From a Look in the Mirror
to Photographs on Instagram
(Anna Świrszczyńska –
     – Grzegorz Uzdański –
          – an Insta Lie)

Marcin Telicki

ORCID: 0000-0002-4578-9661

In 1988, Anne Dumas conducted an interesting social experiment. Dumas showed two groups of graduate students, one from China and the other one from the United States, a photograph of a man dressed in a business suit, eating breakfast next to a window with a view of a modern city. The company's name and all textual information have been removed from this image, which has often been used in advertising in the US. The responses of the two groups differed quite significantly. American students said that the image evokes power and wealth, while Chinese students asked why a middle-aged man is eating breakfast alone, without a family.[1] Paul Messaris, who uses the example of Dumas's experiment in his article, comments thusly on the results of the study:

> [The study] demonstrate[s] the potential consequences of an intriguing aspect of visual literacy, involving familiarity with specific images or sets of images that have played a role in a particular culture's visual heritage (…).[2]

Three decades later, when we have a more in-depth theoretical perspective provided by cul-

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[1] Paul Messaris, "Visual Literacy and Visual Culture," in *Imagery and Visual Literacy: Selected Readings*, ed. Darrell G Beauchamp, Roberts A Braden, and Robert E Griffin (Blacksburg: International Visual Literacy Association, 1995), 51.

[2] Messaris, 51.

tural studies and postcolonial studies, as well as by a more practical experience of multiculturalism, the difference between respondents is not as surprising as at the time of the study. Indeed, I am not so much interested in intercultural communication; my basic assumption is that today, media narratives (including visual narratives) influence the manner in which interpretations of literary texts are modeled. I would like to discuss intertextual connections, which go beyond the traditionally understood concept of intertextuality, by referring to the examples of Anna Świrszczyńska's poem *Grube jelito*[3] [*Large intestine*], the poem *Instagram*[4] (a pastiche of Świrszczyńska's poem by Grzegorz Uzdański, the author of the Facebook page *Nowe wiersze sławnych poetów* [New poems by famous poets]) and the video *Are You Living an Insta Lie? Social Media vs. Reality*.[5]

I will read these media texts in a reverse order, i.e. beginning with the video illustrating the mechanisms of social media and ending with Świrszczyńska's poem. Such an achronological analysis will allow me to further investigate the impact of context on the interpreted texts.

Visual context

The title of the film contains a clear thesis which governs the narrative. Building one's image on social media is referred to as an "Insta lie," making the viewer evaluate this phenomenon negatively (i.e. come to the conclusion that social media falsify reality). Moreover, the creators' axiological position is confirmed by the definition which accompanies the video. It defines an "Insta lie" as "an intentionally false representation of real life on social media." The creators supplement this definition with examples, which include tagging selfies (the reception of visual material is profiled by the selection of keywords), taking hundreds of photographs before you choose one that is supposed to be "natural," taking shots which suggest that you love your job, or using filters to make your travel photos look "amazing" (i.e. unreal).

The story that illustrates the problem (and at the same time conveys a clear moral) was constructed as a series of seemingly unrelated images. Each post motivates other people to act, giving rise to a network of not only "viewers", but also "creators." Young people who are online all the time and everywhere embody the idea of Web 2.0 (based on user-generated content, content sharing, mainly through mobile devices,[6] and trust in materials available online). However, the video shows almost exclusively the negative aspects of this phenomenon and the anticipated social consequences: atomization, loss of traditional interpersonal relationships, loneliness, or low self-esteem. In this context, the adjective "social" is ironic, because instead of unifying the "image of reality," the media break it down and fragment it.

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[3] Anna Świrszczyńska, "Grube jelito," in *Jestem baba* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1975), 223.

[4] The poem was also published in *Przekrój*: Grzegorz Uzdański, "Anna Świrszczyńska „Instagram"," Kwartalnik Przekrój, accessed October 20, 2019, https://przekroj.pl/kultura/anna-swirszczynska-instagram-grzegorz-uzdanski.

[5] The clip is available on YouTube at: *Are You Living an Insta Lie? Social Media Vs. Reality*, accessed October 20, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EFHbruKEmw.

[6] It is worth adding that Web 2.0 is an intermediate stage between the initial phase called Web 1.0 (based on one-way interaction, i.e. receiving ready-made content created by selected persons) and the idea of Web 3.0 (the Internet of Things based on the development of artificial intelligence systems; it also involves creating a "semantic web" and connecting as many objects, services, or even interpersonal relationships as possible).

Are You Living an Insta Lie?, which is meant to elicit intermedial interpretation, provokes questions about visuality and the systems it creates. In her review of various approaches to visuality, Roma Sendyka draws on the concept of Lisa Cartwright and Marita Sturken, who define visibility as "a state of being visible. It is often believed, Cartwright and Sturken write, (...) that visuality characterizes our era due to the growing dominance of visual representations in the media and everyday life. (...) Visuality concerns the ways of perceiving everyday objects: people and things, and not just what we are used to thinking of as a visual text."[7] This quote takes on another meaning when we realize that 15 years ago, when it was formulated, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter had just begun to operate (respectively: 2004, 2005 and 2006), and Instagram was yet to be invented (2010). Today, after just a decade, we perceive visual and media systems differently,[8] because we are aware of the scale of the phenomenon, the technical possibilities offered to average users by publicly available devices and applications, and the psychological and cultural threats posed by the rapidly-changing media landscape.

"Scopic regime" is one useful term that can be used to describe the relationships between social media and visuality. Originally coined by Christian Metz (1982), it was later adopted by Martin Jay. A scopic regime is "a strategy, a rhetoric of seeing (what can be seen, how something can be seen, what must be seen/what must not be seen). Scopic regimes (paradigms of vision) concern culturally specific ways of seeing, and they replace the traditional definition of "seeing" as a universal and primary phenomenon. When viewed in this context, the ways of seeing are not natural, but conventional; they are characterized by certain dynamics of change; they also differ in a synchronic approach and dismantle the traditional definition of "seeing" as universal, regardless of culture, gender, race, and time in history."[9] The rhetoric of seeing conditioned by Instagram consists in constant revealing and hiding, which creates the social identity of the viewer who previously programmed the perception of his image. The viewer knows how, and on the basis of what criteria, he evaluates others; as a result, he has his assumptions about how he will be judged. The paradigm of seeing is a kind of closed circuit: I show what the audience wants to see, and I am rewarded for it. I also reward others if they fit into the pattern of what should be shown.

Naturally, we should also take into consideration the technique of representation, which influences the viewer's assessment. All responses to the video (posts and Internet reviews) ignore the difference between Instagram as a platform and the dynamic representation of multimedia material it offers:

> "Check out our latest video below to reveal the truth behind the photos you see online."[10]

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[7] Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); quote after: Roma Sendyka, "Poetyki wizualności," in *Kulturowa teoria literatury. 2, Poetyki, problematyki, interpretacje*, ed. Ryszard Nycz and Teresa Walas (Kraków: Universitas, 2012), 139.

[8] In January 2019, the agencies We Are Social and Hootsuite published the Digital 2019 report which shows that 98% of all Internet users use social media. Time spent on social media equals to one-third of total Internet time. Interestingly, one user has on average 9 social media accounts: "Digital 2019: Global Internet Use Accelerates," We Are Social, accessed October 21, 2019, https://wearesocial.com/blog/2019/01/digital-2019-global-internet-use-accelerates.

[9] Quote after: Sendyka, "Poetyki wizualności," 158.

[10] Description posted by the filmmakers on the Ditch the Label website. Ditch the label is a group of creators and educators who wish to raise awareness about social media: "Are You Living an Insta Lie?," Ditch the Label, accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.ditchthelabel.org/living-insta-lie/.

"What you see on your feed is from the highlight of someone's day. From that, you see the best moment, then the best picture they took, which is edited and filtered. We're all just going through our day and posting our highlights – and then we're comparing ourselves with each others' highlights."[11]

"The video highlights how the 'perfect' lives seen in social media photos are often faked and completely different from the person's reality. Users can appear to be living lavish, 'perfect' lives, but in reality, they are often mundane like everybody else."[12]

Paradoxically, by warning the youth about the dangers of living an Insta Lie, commentators falsely equate the video and the virtual world with reality. The video becomes a "real" warning: the interpreters neutralize its structural elements (acting, plot, dissolving images, editing, music) to prove their point. The entire process may remind us of Barthes's concept of mythologies, in which new meanings are added to the original sign (they "cover up" previous meanings, naturalize history, and conceal their ideological background). Direct eye contact gives way to the vision of life in frames, but *Are You Living an Insta Lie …?* does not show the viewer how to return to the "natural" state. Instead, it presents a different model of mediated criticism. Piotr Celiński argues that naturalization is a process in which the difference between "images which reflect, transport reality (film, photography, photos) and images which represent 'variations' of reality (electronic art, non-electronic art translated into digital code)"[13] is obliterated. The latter, Celiński adds, "are all just projections (…) which combine disparate elements (…)."[14] Indeed, today, we face the problem of blurring the border between images which "transport" reality and images which represent its variations. Additionally, we have problems with understanding the logic behind selecting and combining different elements.

Recontextualisation

In *Approaching dialogue*, Per Linell defines recontextualization as follows:

> *Recontextualization* may be defined as the dynamic transfer-and-transformation of something from one discourse/text-in-context (the context being in reality a matrix or field of contexts) to another. (…) When parts of texts or discourses are relocated through recontextualization, they are often subject to textual change, such as simplification, condensation, elaboration and refocusing (…).[15]

Having discussed selected aspects of Instagram's multimedia visuality, including shifts within the digital discourse, I would like to discuss the pastiche of Anna Świrszczyńska's poem by Grzegorz Uzdański:

[11] Jennifer Kim, "Are You Living An Insta Lie?," The Odyssey Online, accessed October 21, 2019, https://www. theodysseyonline.com/living-lie-on-instagram.

[12] Will Nicholls, "Instagram vs. Reality: How People Lie About Their Lives with Photos," accessed October 21, 2019, https://petapixel.com/2017/07/28/instagram-vs-reality-video-shows-people-lie-life-photos/.

[13] Piotr Celiński, "Interfejsy mediów cyfrowych: dalsza emancypacja obrazów *czy* szansa na ich zdetronizowanie?," *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio K, Politologia.* 13 (2006): 127.

[14] Celiński, 127.

[15] Per Linell, *Approaching Dialogue: Talk, Interaction and Contexts in Dialogical Perspectives* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub. Co., 2001), 154–55.

Grzegorz Uzdański, *Instagram*   Grzegorz Uzdański, *Instagram*

Wrzucam na Instagrama   I post my photo
swoje zdjęcie.   on Instagram.

Patrz, jaka brzydka,   See how ugly she is,
mówi zdjęcie.   the photo says.

Nie masz już światła w oczach,   Your eyes are devoid of light
ani ciepła we krwi.   and your blood is cold.

Prosisz świat o litość,   You ask the world for mercy
to się mu nie spodoba.   and it won't like it.

Te zmarszczki, ten przykry smutek,   The wrinkles, the painful sadness,
zrób coś, mówi zdjęcie.   do something, the photo says.

Dodaję filtr Aden   I apply the Aden filter
(brzmi prawie jak Eden).   (it sounds almost like Eden).

Wzmacniam   I enhance
kolor i jasność,   color and light,
na zmarszczkach rozmywam kontury.   I blur the wrinkles.

Zdjęcie   The photo
nic już nie mówi.   does not say anything anymore.
Gotowe.   Done.[1]

Investigating "what the photo says" seems to be the most obvious interpretive strategy. In such a reading, Uzdański's poem resembles the warning issued by *Are You Living an Insta Lie?*: the world of images controls your life; you are constantly evaluated; under the guise of establishing interpersonal relationships, the digital world leads to alienation and low self-esteem. The "I" speaks, informing the reader about her decision, only in the first couplet. In the following couplets, the photo "speaks" (it gives the reader the impression that the comments are actually made by potential followers). In reality, however, a more complicated process is taking place in the poem. Similarly to *Are You Living an Insta Lie?*, in Uzdański's poem we are witnessing the moment of editing.

The in-betweenness of this moment is strictly connected with identity: I am already a "non-self" (the photograph has already been taken and it speaks; it has gained some kind of autonomy), but I want to be even more "non-self" (the photograph needs to be altered so that it can meet some idealized criteria of "beauty"). This division of the self corresponds to the two parts of the poem: accusation and attempted intervention. The subject responds to imaginary accusations, which are at the same time a projection of the subject's personal issues and negative body image, and decides to act. However, the action taken does not lead to

real (psychological, spiritual or even physical) change, but boils down to altering the image. It should be emphasized that the photo comments not only on appearance (wrinkles, eyes that are "devoid of light"), but also on internal states. The lyrical I's blood is cold, which, in turn, leads to "the painful sadness." And no one should be sad in a culture that demands constant joy and expects everyone to love their bodies.[16] From negative body image, through direct references to biblical banishment from the Garden of Eden (replaced with the Instagram filter), the lyrical "I" leads us to the ironic finale in which "done" may refer to both relief and resignation.

At what level can we compare *Are You Living an Insta Lie?* and Uzdański's poem? To what extent can literary scholars comment on the psychological consequences of using social media, cultural changes in body image, and self-aggrandizing techniques? On the one hand, what counts is the referential value of the literary text, the manner in which it talks about the real world, which is why we have to engage with these phenomena directly. On the other hand, we should also pay attention to intertextual techniques and the manner in which they have changed the digital environment. They are no longer limited to the text-text or text-image relations but involve a series of multimedia texts which are arranged *ex post facto*. Recontextualization does not as much change the context as it creates a context with a specific goal in mind. Tomasz Mizerkiewicz makes a similar point when he writes that new poetics should provoke literary experiences and not simply describe them:

> The production of new poetics knowledge often takes place as a direct result of text-producing activities, operations performed on the work, playing with it, or exercises inspired by it. We may wish to go so far as to state that the part of poetics knowledge that is worth developing or revealing is discrete knowledge in the sense used by Michel de Certeau, the scholar who developed a theory of the practice of everyday life. We could then conceptually grasp the sphere of literary inventiveness as a little-known poetics present in extremely widespread practices of writing submerged in everyday life, inventive and equal to philology in its autonomy.[17]

Uzdański's pastiche is successful, because it brings together seemingly distant worlds of modern virtual reality and Anna Świrszczyńska's sensual poetry. To recapitulate, when we compare the poem, the video, and the social networking site, we can see that they present interpersonal relations as superficial: people are mostly concerned with judging one another. The subject lacks autonomy and appears to be dependent on the decisions and opinions of others (outer containment). The motto of the subject is, "You ask the world for mercy and it won't

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[16]The report *#StatusOfMind. Social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing* from the Royal Society for Public Health reads: "There are 10 million new photographs uploaded to Facebook alone every hour, providing an almost endless potential for young women to be drawn into appearance-based comparisons whilst online. Studies have shown that when young girls and women in their teens and early twenties view Facebook for only a short period of time, body image concerns are higher compared to non-users. One study also demonstrated girls expressing a heightened desire to change their appearance such as face, hair and/or skin after spending time on Facebook. Others have suggested social media is behind a rise in younger generations opting to have cosmetic surgery to look better in photos, which has implications for physical health through unnecessary invasive surgery. Around 70% of 18-24 years olds would consider having a cosmetic surgical procedure." Source: "#StatusofMind," accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/campaigns/status-of-mind.html.

[17]Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, "New Situations of Poetics," *Forum Poetyki*, no. 1 (lato 2015): 22.

like it." The central somatic theme oscillates around the body as an image that is subjected to simplistic evaluation (pretty/ugly, attractive/repulsive). How does Świrszczyńska's poem function in these contexts?

Source text

Agnieszka Czyżak writes:

> Corporeality as a sphere in which poetry is born, constantly reveals (…) (in the space of everyday life) its fragility and susceptibility to destruction. In Świrszczyńska's late works, we witness a rebellion against the matter, doomed to decay, doomed to end human existence in the world. While Świrszczyńska employs sarcasm, mockery, and ironic distance, she nevertheless recognizes that despair is a very painful experience.[18]

Czyżak aptly describes the essence of Świrszczyńska's poetry; other literary critics describe it in similar terms. Rebellion against and fear of the changing and aging body mixed with existential reflection is expressed by means of a simple language that does not shy away from irony. In my reading of Świrszczyńska's poem *Large intestine*, I would like to verify such critical observations and comment on the role visuality plays in interpretation.

Anna Świrszczyńska, *Grube jelito*	Anna Świrszczyńska, *Large intestine*
Spójrz w lustro, spojrzyjmy oboje.	Look in the mirror, let's both look.
To moje nagie ciało.	This is my naked body.
Ty podobno je lubisz,	You supposedly like it,
ja nie mam powodu.	I have no reason to like it.
Kto nas związał, mnie i moje ciało?	Who bound us, me and my body?
Dlaczego muszę umrzeć	Why do I have to die
razem z nim?	with it?
Mam prawo wiedzieć, gdzie biegnie granica	I have the right to know where the border
między nami.	between us is.
Gdzie jestem ja, ja sama, sama.	Where I am, just me, alone.[2]

The shared somatic "element" may be identified at the level of content. The body, but also, above all else, the consequences of examining it, is analyzed. Seemingly, the situation described in the poem is similar to the story presented in *Are You Living an Insta Lie?* The phrases "let's both look" and "You supposedly like it" refer to the external observer (probably a man).[19]

[18]Agnieszka Czyżak, "Poetki wobec przemijania," in *Formy (nie)obecności: szkice o współczesnej poezji kobiet*, ed. Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik, Agnieszka Kwiatkowska, and Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych UNIVERSITAS, 2018), 154.

[19]Renata Ingbrant argues that in *Jestem baba*, *Large intestine* features in a section in which "the first person narration dominates; the woman speaks in her own voice, destabilizing the hegemony of the male point of view. She frees femininity from the norms and restrictions imposed by culture. Świrszczyńska's lyrical 'I' is aware of the fact that in the eyes of a man she appears as a false reflection in the mirror." Renata Ingbrant, "Kobiecy antyświat w poezji Anny Świrszczyńskiej," in *Formy (nie)obecności: szkice o współczesnej poezji kobiet*, ed. Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik, Agnieszka Kwiatkowska, and Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych UNIVERSITAS, 2018), 267.

However, the lyrical I and the external observer do not look at the body together for a long time – the female subject quickly becomes the dominant voice. The people presented in *Are You Living an Insta Lie?* and the lyrical I in Uzdański's poem were not really in touch with themselves, while the subject in Świrszczyńska's poem turns out to be strong enough to confront difficult questions. Even if these questions lead to an existential crisis, they testify to self-awareness and, to use a psychological concept, inner containment of the subject. The sentence "You supposedly like it,/ I have no reason to like it" stands in direct opposition to the couplet "You ask the world for mercy/ and it won't like it." In Uzdański's poem, low self-esteem is associated with external observers, while in Świrszczyńska's poem it is the subject who judges herself harshly, even despite the support expressed by the (probably male) external observer. The image of the body in the mirror (the analog form of the reflection also plays a role here!) is connected with, as in many Świrszczyńska's works, the mind and the spirit. When the woman says, "I have the right to know where the border between us is," we do not know whether she questions the unity between *soma* and *psyche* (which is more probable), or simply wants to find out where the boundary between the viewer and the object he or she sees is. The subject ultimately asks, "Where I am, just me, alone." The drama, the doubt, the identity crisis – the poem does not end with the simple "Done", as was the case in Uzdański's work, demonstrating how the subject searches for boundaries and strives for self-determination.[20] Świrszczyńska asks questions about the self and about loneliness in the world, and such topics are not really discussed in social media (they are by definition social; however, in reality, they generate loneliness). Monika Rudaś-Grodzka writes:

> [Świrszczyńska, MT] questions the experience of being a person, which is, in turn, linked with experiencing the body and the self. The subject cannot determine the boundary between the self and the body and feels detached from her body. Traditionally, such experiences have helped us navigate our way through the world, but they make Świrszczyńska feel strange and out of touch with herself. Identity becomes a task, a project, that the poet writes for herself in her poetry. Świrszczyńska persistently repeats that she is not what she is and that she must do something about it.[21]

Does Świrszczyńska's approach differ from the vision of the self as presented in social media? After all, we could say that change, and not stasis, is important in social media. They also treat identity as a project and the image of the self as created in social media may cause a depersonalization disorder. The main difference can be found in the quality of reflection, i.e. the courage to ask complex (psychological, existential, moral) questions. Indeed, Świrszczyńska presents a much more sublime version of intimacy; she is brave, honest, and personal, without being impudent and exhibitionistic.

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[20]Irena Grudzińska-Gross rightly notes that "these poems are ruthless, because they are devoid of sentimentality. They are painfully sincere, but they do not demand compassion or pity from the reader, even though the poetess expresses compassion and pity." Irena Grudzińska-Gross, "Książka jak uderzenie," *Dwutygodnik.com*, accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/4641-ksiazka-jak-uderzenie.html.

[21]Monika Rudaś-Grodzka, "Parthenogeneza w okresie menopauzy," *Teksty Drugie* 2002, no. 6 (2002): 71.

Intertextuality à rebours

In conclusion, let me explain the rationale behind my comparative analysis and the order in which I have discussed my examples. The traditional intertextual reading follows the order: from the original text to the intertext/intertextual series. This order is closely connected with the acquisition of reading competences in the traditional (though still very popular) educational model, in which we study texts from the older to the most contemporary (as if we were adding new elements to the corpus). The time in which a given work was created and the need to analyze the older text first determine the historical relationship between older and newer elements. Older elements are prototypes, hypotexts, presuppositions; they consciously or unconsciously reference fragments of texts from the past. All of them, however, are largely dependent on the alleged authorial intention.

My ahistorical reading, in which I have consciously referenced "intertexts" which the author did not know, has been governed by a different logic. First of all, in my interpretation, the reader/interpreter focuses on the problem approach rather than the structural approach. The shared mode of thinking (subject to historical circumstances) is more interesting to him/her than tracing borrowed sentences, imitated images, or paraphrased content. Secondly, today, we acquire visual competences before we acquire textual competences. Therefore, more contemporary texts of culture become reference points for older texts, because we read/view/discover them first. A person who grew up and is a product of visual culture will not read texts in the same way as a person who grew up in and is a product of written/print culture. Indeed, interpretations in which audiovisual suggestions come first are also governed by this logic. When we compare/contrast the same message expressed in different media, we can fully assess to what extent a given cultural phenomenon undergoes changes or finds its further articulation.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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KEYWORDS

I N S T A G R A M

A n n a   Ś w i r s z c z y ń s k a

identity

ABSTRACT:

In the article "From a look in the mirror to photographs on Instagram," I investigate the phenomenon of intermedial interpretation. I compare and contrast a social campaign aimed at young people meant to raise awareness of the perils of Instagram, the pastiche of Anna Świrszczyńska's poem by Grzegorz Uzdański, and Świrszczyńska's original poem. I ask questions about different types of reflectivity triggered by different media and artworks which differ generically, historically, and socially. The central issue is the changing role of visuality and the differences in experiencing a given medium. My ahistorical interpretation is motivated by a specific didactic assumption: media images often precede "textual" readings and they often condition their understanding. It is therefore worth exploring the mechanisms of reception of visual images and how they relate to literary structures.

Grzegorz Uzdański

pastiche

V I S U A L I T Y

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:
Marcin Telicki – dr hab., professor at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. He is the author of *Ćwiczenie uważności*: *Codzienność jako poetyckie doświadczenie nowoczesne* [Practising Mindfulness: The everyday as modern poetic experience] (2018) and *Poetycka antropologia Julii Hartwig* [Julia Hartwig's Poetic Anthropology] (2009). He is the co-editor of the books in the series *Literatura i sztuka* [Literature and Art] (*"Cienie wielkich artystów"*: *Gustaw Herling-Grudziński i dawne malarstwo europejskie* ["Shadows of Great Artists": Gustaw Herling-Grudziński and Old European Painting]; *Ikonoklazm i ikonofilia: Między historią a współczesnością* [Iconoclasm And Iconophilia: Between History and Modernity]; *Tadeusz Różewicz i obrazy* [Tadeusz Różewicz and Painting]; *Widzenie awangardy* [The Vision of the Avant-garde]). His research interests include the history of the 20th and the 21st century literature and relationships between literature, media, popular culture, and visuality.