



## **Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture**

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Airlock

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**abstract:**

Commentary to the works by Dorota Buczkowska.

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**Katarzyna Bojarska** - Assistant professor in the Department of Cultural Studies of the SWPS University. From 2008 to 2019, she worked in the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Co-founder of Widok. Since 2024 head of Center for Comparative Research on Memory Cultures (CCRM). Author of articles and translations interested in the relations of art, literature, history and psychoanalysis. She translated among others Michael Rothberg's "Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization" (Warsaw 2016). Author of a book "Wydarzenia po Wydarzeniu: Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman" [Events after the Event: Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman] (Warsaw 2012). Editor and one of translators of Ernst van Alphen's book "Criticism as Intervention: Art, Memory, Affect" (Krakow 2019). Recipient of numerous research grants and awards, including Fulbright, National Centre for Science, Horizon2020.

## Airlock

A year in a sanatorium. A year? Lots of time. A long time. Or maybe not at all? *We up here are not acquainted with such a unit of time as the week*, Hans Castorp is told. And then he repeats to himself and others: *our smallest unit is the month*. The smallest unit here, here in Davos. Or in any other health resort, where the body gets back in shape. *After all, one is here on special terms, here in the mountains, where nothing actually obliges anyone anymore*. Especially not time. *I still don't know when that spring actually came. It seemed to be in some place, that she was already there for sure – and it wasn't there at all. [...] We lived confused for weeks. Every trip, every walk was just a journey in time*. It is hard to say how to measure a year under these circumstances. Here in the sanatorium. *After all, emptiness and monotony can make the moment and the hour extend and seem long, but they also make long, even the longest periods of time shorten or even evaporate to complete nothingness*. Could photography, a series of photographs, render such time? How is such time recorded in an image, reflected by it?

When was it, for how long, and for whom? A man and a boy in a meadow, both in swimming trunks. The meadow transpires through one of the characters, eats up his silhouette, makes him fade. And this? Spring is in the air, but which spring? The woman in a polka dot dress. There's a brownish stain on her arm, on her neck. It's like a cloud of draped scarf. When was that? The scarf becomes another layer on the image which distances us from the figure depicted; a fold in time, which does not heal but howls. A thickened air, a sticky veil that forces itself between the now and what once was. Finally, it is no longer the lightweight fabric of a scarf wrapped around the neck, but rather thick fur enshrouding the whole head, so that you can only see an eye facing the lens. *"Draw a deep breath. Hold it!" he commanded. "Now, please!" Hans Castorp waited, blinking, his lungs*

*distended. Behind him the storm broke loose: it crackled, lightened, detonated—and grew still. The lens had looked into his inside.*

A year in a sanatorium. The body in the lens, under the magnifying glass, through the stethoscope: fragmented, observed, auscultated, handled, subjected. *Then there is undressing, up the waist. No, the underwear stays. [...] I am thinking: may he move away, may he stand two meters further. I am thinking: please. A body that seeks shelter, asylum. If I grow this fence between me and not me properly, I will reduce the risk of suddenly running out of distance, that on one of the slings or one night the atoms of one of the people who can touch me here with impunity will in passing intertwine with mine. Can photography heal? Can it be healed? Can deformations resulting from the history of photographic matter, from misfortunes and accidents be back in shape, given an unblemished appearance? However, accidental deformation triggers the imagination, feeds fantasy, which takes momentum and gallops through the layers of photographic skin, through the skins of the photographed, grows and forms monstrous shapes. From the Latin root *monstrum*, a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once. A photograph taken on one, two, three... breaths, a divine messenger of catastrophe, a signal light. I'm scared – I've been scared ever since I knew that I might run out of breath or (this feeling you probably know) that I might suddenly forget a word, a term in the middle of a sentence, and I'll have to end up without coherence...*

## Fragments used:

Barbara Klicka, *Zdrój* (Warsaw: WAB, 2019)

Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter  
(New York: Vintage Books, 1969)

Zofia Nałkowska, *Choucas* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1960)

Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (New York:  
Penguin Press, 2019)

