2017). Even though 13 out of 18 Holocaust related props/motives mentioned in the 2017 book *Ślady Holokaustu w imaginarium kultury polskiej* (*Holocaust Traces in the Imaginarium of Polish Culture*) can be found in Beksiński's artwork (not only paintings), he is not recognised explicitly as a creator in this genre. For decades, the artist exploited motifs of crosses, ruins, cripples, faceless heads and wide-spread disintegration that clearly belong to the post-war universe. From the 1950s he would consistently draw, sketch, sculpt, take photographs and invariably paint not 'fantastical'<sup>3</sup> as Poles wanted, but rather 'traumatic' works of art. Before turning to painting, Beksiński was interested in photography. From the 1950s he would photograph post-war residences – black and white photos showcasing the emptiness and sadness of provincial Sanok – as an 'apparent' or 'quasi-reportage' (Foto Beksiński 2011, 54); he also created portraits and self-portraits, more like staged figure photography, closeups of materials and damaged props. The 1950s also marked an intensive period of sketching – between 1954 and 1955 Beksiński drew dozens of rough drafts daily showing thin bodies and skinny, tired faces surrounded by, or hanged on, barbed wire, as well as groups of people jammed in cramped spaces with bars on windows, or workers with wheel-barrows and hands aiming long-barrelled weapons at miserable people<sup>4</sup> (Węgrzyn 2017). Around this time Beksiński made abstract sculptures and reliefs – including a series generally not shown to the general public:

<sup>2</sup> Geographically and socially, Beksiński lived with his family in Sanok until 1977 – then moved to Warsaw. He was never keen on the official art world. He did not attend many artistic events; nor did he really identify with any organised association of painters/creators (in the 50/60s he signed up for the Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków and Związek Polskich Artystów Fotografików – but it was rather a formal act, not a personal statement). The main connection between him and most of the auction houses or exhibitions was his art dealer – Piotr Dmochowski.

<sup>3</sup> 'Fantastical art' is the most recognisable aspect of Beksiński's work, covering the period from 1968 to 1983, roughly the 1970s. According to Piotr Dmochowski, Beksiński's art dealer: 'What you mostly notice is the domination of blue and green; recurring themes of portals, windows and frames, buildings and bodies floating in the air, unknown spaces, people and/or animals that are hard to identify, cathedral-like structures, ruins and scrap yards. The fantastical label was attached to the totality of Beksiński's artwork: for example, his artwork is shown at Warsaw exhibition 'Fantastical Art in Warsaw'.

<sup>4</sup> The series of sketches is published in one photo album by Historic Museum of Sanok (Beksiński. Prace z lat 1930–1955, 2007). Original drawings are kept in the museum's archives and are rather unknown to the general public.



‘Beksiński repeatedly photographed the bust of an executed gaunt prisoner of a concentration camp with deep eye sockets, which he had made himself’ (Foto Beksiński 2011, 154). Banach mentions the ‘prisoner of a concentration camp’ almost incidentally and without detailed explanation. This is one of the rare occasions linking Beksiński’s art closely with the war or Holocaust discourse. In the late 1950s Beksiński tired of photography itself – he wrote an essay (Beksiński 1958) explaining how photography had reached its limits by showing only a realistic point of view. He proposed a new way of creating photography – ‘photographical sets’, where the narration is created by the viewer connecting 3–4 photographs juxtaposed with each other. Beksiński treated these ‘collages’ as finished works, yet there are a few creations that remained in the pre-design stage – on yellowish pages with scribbles and notes around the edges. One, entitled ‘Hunger’, consists of a passport photo of a young boy, a coffin surrounded by soldiers, a girl’s legs and skirt. Another entitled ‘Room number 8/Yellow mannequin’ shows a photo of a ‘No trespassing’ sign, a headless photo of a naked woman’s body and some ruins with barbed wire (Foto Beksiński 2011). His works with fellow Polish photographers – Jerzy Lewczyński and Bronisław Schlabs – appeared in an exhibition later on called ‘anti-photography’ (Karwowska and Wrabiec 1993). Regardless of numerous and significant examples of post-war art, there is still considerable uncertainty with regard to pinpointing Beksiński’s art to this genre of art. The well-known and commercially attractive ‘fantastical’ paintings overshadowed anitphotography, sculptures, short-stories and drawings. And they could – and should – be considered as representations of memory/trauma on equal terms with Tadeusz Kantor’s or Władysław Strzemiński’s art. Tadeusz Kantor already claimed the artistic existence of a ‘human figure phantom’ in 1947 (Kantor 2005, 106); he metamorphosed a human-like statue – ‘convoluted bony structures [...], crumbling apart or integrating into complicated arrangements reminding human figures (Porębski 1956, 4). Those fragmented remains on canvas found their way into spaces, ruins, structures – fusing with them, drastically emanating postwar misery and dread – they were in a constant state of ‘spasm, agony and in distress, paralysed and fallen figures, galvanised’ (Borowski 1982, 36). This description alone can be easily and accurately applied to 3/4 of Beksiński’s paintings.

The exhausted, wounded, deformed human figure is commonly represented in postwar art. However, Zdzisław Beksiński was excluded from mainstream art history since the very beginning. Even though nowadays his paintings sell exceptionally well (and for high prices), he still exists outside the world



of art critics and historians. Misleading assumptions and ‘fantastical’ labels led to grave consequences with regard to his legacy and legitimacy. If we look at his artwork through the lens of the humanities, we can see post-human, postsecular, traumatic and catastrophic representations. We can see the disturbed idea of witnessing/bystanding and human-nonhuman tensions – animalistic, chthonic and environmental connections. Moving beyond standard dichotomies of natural/cultural, human/animal, life/death, we could arrive at the idea of *ontology of the dead body* – particularly the way we see death and what becomes of it. Ewa Domańska in the 2017 book *Necros: An Introduction to the Ontology of the Dead Body* (2017) studies the dead body and remains within cultural, political and social context. acknowledging the body, remains, bones, ashes, matter as a kind of persona – *necropersona*. Domańska analyses changes occurring within and outside the body of *Muslim* – the hierarchical category of Holocaust prisoner – ‘liminal figure designating non-human area of humanity’ (Domańska 2017, 81). The figure is inherently entangled in biopolitics and biopower showcasing the ferocious manner of dehumanisation, often shown as borderline ‘human beasts’, ‘monstrosities’, ‘non-humans’, crawling or lying quadrupeds (Domańska 2017, 85–9). Domańska following the thoughts of Michael Foucault and Giorgio Agamben – in addition to historical statements and memorials, medical studies and fiction – divides the figure into two models: essentially vertical (depth *versus* deep end) and fluidly horizontal (*continuum*) transiting from human to non-human through the process of human pupation/metamorphosis (*przechrówieczanie*) (Domańska 2017, 85). In this instance, this specific figure, following Agamben, may be seen as the prefiguration of the future human – a ‘total witness’ and the ‘paradigmatic figure of modernity is not-human (*non-uomo*)’ (Domańska 2017, 91).

## Yet-human

*Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto* and *Campo di Fiori* by Czesław Miłosz were published in 1944 in the underground anthology *Z otchłani (From the Abyss)* in Warsaw, then to be included in a volume of poetry entitled *Ocalenie (Salvation)* in 1945. The poems were translated into English, for example, in *New and Collected Poems: 1931–2001* (2006). The main characters of the first poem are the eponymous Poor Christian, bees and ants; onstage there is one leafless tree, a yellow wall, a roof and different kinds of organic and inorganic matter along with liver, bone, silks, glass, wood, copper, nickel,



silver, foam, gypsum, iron sheets, violin strings, trumpets, leaves, crystals, hair, paper, rubber, linen, leather, flax, fibre, fabrics, cellulose, snakeskin and wire. The 'phosphorescent fire from the yellow walls' lead to the roof and wall collapsing'. Furthermore, 'flame and heat seizes the foundations'. At this catastrophic stage 'enters a guardian mole'. If this was not a summary of Miłosz's poem, it could nearly perfectly describe Beksiński's painting, but more about this in the third section of this essay.

The mole itself (kret) is a *he* not *it*: 'a guardian mole makes his way', 'he touches', 'he distinguishes'. He works physically – he pushes and buries the bodies; he counts and differentiates. He is intended to strike fear – the Poor Christian explicitly says 'I am afraid, so afraid of the guardian mole' and directs attention to his 'swollen eyelids'. Mole's eyes seem to be tired from all this work, so he uses a helpful tool: 'a small red lamp fastened to his forehead'. He still belongs to the culture, using technology, yet is rather close to nature – he came from the ground and belongs underneath; he is here to clean up – with the help of bees and ants. He came here after the catastrophe – and his task is to 'distinguish human ashes by their luminous vapor'. His mission is filthy and loathsome – representing some sort of a gravedigger or mortician. He is an *animal*, or very *animalistic*, yet his ability to calculate and use equipment connects him to the human world (yet-human). That is why he is associated with 'a Patriarch | Who has sat much in the light of candles | Reading the great book of the species'. He is somewhere in between. Of course, the figure of the Patriarch is not irrelevant – Karina Jarzyńska in 'Literature as a Spiritual Experience. Czesław Miłosz's Work in a Post-Secular Perspective' (Jarzyńska 2018) decodes the meaning behind it:

The poem passes from images of destruction and disintegration – or rather incorporation of the human matter – into 'all-devouring nature' organism (*natura devorata*); to the verses confronting eponymous Christian with the mole – associated with the Judaic imaginary (the headlamp my refer to Tefillin, whereas the patriarch reading book by a candlelight evokes association with Torah or Talmud studying) (Jarzyńska 2018, 78).

In 1987, 43 years after Miłosz published the poems, Jan Błoński commented on the *Poor Christian Looks At The Ghetto* by extending it to *Poor Poles looking at the ghetto*<sup>5</sup>. Błoński identified tension between remembrance,

<sup>5</sup> First publication of the essay: Błoński, Jan. 1987. „Biedni Polacy Patrzą na getto”. *Tygodnik Powszechny* 2. Essay was also published as a book: Błoński, Jan. 1994. *Biedni Polacy patrzą na Getto*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie. Translated to English: Błoński, Jan. 2008. “The





justice and guilt embodied within the Christian moral code – by extending it to the majority of Polish people witnessing the terror of the Second World War in the homeland. Polish post-war poetry (or culture in general) seemed perplexed and entangled in equal measure ‘to purge the burden of guilt from our native soil’ (Błoński, 2008, 321). Błoński draws attention specifically to *the soil* (soaked with the innocent blood) that constitutes not only the literal matter of the land, but the core of the collective memory, identity and difficult stigma of shame and responsibility.

The places that witnessed the catastrophe, bear the evidence within soil and people’s memory. Nowadays, the history of the Warsaw ghetto is well-documented and remembered – museum, publications, memorials etc.<sup>6</sup> – and my usage of the Non-Site of Memory in relation to Miłosz applies to the poem: the situation during and shortly after the tragedy, where bodies vanish and disintegrate into the soil. Sanok’s post-ghetto site until 1977 (while Beksiński was living there) presumably was not well-known – the main indications remained under the form of the street names: Łazienna (Bathhouse street), Cerkiewna (Orthodox Church street), Berka Joselewicza street. Nowadays the site hosts a park and playground – Ogródek Jordanowski – and it is possible that for the casual visitor, it could be hard to identify. Although, historically speaking, Sanok is recognised as an important part of the Jewish legacy – being the part of the Hasidic Trail (Sanok. Szlak Chasydzki 2008).

If Miłosz mediated his status via *Poor Christian* – as a witness/bystander (Jarzyńska 2018, 77) looking at the ghetto and mole-guardian in dread, maybe Beksiński mediated his status as well by situating himself outside the tragedy, as well as outside the canvas. Inhabitants of the Non-Sites of Memory included in the title of this essay are the *post*-human creatures in the foreground – but what do we call the human witnesses describing and painting said fiends? Maybe one of the most misunderstood and underrated inhabitant of the Non-Sites of Memory is Beksiński himself?

---

Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto.” Chapter. In *Jews and the Emerging Polish State (Polin Volume Two)*, edited by Antony Polonsky, 321–336. Liverpool: University Press.

<sup>6</sup> There is a museum in the ghetto area, solemnly regarding The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (Grzybowska 79, Warsaw). One of the analyses on Warsaw historical site/memory and post-memory work is addressed in „Teksty Drugie. Teoria Literatury, Krytyka, Interpretacja” 2020, 4: Muzea na widoku. <https://tekstydrugie.pl/pl/biblio/muzea-na-widoku/>. Accessed: May 10, 2023.



## Sub-human

The painting *Without title* was created in 1975 while Beksiński was still living in Sanok (the Subcarpathian Voivodeship of south-eastern Poland). The painting does have some sort of an accession number – DG-2447<sup>7</sup> – but being untitled is consistent with Beksiński's postulate regarding all of his art works. Nevertheless, Beksiński's fans name and recognize the painting as 'The Crawling Death'<sup>8</sup>. The first time the painting was present on a larger scale was in 1988, when it was used as the cover of 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' by George Orwell (Orwell 1988; Węgrzyn 2018). The painting is now noticeably present online – starting from the virtual Dmochowski Gallery; being the main attraction in 3D presentation of 2017 multimedia exhibitions 'Beksiński nieznan' (Beksiński unknown)<sup>9</sup>, going through fan art and makeovers (gifs, comics, tattoos); ending with the set of 2000-piece puzzle or colouring book<sup>10</sup> and t-shirts or sweatshirts designed by Polish clothing brand Bytom<sup>11</sup>.

The painting mainly features brown, black, red and orange hues. In the background lie burning ruins – the flames rising from the windows – as Miłosz might have described it – 'phosphorescent fire from yellow walls' and then 'the roof and the wall collapse in flame and heat seizes the foundations'. In the foreground, 'Crawling Death' makes his way: a crouching mole-like corpus (black fur-like coat wrapped around the torso), elongated limbs and fingers touching the ground; blindly moving towards the left corner of the painting. The head is wrapped in white cloth, the face covered with blood. We do not see the bodies or exact remains literally, but following Miłosz's guardian-mole surroundings and range of work, we could assume that Crawling Death had restrained his eyes (swollen eyelids) so much that he was eventually forced to bandage them. Maybe, at this stage, the work is complete? The human bodies and remains are accounted for – bees and ants have broken everything down so now, the guardian-mole/Crawling Death do not see, do not count

<sup>7</sup> According to Piotr Dmochowski (Beksiński's art dealer) and his online archive: [http://beksinski.dmochowskigallery.net/galeria\\_karta.php?artist=52&picture=2447](http://beksinski.dmochowskigallery.net/galeria_karta.php?artist=52&picture=2447) [accessed: March 9, 2023].

<sup>8</sup> In 2018 I consulted Wiesław Banach (art historian and director of Historic Museum in Sanok) on the origin of the 'Crawling Death' title. It was not possible to determine. Banach claims the name must have been made up by some internavts. The painting was given to a friend by Beksiński himself; it is assumed the painting is still in the private hands of the family.

<sup>9</sup> *3D visualisation of painting by Sebastian Kowalik*. Accessed: March 9, 2023. <https://kowaliksebastian.artstation.com/projects/rGgA6>.

<sup>10</sup> *Marketplace Beks*. [www.beks.pl](http://www.beks.pl). Accessed: May 10, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> *Bytom store*. Accessed: March 9, 2023. <https://bytom.com.pl/p-0000db1042-bluza-beksinski>.



and do not judge. All that is left is fire absorbing the city, bare soil with buried memory of the tragedy, and blind, crawling away creature – only smelling ‘human ashes by their luminous vapour’ and sensing ‘a different part of the spectrum’. So now, the creature’s work is done. It is turning into an animal once more, trying to leave the ruins of humans and civilisation, looking out for the tunnel it emerged from.

John David Ebert, in an essay from 2013 entitled ‘On a Painting by Zdzisław Beksiński’ (Ebert 2013) acknowledged this painting as crucial for understanding all of Beksiński’s work and presented the creature as ‘Master Signifier’ and ‘Subhuman Christ’. By cross-referencing a couple of Beksiński’s paintings, Ebert recognises the vertical/diagonal movement of painted Christ-like figures coming from the cross-like structure down to Earth and adopting a prone or crawling position. Positioning paintings within the context of art history and artwork – specifically presenting blind characters – Ebert narrows them down to Christ the martyr: Matthias Grünewald, *The Mocking of Christ*, 1505; Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, 1944. Even though Beksiński himself claimed that he did not use typically Christian symbols because of their religious meaning (Beksiński 1995), I acknowledge where Ebert is coming from with this interpretation – crosses as well as Christ-like figures are consistently present in Beksiński’s artwork, maybe in a postsecular manner, in fact. ‘Subhuman Christ’ is not someone we could/should wait for; he is in the final stage of martyrdom, coming down/falling from the cross – trying to find the meaning of existence and embarking on a quest for the remnants and traces of ‘the Significance’. This figure recalls the ‘bricoleur’ described by Ryszard Nycz:

Bricoleur – through the dialogue with empirical material (belongings, pieces of memories and pictures, clichés of imagination, subconsciousness, mass culture and all the rubble of tradition), assembles entirety according to traditional criteria inconsistent and heterogeneous, because binding divergent (and sometimes incommensurable) components of specific imaging into indeterminate evocations of dimension of meaning (Nycz 1994, 17).

‘Subhuman Christ’ embodies the fallen, post-war/post-catastrophic figure turning into a collector, searching for remains – not only human remains, but cultural, social, architectural, significant or tactile. As Ebert pointed out, ‘the crawling figure is Beksiński’s half-human, half-animal Christ-being who has slid down from his perch at the centre of the Western tradition, and gone scurrying away in search of clues to its fate’ (Ebert 2013).



Jean-Luc Nancy conducted an analysis of the post-Christian philosophy of the significant *body of Christ* within the physical, symbolic and cultural space through the lens of negative dialectics: 'Flung from on high, by the Highest himself, in the falsehood of senses, the evil of sin. A unfailingly disastrous body. [...] This only aggravates the disaster, as we all know: because the body is ever more fallen, the fall being further inward, more agonizing. The body is our agony stripped bare' (Nancy 2008, 7). This understanding indicates that the fate of post-fatigue Christ body can be a summary of human existence after the catastrophe, doomed to survive/witness/bystand and later on, live – but only somewhere in-between states of human (sacred) and animal (barbaric) – in a word: sub-human.

## Ecce Animot

The witness/memory representation figure within Miłosz's poem and Beki-siński's painting seem to be located on the verge of human and animal. The animalistic part within/outside the human, or general discrepancies between cultural and natural is part of Jacques Derrida philosophy:

Beyond the edge of the so-called human, beyond it but by no means on a single opposing side, rather than "The Animal" or "Animal Life" there is already a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living, or more precisely (since to say "the living" is already to say too much or not enough), a multiplicity of organizations of relations between living and dead, relations of organization or lack of organization among realms that are more and more difficult to dissociate by means of the figures of the organic and inorganic, of life and/or death. These relations are at once intertwined and abyssal, and they can never be totally objectified. They do not leave room for any simple exteriority of one term with respect to another (Derrida 2008, 31).

The relation between/within seems to constitute the key for understanding the creatures. Derrida proposes redefining and reevaluating anthropocentric views of the animal, looking for something more neutral, as well as boundaries eliminating eternal human/animal difference. Challenging the French language, he proposes the in between term: *l'animot*. With the English translation maintaining the meaning, 'ecce' added to the 'animot', creating a semantic and inter-genre bridge: '*Ecce animot*'. Neither a species nor a gender nor an individual, it is an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals, and – rather than a double clone or a portmanteau word – a sort of monstrous hybrid, a chimera' (Derrida 2008, 41).



How do those human/animal bodies work in the context of psychoanalysis and ontology – between biology, culture and environment? Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in their ‘Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Anti-Oedipus’ and ‘A Thousand Plateaus’ – following and reinterpreting Antonin Artaud – create the idea of a body-without-organs (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 158). It is a state of embodiment – creating relations between inside/outside, cultural/natural within all the organisms, not only anthropocentric ones:

So what is this BwO? – But you’re already on it, scurrying like a vermin, groping like a blind person, or running like a lunatic: desert traveler and nomad of the steppes. On it we sleep, live our waking lives, fight–fight and are fought–seek our place, experience untold happiness and fabulous Defeats ( Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 150).

The guardian mole and Crawling Death, in a posthistoric and posthuman world may be animots, witnesses, survivors, ourselves, others, Chirsts. They may not have a name or category. They may be only a concept, a sign, a bricoleur, blind, all-seeing. They may be yet-human or sub-human, bring all the meaning or bear none. In the end they may just *be* – and within that being they may be impossible, unbelievable, or just *barbaric* – just like the impossibility of ‘writing poetry after Auschwitz’ (Adorno, *Prisms*, 1997: 34). Critical theory based on the Dialectic of Enlightenment sanctioned by the Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno) recognises the failure of the modern mind – the creator and executor of the War and Holocaust. After the Second World War – humanities and art become traumatic and wounded – just like their creators, very often witnesses and survivors. With time, dormant and repressed emotions/memories find their way into the light of the day: in 1944 as a guardian mole – still on the verge of yet-human – using the mind, functioning reasonably and for the purpose – but already resembling the monster; in 1977 as a Crawling Death – sub-human – chimera, hybrid, ecce animot – doomed to blindness, searching and/or escaping towards/from the Meaning, History, Memory. Miłosz’s poems created firsthand during and after the Holocaust speak of (and are themselves) *barbaric*, hence bringing to life a guardian mole creature – lurking around the ghetto site, intimately and bodily organising and judging the dead and surviving. Then, Beksiński’s painting – created after a lapse of time/memory/liability – gives more space and less measures for its Crawling Death creature – it is all alone, blind, maybe in search of something, maybe walking away/escaping the new/future Non-Sites of Memory.



## Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W. 1997. *Prisms*. Translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber, Ninth printing. Accessed: May 10, 2023. [https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/5798834/mod\\_resource/content/1/Theodor%20W.%20Adorno%20Prisms%20%28Studies%20in%20Contemporary%20German%20Social%20Thought%29.pdf](https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/5798834/mod_resource/content/1/Theodor%20W.%20Adorno%20Prisms%20%28Studies%20in%20Contemporary%20German%20Social%20Thought%29.pdf).
- Beksiński, Zdzisław. 1958. „Kryzys w fotografice i perspektywy jego przewycięzenia”. *Fotografia* 11. Accessed: May 15, 2023.. [beksinski.dmochochowski.gallery.net/library.php](https://beksinski.dmochochowski.gallery.net/library.php).
- Beksiński, Zdzisław. 1995. „«Nie obdzieram ludzi ze skóry» – Conversation with Jerzy Wójcik”. *Rzeczpospolita* 116, 20 (21.05.1995 r.). Accessed: May 15, 2023. <http://beksinski.dmochochowski.gallery.net/library.php?section=wywiady>.
- Beksiński, Zdzisław. 2015. *Opowiadania*, edited by Tomasz Chomiszczak. Olszanica: BOSZ.
- Beksiński. *Prace z lat 1930–1955*. 2007. t. 2, edited by Wiesław Banach. Sanok: Muzeum Historyczne w Sanoku.
- Borowski, Wiesław. 1982. *Tadeusz Kantor*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe.
- Chomiszczak, Tomasz. 2015. „Zaledwie okruchy, bezużyteczne szczątki, niedojedzone przez czas resztki. Prozatorskie do-myślenia Zdzisława Beksińskiego”. *Opowiadania*, edited by Tomasz Chomiszczak, Olszanica: BOSZ.
- Chwin. Stefan. 2011. „Czesław Miłosz wobec powstania warszawskiego”. *Teksty Drugie: Teoria Literatury, Krytyka, Interpretacja* 5: 62–81.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*, edited by Marie-Louise Mallet. Translated by David Wills. Fordham: Fordham University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1984. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Athlone.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1988. *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Athlone.
- Domańska, Ewa. 2017. *Nekros: wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Ebert, John David. 2013. *On a Painting by Zdzisław Beksiński*. Accessed: November 15, 2024. [https://www.beksinskiarchiwum.net/archiwum1/publistyka\\_medialna\\_dotycząca\\_beksinskiego/teksty\\_napisane\\_o\\_beksinskim\\_w\\_jezykach\\_obcych/english/john\\_david\\_ebert.pdf](https://www.beksinskiarchiwum.net/archiwum1/publistyka_medialna_dotycząca_beksinskiego/teksty_napisane_o_beksinskim_w_jezykach_obcych/english/john_david_ebert.pdf).
- Foto Beksiński. 2011. ed. Wiesław Banach, Olszanica: BOSZ.
- Jarzyńska, Karina. 2018. *Literatura jako ćwiczenie duchowe. Dzieło Czesława Miłosza w perspektywie postsekularnej*. Kraków: Universitas.
- Grzebałkowska, Magdalena. 2014. *Beksińscy. Portret podwójny*. Kraków: Znak.
- Kantor, Tadeusz. 2005. *Pisma*. vol. 1, Edited by Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz. Wrocław–Kraków: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Ośrodek Dokumentacji Sztuki Tadeusza Kantora Cricoteka.
- Karwowska Elżbieta R., and Hanna Wrabiec. eds. 1993. *Antyfotografia i ciąg dalszy. Beksiński, Lewczyński, Schlabs*. Wrocław: Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu.
- Koszowy, Marta. 2021. „Fotografia”. *Reprezentacje Zagłady w kulturze polskiej (1939–2019). Problematyka Zagłady w sztukach wizualnych i popkulturze*, edited by Sławomir Buryła, Dorota Krawczyńska, and Jacek Leociak. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN.
- Kowalska-Leder, Justyna, Paweł Dobrosielski, Iwona Kurz, and Małgorzata Szpakowska. eds. 2017. *Ślady Holokaustu w imaginarium kultury polskiej*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.



- Litwin, Weronika. ed. 2008. *Sanok. Szlak Chasydzki*. Warszawa: Fundacja Ochrony Dziedzictwa Żydowskiego. Accessed: November 19, 2024.. [https://fodz.pl/download/1szlak\\_chasydzki\\_sanok\\_PL.pdf](https://fodz.pl/download/1szlak_chasydzki_sanok_PL.pdf).
- Łapiński, Zdzisław. 2001. „Miłosz «zaraz po wojnie»”. *Teksty Drugie: Teoria Literatury, Krytyka, Interpretacja* 3–4: 171–81.
- Malabou, Catherine. 2012. *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*. Translated by Carolyn Shread. Cambridge–Maldern: Polity Press.
- Miłosz, Czesław. 2006. *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*. London: Penguin Group.
- Mitchell, William J. T. 2013. *Czego chcą obrazy?* Translated by Łukasz Zaremba. Warszawa: Narodowe Centrum Kultury.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2008. *Corpus*. Translated by Richard A. Rand. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Nycz, Ryszard. 1994. „Tropy «ja»: koncepcje podmiotowości w literaturze polskiej ostatniego stulecia”. *Teksty Drugie: Teoria Literatury, Krytyka, Interpretacja* 2 (26): 7–27.
- Orwell, George. 1988. *Rok 1984*. Translated by Tomasz Mirowicz, Warszawa: Da Capo.
- Porębski, Mieczysław. 1956. „Maria Jarema i Tadeusz Kantor w Salonie Po Prostu”. *Po Prostu*: 52–53. <https://bid.desa.pl/lots/view/1-2PC4SG/tadeusz-kantor-kompozycja-1956>
- Sendyka, Roma. 2016. “Sites That Haunt: Affects and Non-sites of Memory.” *East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures* 4. Accessed: May 16, 2023. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0888325416658950>
- Sendyka, Roma. 2017. “The Difficult Heritage of Non-Sites of Memory. Contested Places, Contaminated Landscapes.” *Traces Journal* #3: 4–14. Accessed: May 16, 2023, [www.traces.polimi.it/index.html@p=2230.html](http://www.traces.polimi.it/index.html@p=2230.html).
- Staniewska, Alexandra, and Ewa Domańska. eds. 2023. *Ekshumacje polityczne: teoria i praktyka*. Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria.
- Węgrzyn, Klaudia. 2017. „Zdzisław Beksiński – klisze (nie)pamięci. Wprowadzenie do analizy przypadku”. *Identyfikacje Zagłady. Szkice historyczne i praktyki kulturowe*. 145–158, edited by Monika Gromala, Sylwia Papier, Marta Świetlik. Kraków: ATW.
- Węgrzyn, Klaudia. 2018. „Ilustracje dystopii. Paradoks intencji artysty oraz intencji dzieła na przykładzie Zdzisława Beksińskiego”. *Artyst(k)a: obecność i tożsamość. Manifestacje podmiotowości w gestach i procesach twórczych*. 87–102, edited by Magdalena Popiel, Klaudia Węgrzyn. Kraków: Wiele Kroppek.
- Węgrzyn, Klaudia. 2020. “Archeologia antyfotografii. Wywoływanie zdjęć i widm z Sanoka w pracach Jerzego Lewczyńskiego oraz Zdzisława Beksińskiego”. *Monografia Towarzystwa Doktorantów Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego: Pamięć, Obraz, Projekcja*, edited by Agnieszka Ścibior. Kraków: Petrus.

