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## Three Paintings by Zdzisław Beksiński: Making Art Possible “After Auschwitz”

Natalia P. Koptseva\* and Ksenia V. Reznikova

Siberian Federal University  
79 Svobodny, Krasnoyarsk, 660041, Russia

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*The article is dedicated to the art work of one of the most significant Polish surrealist artists, Zdzisław Beksiński. The article reveals the main periods of the artist's biography, lists the people of art who influenced the establishment of the author's individual style and the art works Z. Beksiński preferred. Special attention is paid to the dichotomy of form and content as well as Z. Beksiński's original opinion of it: the artist believed that the major significance was borne by the form, not the content: what he created was the form, while content is something contributed by the spectators. The article continues with the review of three works by Z. Beksiński, leading to the following conclusion: in the situation when god has been crucified but not resurrected, when the human loses his last hope for salvation, when his forces are a null in the face of an unknown but horrifying enemy; in the situation of the End of the World, the total night when the monsters (such as the monstrous words) come alive, the only thing left for a human is to remember of this situation at every moment of time, to understand the nature of words and the threat they present, to understand the mechanism of protection from them; to take care of the closest people, to protect them, thereby allowing neither themselves nor himself to turn into stone of the horrors the reality brings. The final analysis of art works by Z. Beksiński is performed through the prism of “after Auschwitz” art concept.*

*Keywords: Zdzisław Beksiński; Polish surrealism; form and content; art “after Auschwitz”.*

*Research area: culture studies.*

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### 1. Introduction into art of Zdzisław Beksiński

Today Zdzisław Beksiński (1929-2005) is famous all over the world<sup>1</sup>. His paintings, sculptures, photographs, his works created with sophisticated artistic techniques stand on a vague but a significant borderline between elite art for connoisseurs and art patrons and popular art that is shared from one blog to another, occupying a large niche in various social networks. Art works by Zdzisław Beksiński are recognized as “theirs”

by both “dark” youth subcultures welcoming any sort of infernal art (both ancient and contemporary), and experts of artistic advance guard playing with transformations of human figures and faces, metamorphosis of natural things and psychological states. Beksiński's art work is of global relevance; his creations are admired on all populated continents. European, American, Asian fans of this Polish artist see him as a master adequate to our time, a rare artist who visualized the borderline between the physical

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\* Corresponding author E-mail address: decanka@mail.ru

and the psychic, who united metamorphoses of History and transformations of Nature, and who revealed all borders and transformations on the poor human body, in the geography of face and in all the places in the world, where each and every one will be one day left face to face with the horrors and fears, produced by his own self and every second generated by the Universe.

Art works by Zdzisław Beksiński are representative for Polish artistic surrealism. Today this movement is recognized all over the world, and such maîtres as Zdzisław Beksiński fit it into the all-world context. The art processes of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries cannot be comprehended outside the context of artistic ideas and concepts contributed by Polish surrealist artists<sup>2</sup>. Among them art critics and researchers usually reckon such artists as Edward Okuń, Józef Mehoffer, Jozef Malchewsky, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Henry Fantazos, Tomasz Sętowski, Jacek Yerka, Wojtek Siudmak, Piotr Naliwajko, Jarosław Kukowski. Often some surrealistic notes are found in the works by Michał Swider, Bronisław Chromy, Ewa Pello, Joanna Sierko-Filipowska. It is also common to name the following artists as representatives of Polish surrealistic painting: Dariusz Twardoch, Thomas Pradzinski, Jarosław Kukowski, Piotr Adamczyk, Jacek Lipowcan, Włodzimierz Kukliński, Damian Klaczkiewicz. As it was said in one Internet blog where participants share illustrations by Polish surrealist artists, “their name is legion”. Here we encounter the “dark” reminiscences of the Biblical worlds again. And we cannot but notice that it happens thanks to art of the Catholic country that brought Pope Saint John Paul II to the world!

Even the count of the Polish artists associated with surrealism in painting in this or that way proves that such artistic phenomenon as Polish painting surrealism really exists and has a great audience. Some of the artists have found their place in the modern pop-art medium and contribute to

spreading the Polish trend of global mass culture. Masterpieces by other Polish surrealist artists, created with sophisticated artistic technologies represent the miracle of the human spirit capable of visualizing the hidden and dynamic entities of the world being<sup>3</sup>.

The reasons for blossom of surrealism in Polish visual art can be revealed through a small research of Zdzisław Beksiński’s works, who, undoubtedly, takes the first and the most honoured place both among the representatives of the movement and among the majority of Polish artists of the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The title of the “greatest modern artist” was granted to Zdzisław Beksiński in the late 70-s by the famous designer of “Alien”, Swiss artist Hans Rudolf Giger, a great representative of fantastic realism. Giger is often claimed to represent the “dark visionary art” style. The typical conceptual peculiarities of the style are praising theomachy, mix of “Light and Dark”, artistic and political Trotskyism as ideology of endless constructed shocks etc. Similarly, art works by Zdzisław Beksiński are often “drawn over” by “dark visionary art” fans. In art-oriented social networks (like tumblr.com) one can easily see that today “dark visionary art” is gaining momentum and the number of its fans is growing by leaps and bounds. It is quite a powerful movement in modern pop culture.

Art work of Zdzisław Beksiński was studied by such researchers and critics as Tadeusz Nyczek, Anna Dmochowska and Piotr Dmochowski, Remigiusz Grzela, Liliana Śnieg-Czaplewska, Magdalena Grzebałkowska, Wiesław Banach, Artur Olechniewicz, Dorota Szomko-Osełkowska, Katarzyna Winnicka. His art became the theme for 9 movies. Modern American film director William Malone used paintings of Beksiński in his horror movies, and Mexican director Guillermo de Toro claims that his own work was inspired by the works of Zdzisław Beksiński.

Zdzisław Beksiński studied architecture at Cracow University of Technology and graduated in 1952. He returned to his home town Sanok and even devoted a period of his life to construction, working as a construction site supervisor. However, he left it soon, and in the first period of his artistic development he was engaged with modern photography and photocollage technique. In 1957-1960 he was a member of an informal photographer group, working together with Jorge Lewinski and Bronisław Szlabs.

Within the same time period he created a significant number of innovative modern sculptures. Since the early 60-s, Beksiński had worked a lot in painting. At first, his works were abstract, but later, as the style evolved, it transformed into an outstanding sort of fantastic realism. Art critics suppose that the most fruitful period of his work were the 60 – 80-s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the majority of his renowned “signature” works were made. This period of his work is usually referred to as “fantastic”.

The first exhibition of Z. Beksiński was held in Warsaw, in 1964. The representatives of abstractionism who previously considered him to be the abstract art follower were disappointed, blaming the artist of backsliding, but all the works put on display were sold out and the new “fantastic” style made him famous in an instant. The honour of “discovering” Z. Beksiński as a unique artist belongs to the art critic and organizer of the exhibition, Janusz Boguski.

In the 80-s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Zdzisław Beksiński became famous in Western Europe, America, and Japan. He was the only Polish artist to have his works displayed at the famous art gallery of Osaka (Japan).

In the early 1990-s the general vector of his art works was changed. The multi-shape compositions with thoroughly articulated details, common for the 1960-s – 1980-s, were left in

the past. In 1977, after their house in Sanok was knocked down, the Beksińskis moved to Warsaw. After 1984, the artist often stayed in Paris. His fan, university professor Piotr Dmochowski, organized a series of exhibitions of Beksiński in France, Belgium, Germany, and Japan. In 1989-1996 there was a special gallery in Paris dedicated to Beksiński. In the 1990-s, for a while, he had permanent personal exhibitions at some art museums of the Eastern Europe and in Osaka. Even though the Osaka gallery does not exist anymore, around 70 paintings by Beksiński are still in Japan.

By that time, Beksiński had reached the portrait genre and the crucifix theme. The image details and particularities of paintings were dominated by laconism and even peculiar monumentality. Since the late 1990-s and until the tragic murder in his own house, Zdzisław Beksiński engaged himself with digital photograph processing, using computer and photocopier for creating his art works. However, the general “fantastic” style remained unchanged.

In 2001 Beksiński drew up his will, where he instructed his works to be handed to the Historical Museum of Sanok. In the artist’s lifetime, the museum received 300 of his works, and after his death the collection was filled with 20 paintings and a thousand of graphic works, reliefs, sculptures, multimedia, gravures, and photographs. Today it is the largest collection of works by Zdzisław Beksiński in the world. The historical museum also came into possession of all the artist’s property, apartments and bank deposits.

The other large collections of Beksiński’s works are in Częstochowa, where his early works (photographs and drawings) are stored; in Wrocław, where his abstract works are kept; at the Art Museum of Osaka. The greatest private collection of his works is the collection of Anna and Piotr Dmochowski (though some of the works

from the collection were supposed to be handed to Sanok gallery at law).

In Poland exhibitions of Zdzisław Beksiński were held from March 18 to April 18, 2003; from April 22 to May 16, 2004; from October 16 to November 26, 2004; from February 12 to March 6, 2005; from April 22 to May 22, 2006. In the end of May – beginning of June, 2013, the Museum of Fantastic Art in Vienna organized the exhibition of works by Beksiński called “The Darkness of the Subconscious”. On May 18, 2012, the opening ceremony of a new Beksiński gallery in Sanok was held.

## **2. Self-conception of Zdzisław Beksiński**

In one of his interviews in the year 1989, Zdzisław Beksiński mentioned that in his youth he was greatly impressed by works of Artur Grottger<sup>4</sup>. Artur Grottger (1837-1867) is famous not only for his art works, but also for the romantic legends of his life and love affairs. In the artistic outlook of Poland, Artur Grottger has a respected status of a patriot artist, a hermit, a fighter for the independence of his Motherland. The legend of the perished patriot artist was supported in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by those social movements of Poland that praised Polish national patriotism and the ideals of self-sacrifice.

At first thought, the artistic language of Artur Grottger is radically different from that of Zdzisław Beksiński. However, the black and white works of Artur Grottger from “Lithuania” series may be correlated to the surreal characters of Beksiński’s visual art (Fig. 1).

Probably, the romantic cult of the patriot artist A. Grottger, so typical for Polish culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, aided the formation of a special artistic and symbolic language of Zdzisław Beksiński, where the whimsicality, grotesque, transformation of the “common” curves of bodies, faces, spaces, and cult storylines as a whole

make up a compound cultural text, expecting the recipient audience to form the word picture in the situation of great freedom provided by the artist through the chthonian signs and symbols, appealing to the deepest cultural layers of the recipients.

There is an artistic outlook typical for the Romanticism aesthetics, built upon the concept of “world duality”. There are two simultaneously co-present worlds. However, only one of them is accessible to the senses of all people, while the other opens up to the genius artists only, who use their art to speak of their visions. However, even if Beksiński had not followed the Romanticism aesthetic principles explicitly and directly, his own art still undoubtedly presents the discovery of the “second, another world” that attracts so many people all around the world.

In the same interview, Zdzisław Beksiński mentioned another piece of painting, “Isle of the Dead” by A. Böcklin. He also added that during all the periods of his life, the greatest influence on his art was made by Franz Kafka. The theme of impact made by the ideas and aesthetics by Franz Kafka on the visual art of Zdzisław Beksiński requires a separate research. In this article we only mention that this influence was evidenced by the artist himself and he is the one to define the duration and intensity of this influence on all the periods of his work.

A piece of visual art as such is always a result of interaction between the artist and artistic material<sup>5</sup>. The artistic material means more than the natural and artificial materials used, such as stone, canvas, paints, wood, metal, plastic etc. The artistic material also consists of the psychic processes and internal experience of the author. The artistic materials are also philosophic ideas, concepts, and aesthetic systems. But the artistic material perceived and transformed by the author is the experience of other artists, their style, techniques, technologies of art. For this reason,

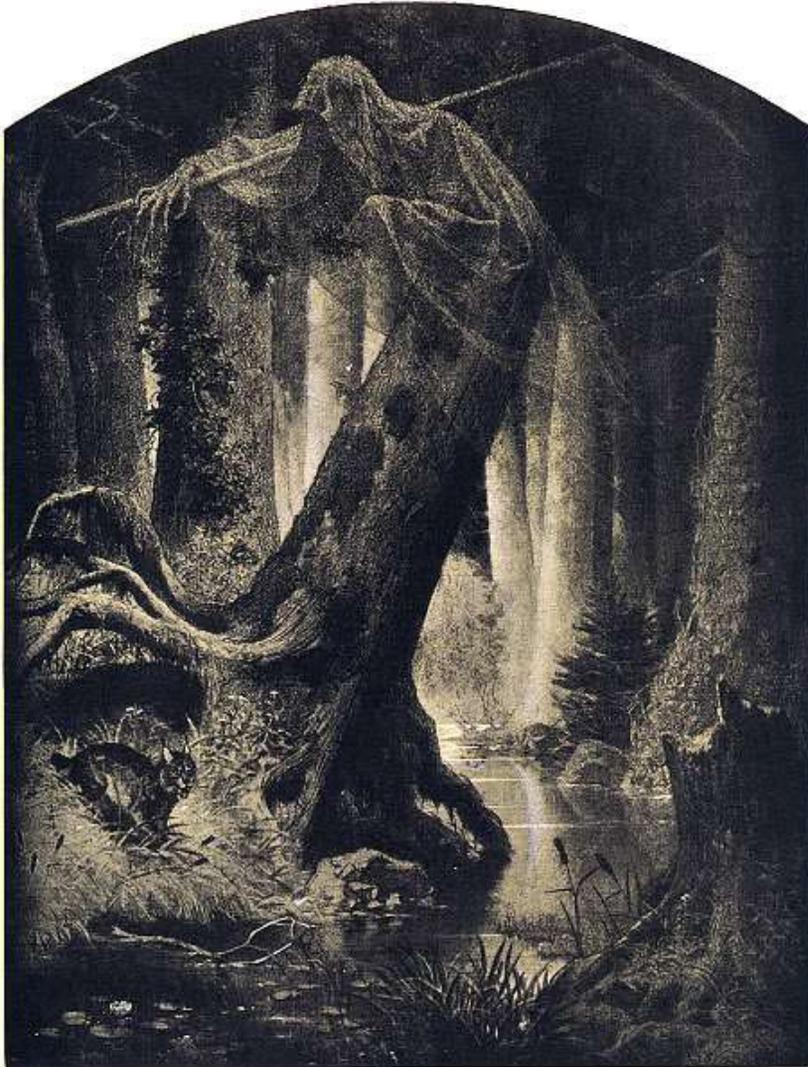


Fig. 1. Artur Grottger. Gravure from Lithuania series

great attention should be paid to the evidence of Zdzisław Beksiński on the significance of the art technique discoveries of Bronisław Wojciech Linke.

In his interview in 1989 Zdzisław Beksiński said that he had never been abroad and knew the great artists' works only by reproductions. The greatest evidence on the core of the art philosophy of Beksiński articulated by himself is the thesis of the form dominating over content in his works. However, the audience is inclined to seeing the content: people, scary objects (skulls, crosses),

trees, landscape. As the artist claimed, since 1980 his art pieces had been mostly determined by their form and architecture, not the content. The conceptual images were produced by the artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> or the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while Beksiński was more interested in the form, which, according to himself, was always incomplete. For this reason, we should claim unfair the “treachery blamings” of his old allies with whom he began establishing the concept for Polish abstract painting. The “content”, as Beksiński suggested, was contributed into his

works by the audience, not by himself. Maybe, that is the reason why he never gave any titles to his works. Zdzisław Beksiński believed that titles may mislead the spectator's thinking: title suggests a certain interpretation. The title of any piece of art is given in the artist's native language. Translated, the title may get even more confusing for the spectator, leading him farther and farther away from the art pieces themselves, of which Beksiński himself used to say: "Because I don't know what I painted"<sup>6</sup>.

Artistic philosophy of Zdzisław Beksiński seems very assonant with the ideas of another great artist of Polish origin, Kazimir Malevich, the author of foundations of Suprematism. Kazimir Malevich wrote:

"The artist broke free of all the ideas, images, impressions and the things originating from them. That is the philosophy of Suprematism, bringing art back to itself.

Non-Objectivity of Art is the Art of pure feelings, it is milk without a bottle, existing on its own, it doesn't depend on a bottle's form; this

bottle doesn't represent its essence and taste" (Kazimir Malevich. Suprematism)<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, Z. Beksiński called Bronislaw Linke (1906-1962) one of his teachers of art techniques. For Bronislaw Linke, who is called a representative of "metaphoric realism", mixed artistic technique was mostly typical. In the same piece of art Linke used watercolours, crayons, gouache, paper scratching, collage, pastels etc. The most famous works by Bronislaw Linke is the "Stones Cry" series, paintings "Red Bus" (Fig. 2) and "The Prayer of the Killed" (Fig. 3). Therefore, it was the freedom of attitude to the existing art techniques that attracted Zdzisław Beksiński, not a certain technique or a stable combination of existing techniques. Moreover, there is a certain "vagueness" of the selected techniques that attracts attention; probably it is the thing that hides aesthetics of the evanescent, as in the post-war world nothing, even the Past, has a fixed shape of its own.

An important element for modelling the artistic outlook of the artist is the evidence of



Fig. 2. Bronislaw Linke. Red Bus, 1959-1961

Zdzisław Beksiński himself, claiming that during his work he listened to music by such composers, as Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Franz Schubert, Richard Strauss, and Mieczysław Karłowicz. He emphasized that music of the composers he listed was typical for the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Among the modern music he listened to, Zdzisław Beksiński did not specify any names, but listed some music styles: pop, heavy metal, hard rock. Long ago, at the very beginning of European painting history, Leonardo da Vinci said that music is the “sister of painting”. In the aesthetic systems of I. Kant and H. Hegel, in respect with the Absolute, art hierarchies are built in different ways: if H. Hegel saw the peak of art standing closest to the philosophic notion describing the core of Absolute, in epic poetry, while I. Kant claimed music, the most non-objective kind of art, to be superior in cognizing the Truth.

Among modern fans of Zdzisław Beksiński there is a great number of heavy metal and hard rock loving young people. The recipient audience creating word pictures in the process of interaction with art works by Zdzisław Beksiński are modern young people who take the artistic philosophy of the artist for the aesthetics of destruction and transformation. Of course, if the totality of Beksiński’s works contains pieces of “masterpiece” class, it is fair to say that for masterpieces it is common to be present not only in the contemporary time of the artist’s life, but also beyond time, or, to be more precise, in all the time, when the expressed ideas find their sole sensual (painted) manifestation.

### 3. Analysis of three art works by Zdzisław Beksiński

#### 3.1. *Painting, 1985, oil, orgalite (Fig. 4)*

The vertically oriented canvas presents a cross, located in a mountainous area, with a man crucified on it. Vertically, the rock occupies only a half of the whole space. The tops of the stones



Fig. 3. Bronislaw Linke. The Prayer of the Killed, 1942

are covered with some grass. The spectator sees the vertical plane of the rock. In the left lower corner there is a dark sprawling tree with an almost spherical crown, as high as a half of the rock. In a distance, on the rock there are several more sprawling trees. In the right part of the painting, between the trees there is a tower with conic top, its silhouette vaguely seen against the sky. At the very bottom of the stone wall there is a door located on the central vertical axis of



Fig. 4. Zdzisław Beksiński, Painting, 1985, oil, orgalite

the painting. Like the door, the cross installed on the top of the rock is also standing on the central vertical axis. The cross is T-shaped; its horizontal bar is parallel to the upper edge of the canvas. On the cross, there is a skeleton of the crucified. The sky making the background for the cross is dark, blue and grey, uneven in colour.

Despite the great number of people executed by crucifixion during the history of the humankind, after the crucifixion of Christ a cross is associated with His death, which was also caused by the executed apostles' begging their crosses not to be similar to His. Such a strong association of a cross with the crucifixion

of Jesus Christ, present in the Christian tradition, at first sight brings us to assumption that it is the crucifixion of Christ presented to the spectator. However, there occur some contradictions with the canonical depiction of the cross. First of all, the crucified has decomposed, the only remains are the flesh-free bones, bleached with time, glowing in the dark. Secondly, the cross is sole, however the canonical depiction of the cross assumes the presence of several characters: the Holy Mother, John, warriors etc. Summarizing these contradictions, we may say that in the represented world outlook **God has decomposed**, resurrection is out of question, and, consequently,

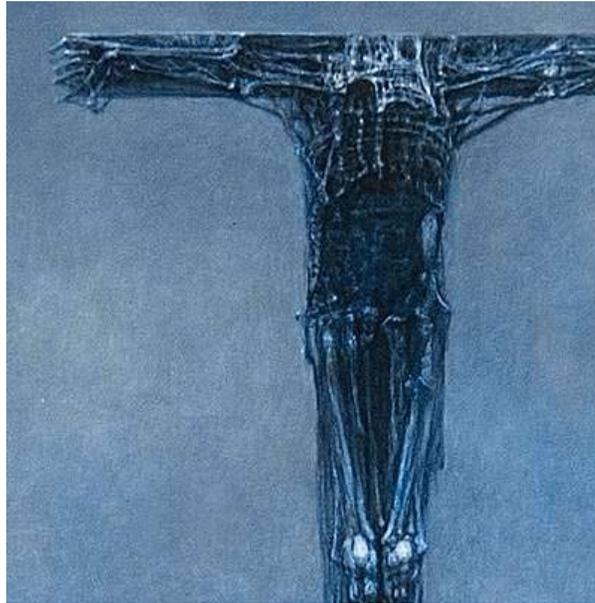


Fig. 5. Zdzisław Beksiński, Painting, 1985, oil, orgalite. Fragment

so is the Second Coming (and, therefore, the Last Judgment and the eternity). God has died and decomposed, and the feeling of **hopelessness** is fed with the general dark-blue tone of the painting, the starless night (**literal end of the world**) and complete absence of people. **The End of the World has come**, which is also hinted at by the T-shape of the cross: in Hebrew alphabet *taw* is the last letter, also associated with the End of the World.

**The death of God that brought the End of the World** was more than **martyrdom**; it was **ultimately painful**, proved by the manner the finger phalanges are grasping the horizontal bar of the cross and the skull of the dead, or the thing taken for the skull (Fig. 5). The skull is depicted in an uncommon way, so that we may comprehend what the picture presents only with the method of elimination and guesses. Thus, it is clear that what we see is not the top of the head (which would have been true if the chin of the dead was lying on his chest); it is not the lower face part (as if the head had been thrown back); it is the face, the front of the skull. However,

symmetrical or regular forms are out of question. It is a distorted skull, resembling a flat mask with huge eyes, distorted face, and bare teeth. It is hard to imagine what tortures could cause the distortion of not only the face, but also the skull bones.

Comparing the size of the door in the stone wall, the trees at the foot of the rock and the skeleton on the cross, we face the following question: **who crucified God, if people are smaller than his foot?** Who did that? What was the force that overcame the divine? Even attempts of thinking who it may be are horrifying, because **realization of the force superior to the divine is catastrophic in itself**. Because in such a world the humankind, which is weak as it is and weak in the face of god, is deprived of the last hope, the last arch. If god has been crucified, it means that there are some mysterious forces dominating over him, neither was it a battle where both fighters died (there are no more prostrate bodies except for the crucified). It means that **the human is left alone in the world, face to face with the forces that incommensurably overcome not only the**



Fig. 6. Zdzisław Beksiński, Painting, mid. 1970-s, oil, orgalite

**human, but also the divine.** In such a situation, reduction of the human forces, miserly as they are, is also caused by the ignorance of who the enemy is, who the greatest threat is, who or what shall bring the inevitable and horrifying death.

*3.2. Painting of approximately mid. 1970-s, oil, orgalite (Fig. 6)*

In the centre of the vertically oriented canvas there is a head of an anthropomorphic creature, occupying the major part of the space. The background is dark, gradient from black on the top to black and red in the bottom. In the

upper part of the painting the background is not just abstractly black; it is black sky with white spots of stars and a thin line of the moon in the last quarter phase.

For clarity, the head can be divided into three parts, located vertically one over another. The top part, occupying a half of the total height of the head, is a brow-grey-black corpus, the top of which (the lightest part of the head, possibly illuminated with the moon) looks more or less smooth and even, while its middle and lower parts are ridden in dark fissures and hollows, the largest of which is on the right, in the lower

part of the head top. In the centre of the upper part of the head there is a gaping hole looking into darkness, in the middle of which there is a white circle, comparable with the moon in size. The entire surface around the hole, irrespective of whether it is smooth or scalloped, is covered with a pattern of thin red, black, and white lines, entwined with each other and resembling some rivers with confluents or blood vessels.

The bottom part of the head is the smallest in size; it is a rhomb-shaped corpus, constituting the chin and the lips. The upper lip is dark, almost black; the lower one is light brown. The mouth is slightly open; the lower front teeth are seen clearer than the upper. The chin is dark red, with loops of red threads hanging from it. On the chin there is inscription "SLOWA" ("WORDS"), the letters of which look as though they had been not written, but cut, or stamped on a hard surface (which is proven by a distinctive shading on the first three letters).

The middle part is dramatically different from the two described above. It is presented with long dark-red round serpentine sprouts spreading out from the head. The sprouts are different in thickness: there are thick, medium and thin ones, the thinner enlacing the larger, entwining with them. The sprouts are radially directed from the head, a part of them is looking directly at the spectator. There are some red thread loops hanging from the sprouts, similar to those seen in the chin area. Every sprout ends with a flat round light-brown slice.

In the process of primary description, we see a series of mismatches, the explanation of which may aid the understanding of the image. First of all, we may mention the mismatch of the depicted head with the canonical, standard image of an anthropomorphic creature. First of all, why inside the head there is a **black hole** with a glowing **circle** in the middle? Secondly, **the neck, the nose, the ears and the eyes are**

**missing**; from the attributive parts of face, only **the mouth** is present. Thirdly, it is difficult to understand, whether it is a **bare skull** covered with a network of blood vessels that is depicted, or the blood vessels are seen **through the skin**. Let us keep these questions and mismatches in mind to find the answers and explanations in the process of further research.

Let us do a more detailed analysis. Using the analogy method, relying on the resemblance of the colour and the shape of the hummocks on the top part of the depicted head with the earth surface relief, and also on the resemblance of the blood vessels with a network of rivers and brooks, let us conclude that the **top part of the head**, the skull, represents the Earth. Or, more likely, one of the **Planets** of the Space, in which it is located (the background is the starry sky and the moon). As we take the analogy of the head and a planet as the initial step, the presence of the moon in the last quarter phase raises the question on the location of the Sun. However, neither a quick glance on the canvas, nor the logical assumption on where it is supposed to be, brings us to finding it. Therefore, the painting makes the impression that **the Sun does not exist**. On this Planet **the night is permanent**, and the only difference that may be, is whether the moon is visible or not. What is the internal structure of the "Planet"? A skull is a case for brain, so it would be logical to expect that it would be seen under the bone. However, the large hole in the skull opens the view on nothing but the black emptiness and a small white circle in the centre, a kind of a nucleus. The blackness inside is similar to the blackness of space outside. Then the Moon outside can be compared with the round nucleus inside the skull (also stimulated by their comparable sizes). Therefore, there are **two Moons: the external**, the universal one, which can pass through different phases; and **the Moon of the internal Space**, which is in full phase. Daytime or sunlight are excluded in such a world

structure. It is more about a **total night, both internal and external**.

Let us turn our attention to the peculiarities of the face. As it has been mentioned before, there are no eyes, nose, or ears, i.e. no organs responsible for such senses as sight, smell and sound. Then theoretically, the only senses that remain intact are only **taste** and **touch**. But in practice, it is not that simple. The possibility of taste perception is assumed by the presence of the mouth, which is slightly open, showing the teeth. The situation with touch is more complicated; on one hand, it requires skin, but as we have already noticed, it is not clear whether the skull has any skin or it consists of nothing but bone. On the other hand, the radially directed sprouts ending with light-brown slices can be performing the function of perceiving the environment by touch, especially under the current conditions when there not more than two senses intact. The shape of the sprouts lets us assume that they are capable not only of **recognizing what is there around the head** with the help of their receptors, but also of **entwining the desired object, pulling it to the head to feed it**, as there is no other way for the head to communicate with the external medium (it has nothing but the mouth and the tentacle sprouts).

Here we could stop analysing the organs of senses, but we cannot but notice the **similarities** we may notice **between the eye and the hole in the forehead zone of the skull**. Firstly, in some traditions it is believed that in the middle of the forehead there is the third, the true eye. Secondly, its shape of a small, clear white circle in the hole in the forehead cannot but resemble the shape of a pupil, one of the very few absolutely symmetrical elements of the human body. But if the circle inside the skull is associated with the pupil, it raises the question on why it is white. The answer may be

the **inversion**, or the upturning of the opposite. If it is so, the **white pupil should react to the darkness coming into the eye**, not to the light. It can be explained by the surrounding darkness, the absolute night we mentioned before. Association of the white circle with the pupil can also explain the emptiness inside the skull, the case for the brain. Human brain structure is extremely complicated; each of its zones performs its own, individual function, processing information delivered by the organs of senses. In our example, there is a minimum of organs. Moreover, the tentacle sprouts resemble snakes so much, that it seems that they can live on their own. Furthermore, there is nothing but the head; there is no neck, let alone the rest of the body. Consequently, **the brain in its customary volume is not needed anymore**. All that is required is one eye, one pupil to direct, or, to be more precise, **to aim the tentacle sprouts at different objects**. Accepting this version, we may pay our attention to **where the sight pupil is aiming at now**, and with some horror realize that it is not looking anywhere to the side (then the circle would not be so even), but **directly to the spectator**. That means that the tentacle sprouts are following the command to catch the spectator and pull him towards the head, never to let him go. Then the mouth is **slightly open, anticipating the taste of you**, of the one looking at the painting.

Then let us make a step towards the canonical images of mythical creatures. In particular, the image of a head without a neck and the rest of the body, as well as the presence of serpentine sprouts, make us refer to the image of Medusa. Instead of hair, three Gorgon sisters had snakes, but Medusa was the only one to turn onlookers to stone and to be mortal herself. According to the myths, Medusa's head kept turning onlookers to stone even after having been separated from the body. However, if we compare the head

depicted in the painting and the canonical image of Medusa, we have to remark that the head has no eyes in the common meaning of the word; it only has the white pupil in the centre of its skull. Consequently, the pupil is **more than a sight for the tentacles; it may also possess a deathful force itself**. It may explain the fact why the sprouts end with light-brown slices instead of snake heads: they do not need poison to kill. Grasping the victim is enough for them.

But the analogy with Medusa is the reason for us to suggest that the picture presented by the author is not hopelessly horrible. There is a way out, and it is very clear to the spectators; the only thing they have to do is to select the right behaviour. No doubt, they may get trapped by the sight pupil, the centre of the internal absolute night, and then be pulled to the mouth with the horrifying tentacles and be eaten. But they may also recall that after being separated from the body, Medusa's head was fixed on Perseus' shield, serving as a powerful protection from his enemies. Since those times it has become a tradition to use the picture of Medusa's head for protection, as it was not only the head itself, but even the pictures of it that had great protective power. So, the painting may be perceived as a **Gorgoneion**, a talisman used **for protection from being swallowed by the absolute night**. The fact that it is not Medusa herself, but only an image, a mask of her, is proven by the inscription "SLOWA", which is not written, but cut on a solid material. What the spectator sees is **not a portrait of a living being, but just a realistically sculpted mask**. But it is true not for every spectator, but only for that who **understands both the nature of words** (which are meant by the **serpentine tentacle sprouts**), and the **mechanism of protecting himself from them** (**Gorgoneion**, not Medusa, a constant **reminding of the existing threat**, which simultaneously acts as **the best protection**).

### *3.3. Painting of approximately early 2000-s, oil, orgalite, 98 x 132 cm (Fig. 7)*

The vertically oriented canvas represents a group portrait against a beige background. There are three characters. One of them, the largest in size, is sitting on a slanting surface, perhaps, a bench. The character is depicted in brown-grey-black tones. Its gnarled silhouette lets us suggest that it is a statue made of stone. There is only one of its hands, the left one, pictured as a hand of a normal human being: it is of flesh colour, the hand and finger phalanges are clearly depicted. However, we notice that the arm looks real only below the elbow. Nevertheless, even in this part of the arm there are two holes that are not attributive for a normal arm: a small rectangular shallow hole right below the elbow bend and a deeper, narrow and long one, more than half a forearm long. The object perpendicular to the left arm located above the elbow bend may be taken for a rolled up sleeve. The dark character is sitting, resting upon its straight left arm, leaning back. Its face, chest, legs are slightly coloured with the yellow light it exposes its body to, leaning backwards.

The other character, which is of almost the same size as the one described first, is sitting closer to the spectator (its image overlaps with the image of the first), on the same bench. The second character is transparently white: the beige background, as well as the stone-dark corpus of the first character, are visible through it. Sitting on the same bench, the lighter character is leaning forward, the head inclined in the same direction. The conjunction of the two characters in the area of their pelvis and legs draws attention. In this area, the two separate bodies are not separate anymore, turning into a single entity. The hands of the lighter character are not pictured separately. Just like the darker character, the lighter seems to be composed of large angular shapes. But unlike the first, it does not look like a stone figure; it



Fig. 7. Zdzisław Beksiński, Painting, early 2000-s, oil, orgalite, 98 x 132 cm

looks wrapped in a large piece of fabric. There is no sunlight reflection on this character.

Having compared the two described characters we may assume that the painting presents a man and a woman. The man is the darker character; the sleeve of his dark clothes is rolled up, and his body is made of rougher shapes. The difference between the categories of “rough” “soft” becomes noticeable at the comparison of the characters’ faces: the darker face is angular both in the way it is contoured and in the way it is filled; the lighter face is painted with smoother

lines. The woman wears light clothes, her features are gentler. The man and the woman are in quite a close relationship which is proved by several facts. Firstly, the body of the woman depicted by the man’s side is so transparent that the man can be seen through her; they fuse into a whole. Secondly, in the space of the painting the woman is sitting closer to the spectator, but in the closest plane we see the man’s left hand lying on the bench. Therefore, the man’s arm is wrapped around the woman’s back, on one hand, symbolically **protecting** her from the environment, and on

the other, demonstrating his **patronage over her** and close relationship. Thirdly, the closeness is hinted at by the analogical elements in the faces of the two completely opposite characters: those are decussate **crosses**, “saltires”, one of which is on the woman’s left cheek and the second is in the left temple area of the man’s head.

The question arising in the process of description of the two major characters is: what is that making the woman leaning forward, instead of sitting exposed to the light, repeating the man’s posture, preventing her from fusing completely with his figure (idealization method lets us assume that if the woman had not been leaning forward, due to the transparency of her body she would be absolutely indistinctive against the man)? The answer is found in the place where, according to the woman’s head position, the woman’s sight is directed: there is a child sitting the adults’ feet. As we see, he is sitting on something resembling a stone, faced in the direction opposite to that of the people on the bench; the back and his head are illuminated with the same yellowish light, as the head, the chest and the legs of the man. The

child is sitting on a large stone, slightly slouched, drawn a little forward. In front of him there are some large oblong angular stones, in the colour solution similar to that of the man. The stones are stacked one on another, making up a small but a long pile.

At the more detailed inspection of the stones we find, that those are not stones at all; in the right lower part of the pile, some foot bones, toe phalanges, arch of a foot and a heel are clearly seen. It makes us doubt, whether the child is sitting among some stones, not among some bones? Moreover, the stone laying over the arch of the foot has a clear silhouette of a large skull (Fig. 8). But in such a case, are the child and the adults aware of those being bones? Having found all the four heads present on the painting (the man, the woman, the child, the skull), we may trace their sights and notice that all of them make up a single line that finishes on the toe phalanges (Fig. 9).

There is another motion we can see in the painting. The clue of its presence are the decussate crosses on the man’s and woman’s faces, and

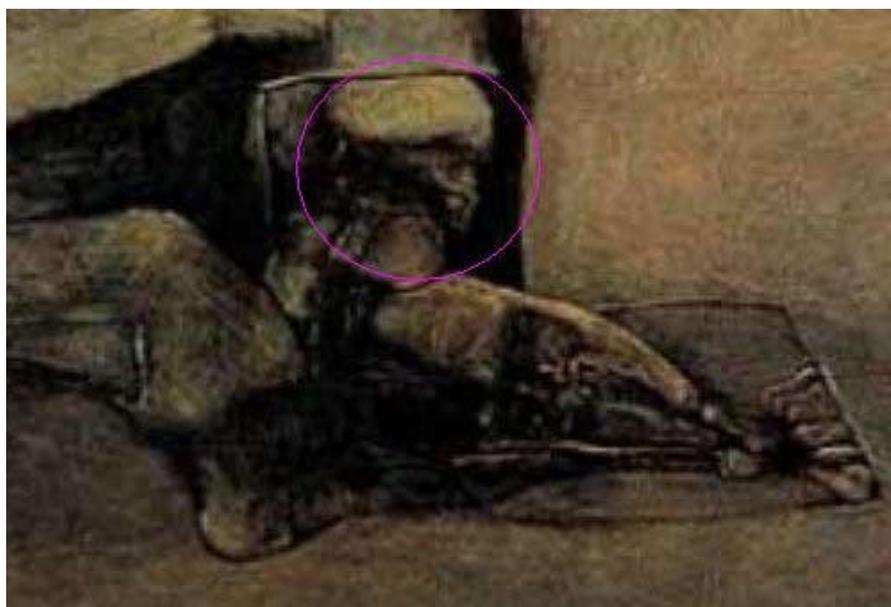


Fig. 8. Zdzisław Beksiński, Painting, early 2000-s, oil, orgalite. Fragment

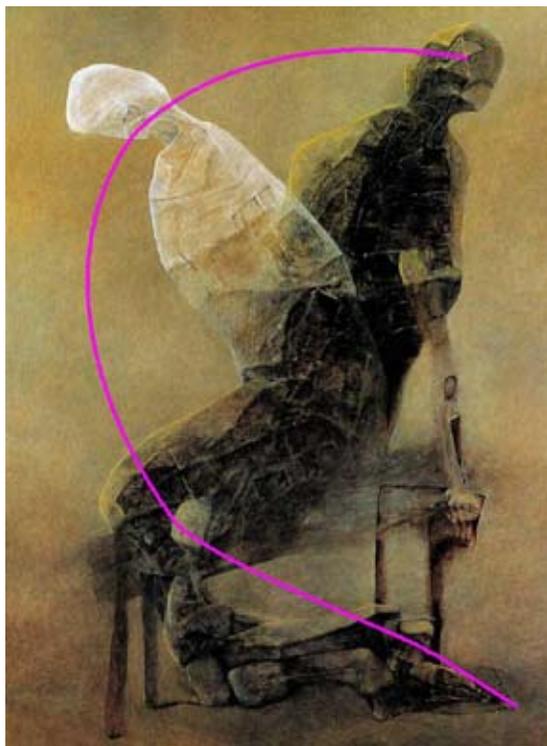


Fig. 9. Zdzisław Beksiński, Painting, early 2000-s, oil, orgalite

the third, large decussate cross formed by their bodies, also becomes evident. If we continue one of the cross's lines going through the middle of the cross on the man's face along his torso, it can be drawn down to the lower left corner of the stone the child is sitting on. The other line begins from the middle of the cross on the woman's face along her torso and finishes on the man's left hand finger phalanges (Fig. 10). But the produced decussate cross is not complete: it can be finished with the line of the man's left forearm; the sight of the man, perpendicular to his own body, parallel to the rays of light; the sight of the woman looking downwards, on the child; the stone-bones, laying in front of the child. Therefore, the cross we produced is not just a decussate cross, but a so-called "gammadion cross", or the swastika (Fig. 11). The swastika symbol assumes some motion, usually directed along the bent "arms" of the cross, which, in the present case, is counter

clockwise. We have already traced some motion in this direction, beginning from the man's head, but it stopped on the dead leg's toes. The swastika motion demonstrates that this point is not a full stop; there is another step that is not recognizable without the swastika.

Having analysed the separate parts of the canvas, we may speak of the different degree of motion typical of them. Thus, the most motionless element is the pile of bones or stones, it is **motionless and dead**. The child sitting on one of the stones is, firstly, associated with the motionless bone-stones due to the fact of sitting on them; secondly, he is hardly distinctive from the bone-stones in colour; thirdly, he is also motionless, sitting in a comfortable and relaxed position. Therefore, we may notice that though the child is just as **motionless** as the bone-stones, though he is **of the same colour** as they are, he is, nevertheless, **alive**. The affection for

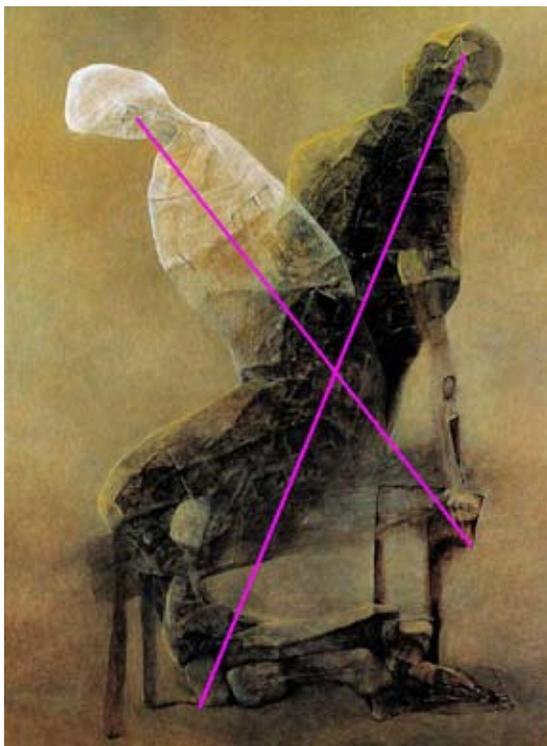


Fig. 10. Zdzisław Beksiński, Painting, early 2000-s, oil, orgalite

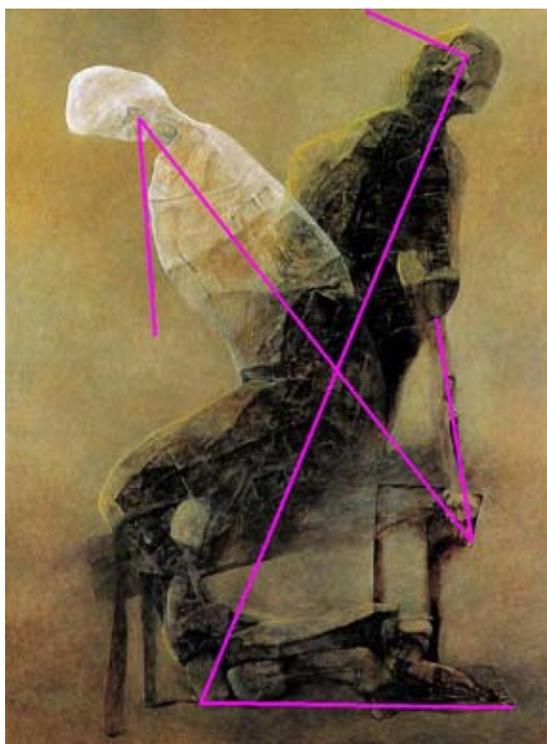


Fig. 11. Zdzisław Beksiński, Painting, early 2000-s, oil, orgalite

the child pulls the woman from the motionless-stony state; she bends down, performing the most significant move of all the presented characters. She is **alive**, she is **moving** and **interested**, **indifferent** to the child. The man, on one hand, seems to be **stony and motionless**, like the child, like the bone-stones: he is sitting, comfortably leaning against the bench, and colour solution coinciding with the images of the child and the bone-stones. But on the other hand, he is not only alive; **in fact, he is the most alive** of all the presented characters, because it is his left hand that is neither stone nor transparent, it is an ordinary hand of an ordinary person. Then we ask a question: why is it so, why is it only the hand that is real? To answer it, we should pay attention to what he is doing with that hand: he is not only **leaning** against the bench behind himself to sit comfortably, enjoying the sunlight; he puts his arm around the woman's back, protecting her, **protecting the rear**, at the same time ensuring that **the woman and the child are safe**. At first sight, it is not so clear, and the spectator may not find it out, concluding that the man in the painting is the most indifferent character and that he does not care of anything or anyone; he is nothing but a statue of stone. And only a long plunge into the painting and thorough analysis let us understand that it is he who demonstrates us what **can bring life into stone: care, protection of the family, of other people**, not only of your own self.

We may summarize the analysed works by Z. Beksiński as follows. In the situation when god has been crucified but not resurrected, when the human loses his last hope for salvation, when his forces are a null in the face of an unknown but horrifying enemy; in the situation of the End of the World, the total night when the monsters (such as the monstrous words) come alive, the only thing left for a human is to remember of this situation at every moment of time, to understand

the nature of words and the threat they present, to understand the mechanism of protection from them; to take care of the closest people, to protect them, thereby allowing neither themselves nor himself to turn into stone of the horrors the reality brings.

#### 4. Some summaries: how is it possible “to think after Auschwitz”?

Art, religion, philosophy are the forms of presenting substance in the forms typical for each of them, equal to some extent. In the certain points of the temporal and special continuum different appearance forms of the same substance co-exist with each other. It seems that the visual art works by Zdzisław Beksiński in their conceptual field correlate with the philosophic ideas of Theodor Adorno, expressed in the “After Auschwitz” section of the famous book “Negative Dialectics” by this German philosopher, a Frankfurt school representative<sup>8</sup>. Theodor Adorno expressed the philosophical intuition of many intellectuals who could feel that “after Auschwitz” one can rely neither on the critical thinking, nor on the results of its work as on the reflection of the eternal anymore:

The feeling which after Auschwitz resists every assertion of positivity of existence as sanctimonious prattle, as injustice to the victims; which is reluctant to squeeze any meaning, be it ever so washed-out, out of their fate, has its objective moment after events, which condemn the construction of a meaning of immanence, radiated by an affirmatively posited transcendence, to a mockery<sup>9</sup>.

Many and many other real events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were catastrophes of the social (second) nature, real hell and practical evil, especially those that concerned people, when death turned into a technology of massive domination and

destruction, when individual was transformed into an “exemplar”:

By the murder of millions through administration, death has become something, which has never yet been so feared<sup>10</sup>.

Those who survived through the war and who knew what was happening in Auschwitz, were left with the feeling of staying alive by a coincidence, of being guilty of having survived.

By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier<sup>11</sup>.

It goes without saying, claims Adorno, that any exalted concepts, any hints on exalted ideas in poetic or other art “after Auschwitz” are impossible. All the previous ideas are dead. No “spiritual project”, no “spiritual image” could prevent Auschwitz. And that is, according

to Theodor Adorno, the main result of the old metaphysics.

In his interview taken in 1989 Zdzisław Beksiński firmly claimed being atheistic. At that the forms of his works always provoke recalling of multiple Christian signs and symbols, from the birth of Christ to Apocalypse. He also said that those who survived through the war themselves, those who could see the way it was depicted in works of art (in movies), were “more efficient” than they seemed. And even though in the same interview Zdzisław Beksiński himself rejected the interpretation of his works as based on the suffering of concentration camps’ victims, the way the clear meaning of his works (no titles, hard to determine the time, absence of plot, contents, the artist himself repeats that the only thing that exists is the form, and there is nothing but the form that exists in his works) eludes from criticism is the way for art to exist “after Auschwitz” when, as Adorno wrote, the use of the name of God is denial of His existence.

<sup>1</sup> Beksiński Zdzisław. *Antologia Twórczości cz 1 – Fotografia*. Rzeszów: Fundacja Beksiński, 2007; Beksiński Zdzisław. *Antologia Twórczości cz 2 – prace z lat 50. i 60.* Rzeszów: Fundacja Beksiński, 2011; Beksiński Zdzisław. *Antologia Twórczości cz 3 – Okres Fantastyczny*. Rzeszów: Fundacja Beksiński, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Jhukovskiy V.I. *Modern Theory of Visual Art: Regional Project* // *Journal of Siberian Federal University. Humanities & Social Sciences* 8 (2014 7): 1301-1311; Koptseva N.P., Reznikova K. *Three paintings by Albert-Charles Lebourg and philosophical foundations of impressionism of the last third of the XIX – first third of the XX centuries* // *SENTENTIA. EUROPEAN Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. – 2014. – № 1. – C.78-90. DOI: 10.7256/1339-3057.2014.1.10942; Nevolko N.N. *The Visualization of Ethnic Theme in the Khakass Artists’ Paintings and Graphic Works of Art* // *Journal of Siberian Federal University. Humanities & Social Sciences* 8 (2011 4) 1109-1126; Semenova A.A. *Vizualizirovannaiia kul’tura modernizirovannogo sotsiuma [Visualized Culture of Modernized Society]* // *Volgograd State University Newsletter. Series 7. Philosophy. Sociology and Social Technologies*. 2012, No.3 (18). P. 145-149; Il’beykina, M.I. *Vizual’no-antropologicheskaia spetsifika sovremennykh kul’turnykh praktik [Visual and Anthropological Specificity of Modern Cultural Practices]* // *Sovremennye problemy nauki i obrazovaniia*. 2013, No.3. P. 452; Koptseva, N.P., Libakova, N.M. *Produktivnost’ gendernogo podkhoda dlia sovremennykh kul’turnykh issledovaniy [Efficiency of Gender Approach to the Modern Cultural Research]* // *Sovremennye problemy nauki i obrazovaniia*. 2013, No.1. P.400.

<sup>3</sup> Jhukovskiy, V.I., Koptseva, N.P. *Propozitsii teorii izobrazitel’nogo iskusstva [Visual Art Theory Propositions]*. Krasnoyarsk, 2004; Jhukovskiy, V.I., Koptseva, N.P., Pivovarov, D.V. *Vizual’naia suschnost’ religii [Visual Aspect of Religion]*. Krasnoyarsk, 2006; Jhukovskiy, V.I. *Teoriia izobrazitel’nogo iskusstva [Visual Art Theory]*. Saint Petersburg: Aleteya, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Slavomir, Zigmunt. *Interview with Zdzisław Beksiński of 1989*. Electronic source. URL: [http://www.cialo-umysl-dusza.pl/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=138:zdzisaw-beksiski-maluj-swoje-sny&catid=39:strefa-dobrych-myli-artykuy&Itemid=59](http://www.cialo-umysl-dusza.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=138:zdzisaw-beksiski-maluj-swoje-sny&catid=39:strefa-dobrych-myli-artykuy&Itemid=59).

<sup>5</sup> Jhukovskiy, V.I., Koptseva, N.P. *Propozitsii teorii izobrazitel’nogo iskusstva [Visual Art Theory Propositions]*. Krasnoyarsk, 2004; Jhukovskiy, V.I., Koptseva, N.P., Pivovarov, D.V. *Vizual’naia suschnost’ religii [Visual Aspect of Religion]*. Krasnoyarsk, 2006; Jhukovskiy, V.I. *Teoriia izobrazitel’nogo iskusstva [Visual Art Theory]*. Saint Petersburg: Aleteya, 2011; Koptseva N.P., Jhukovskiy V.I. *The Artistic Image as a Process and Result of Game Relations between a Work of Visual Art as an Object and its Spectator* // *Journal of Siberian Federal University. Humanities & Social Sciences* 2 (2008 1) 226-244.

- <sup>6</sup> Slavomir, Zigmunt. Interview with Zdzisław Beksiński of 1989. Electronic source. URL: [http://www.cialo-umysl-dusza.pl/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=138:zdzisaw-beksiski-maluj-swoje-sny&catid=39:strefa-dobrych-myli-artykuy&Itemid=59](http://www.cialo-umysl-dusza.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=138:zdzisaw-beksiski-maluj-swoje-sny&catid=39:strefa-dobrych-myli-artykuy&Itemid=59)
- <sup>7</sup> Filozofskie vzgliady Kazimira Malevicha na iskusstvo i zhizn' [Kazimir Malevich's Philosophic Understanding of Art and Life]. Electronic source. URL: <http://www.nemchinovka-malevich.ru/TEXT/RUSSIAN/philosof.html>. Publication date unknown.
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- <sup>9</sup> Ibid. P. 322.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. P.323.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid. P. 323.

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## **Три картины Здислава Бексински: как возможно искусство «после Освенцима»**

**Н.П. Копцева, К.В. Резникова**  
Сибирский федеральный университет  
Россия, 660041, Красноярск, пр. Свободный, 79

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*Статья посвящена творчеству одного из наиболее значимых представителей польского сюрреализма – Здиславу Бексински. Раскрываются основные периоды творческой биографии; происходит обращение к деятелям искусства, повлиявшим на становление авторского стиля; к художественным материалам, которым З. Бексински отдавал предпочтение. Внимание уделяется дихотомии формы и содержания и оригинальному взгляду З. Бексински на нее, считавшему, что основное значение имеет форма, но не содержание: форму создавал он сам, в то время как содержание приносят уже зрители. В статье представлен искусствоведческий анализ трех произведений З. Бексински, итог которого таков: в ситуации, когда бог распят и не воскрес, когда у человека потеряна последняя надежда на спасение, когда его силы ничтожны перед лицом неизвестного ужасающего противника, все, что остается – помнить об этой ситуации в каждый момент времени, стараться найти защиту для себя и близких, не давая окаменеть от ужаса действительности. Финальное осмысление творчества З. Бексински происходит через призму концепции искусства «после Освенцима».*

*Ключевые слова:* Здислав Бексински; польский сюрреализм; форма и содержание; искусство «после Освенцима».

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