

Can One Squander Their Purest Affections on Gruesome Foreign Bodies?

Remarks on the Doll Motif in the Oeuvre of Marek Piasecki

Kann man seine lauterste Wärme an einen grausigen Fremdkörper verschwenden?

Anmerkungen zum Puppenmotiv im Oeuvre von Marek Piasecki

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ABSTRACT (English)

The 1950s and 1960s series of black-and-white photographs by the Polish artist Marek Piasecki (1935-2011) entitled *The Doll* as well as the objects created in the same period in which the artist wove the motif of a doll are analysed in the context of the doll text by Rainer Maria Rilke and the work of Hans Bellmer, complemented by reflections by Anna Szykowska-Piotrowska, Georges Didi-Huberman and other contemporary authors.. Fragmentation of bodies in these works by Piasecki is not a device of eroticization or fetishization, as in Bellmer, but makes one aware of their defenceless fragility and mortality. As a typical abject Piasecki's doll attract as much as they put one off; their presence verges on unbearable as it awakens the anxiety of death.

Keywords: Marek Piasecki, doll, photographs, objects, abject

ABSTRACT (Deutsch)

Die in den 1950er und 1960er Jahren entstandene Serie von Schwarz-Weiß-Fotografien des polnischen Künstlers Marek Piasecki (1935-2011) mit dem Titel „Die Puppe“ sowie die im gleichen Zeitraum entstandenen Objekte, in denen der Künstler das Motiv der Puppe verarbeitet hat, werden im Kontext des Puppen-Textes von Rainer Maria Rilke und des Werks von Hans Bellmer analysiert, ergänzt durch Reflexionen von Anna Szykowska-Piotrowska, Georges Didi-Huberman und anderen zeitgenössischen Autoren.. Die Fragmentierung der Körper in diesen Werken von Piasecki ist kein Mittel der Erotisierung oder Fetischisierung wie bei Bellmer, sondern macht die wehrlose Zerbrechlichkeit und Sterblichkeit bewusst. Als typische Objekte ziehen Piaseckis Puppen ebenso an wie sie abschrecken; ihre Anwesenheit grenzt an Unerträglichkeit, da sie die Angst vor dem Tod wecken.

Schlüsselwörter: Marek Piasecki, Puppe, Fotografie, Objekte, Abject



Who do I trust – Piasecki, Rilke ...?

The 1950s and 1960s series of black-and-white photographs by Marek Piasecki¹ entitled *The Doll* (cf. figures 1-15) as well as the objects created in the same period in which the artist wove the motif of a doll convinced me not to trust Rainer Maria Rilke. In 1914, the Austrian poet wrote in his famed *Puppen. Zu den Wachs-Puppen von Lotte Pritzel* [*Dolls. On the Wax Dolls of Lotte Pritzel*] that they have neither soul nor imagination and, unlike marionettes, rank lower in hierarchy than things (Rilke 1994, 3). Moreover, they are typified by “the gruesome foreign body, on which we squandered our purest affection; as the superficially painted watery corpse borne up and carried along on the floodwaters of our tenderness until we were on dry land again and abandoned it in some thicket” (Rilke 1994, 3). Rilke continues: “a poet could fall under the domination of a marionette, because the marionette has only imagination. The doll has none, and is exactly that much less than a thing as the marionette is more. But this being less than a thing, in all its inevitability, contains the secret of the doll’s predominance” (Rilke 1994, 4). Furthermore, it must be remembered that using the doll motif was a bold move, as Piasecki did so after Bellmer’s works and publications in the 1930ies, which was by no means a minor challenge. Most likely, he found his dolls in the attics and at flea markets. Then, not only did he photograph those *objets trouvés*, but also assembled them into objects in the privacy of his successive studios, only to capture them on black-and-white film again. What was it that he managed to extract from the doll in the staged analogue photographs, objects and photographed objects which differed from what Rilke and Bellmer saw in them? What narratives involving dolls did he visually construct?

¹ Marek Piasecki (1935 in Warsaw - 2011 in Lund) worked in Warsaw and Cracow, emigrating to Sweden in 1967. Shortly after being accepted to study art history at the Jagiellonian University (1952), Piasecki was arrested for political reasons and sentenced to six years in prison. Due to ill health, he was released in 1953 and spent most of his time in sanatoriums, where he actively pursued photography. He was involved in photography, printmaking and sculpture; his work is situated on the borderline of various techniques and artistic trends, showing links with pre-war surrealism and 1960s neo-Dadaism. He is known above all as a creator of prints on light-sensitive paper (mainly heliography) and photographs of dolls in characteristic three-dimensional frames. Piasecki’s studio in Krakow was filled with boxes of objects collected by the artist, mainly dolls, turning into a kind of ‘work-habitat’.

Piaseck’s dolls – ambivalent and decultured

I would be tempted to say that Piasecki *permanently* imbued those horrifyingly alien bodies with soul and imagination, elevating them above objects (cf. figures 1, 4, 5, 8). It was he who caused them to look at us so vividly that we see ourselves anew,



Figure 1: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll* ■■■■

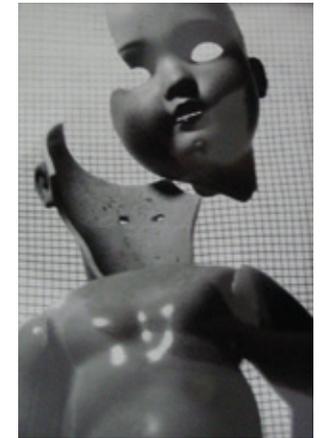


Figure 4: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll* ■■■■

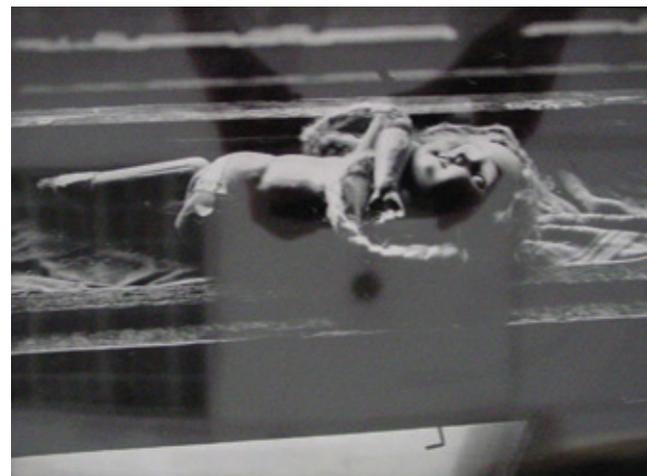


Figure 5: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll* ■■■■



Figure 8: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll* ■■■■

arrested by their penetrating gaze that has us transfixed in front of the photographs. We feel uneasy, as if we were sinking into the Freudian *das Unheimliche* – the uncanny, a psychoanalytical notion which expresses the sense of perplexity or fear when facing a known phenomenon which suddenly appears alien, mysterious and



Figure 2: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*



Figure 6: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*

intriguing. In Piasecki's images and objects the doll is both terrifying and rivets one's attention; it is simultaneously ordinary and familiar as well as astonishing. As such, it is in line with the Surrealist and neo-Dada traditions, though its semantic saturation substantially exceeds both of those contexts. This is the case even with seemingly classic portraits of dolls (cf. figures 2, 6).

As Hans Bellmer observed with respect to sharply focused images, this unnatural vividness could no doubt have been enchanting and captivating. The dolls in Piasecki's works are undoubtedly enchanting and singularly distorted out of their natural form or – as I would put it – deculturated. After all, their nature, shaped within the realm of culture, assumes a highly peculiar aspect in the black-and-white photographs and in the objects. Quite certainly they are no innocent child's toys which girls carry around in the toy prams among frilly cushions. In most cases, they remain naked and fragmented, inhabiting confined, tight and “stuffy” frames. They arouse disquiet rather than pacify. They possess both soul and imagination. As Rilke further underlines –oppositely this time: “we could not make it into a thing or person, and in such moments it became a stranger to us” (Rilke 1994, 4). Thus, it functions *in-between and its status is unresolvable, which leads to ontological and epistemological indeterminacy*.

For his part, Bellmer, that profound connoisseur and passionate aficionado of doll-ness observed that a doll is only alive thanks to ideas with which it is infused. Piasecki filled his dolls with notions to the brim, hence their poignant effect on our imagination whereby all sorts of clichés are elicited from memory. The artist dressed the

dolls, arranged, posed, illuminated and photographed them, while stripping them of the carefree infantility. According to Bellmer despite boundless submission there is an utterly exasperating distance in those dolls. As Paul Éluard writes in the series of prose poems entitled *Les Jeux de la Poupée* (1949), the doll scares animals and children... among the sheets is where its mirror lies. In the case of works by Piasecki, we – the viewers – serve as the mirror and one cannot deny that there is something uncanny in that confrontation. The gazes of an artificial and a living body interlock, asking one another about their respective conditions. Piasecki frames his photographs in such a way that the doll is most often shrunken, as everything that may be said of it reduces and confines it. In the smallest space of the narrowest field of vision, we are looking – reckoning and arguing – for a place where its heart is, assessing the faith in childhood.

A face behind the face – between post-face and mask

One would like to say that Piasecki's dolls do not have faces but rather a symbolic and discursive *post-face*. Anna Szyjkowska-Piotrowska, author of the monograph entitled *Po-twarz. Przekraczanie wizualności w sztuce i fotografii [After-Face. Transgressing visuality in art and photography]*, notes that inherent in the nature of the word is a “rupture, which at the same time constitutes a



Figure 3: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*



Figure 7: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*

junction; it construes face as a ‘space between’ which harbours multiple dichotomies and yet manages to unite various oppositions of culture. In the ‘post-face’ one can see [...] as we transcend face in its visuality heading towards the subsequent stadium of symbol, or watch how face slips away from our grasp” (Szyjowska-Piotrowska 2015, 6).



Figure 13: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*

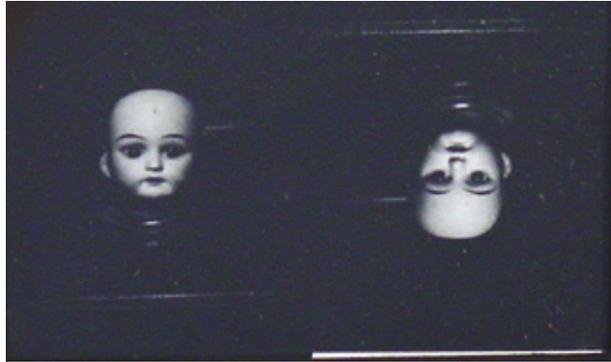


Figure 15: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*

The physiognomies of Piasecki’s dolls are conventional, doll-like and repetitive, while being individual and one of a kind at the same time (cf. figures 3, 7, 13, 15). The artist knows perfectly how to play and animate the face as a space between seriality and stereotype on the one hand and idiosyncratic trait on the other.

Light, as it is juxtaposed with the dark, often abysmal background, the framing and the neighbourhood with another post-face cause our encounter with those specific dolls too be so laden with tension (cf. figures 10, 11).

Drawing on Giorgio Agamben, who in his turn was inspired by a notion from Walter Benjamin’s repertoire, I would say that the visages of Piasecki’s doll have an *exposure value*, being as immobile as



Figure 10: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*

painter’s canvas. They operate in the realm between the post-face and a mask, enabling us to attempt continual assessment of our faith in childhood. In the photographs, that exposure value seems to be redoubled, as it is already contained in the very frozen faces of the dolls, as well as in their posing for the artist, which in its turn seems to stigmatize the photographic medium itself. The resulting effect is that of a *double exposure*, though not in the traditional understanding of a photographic technique, but a metaphor posing a question about the visual phenomenon of the intense presence of Piasecki’s fanciful dolls. Photography amplifies that exposure value of the face, superimposing its mediatic filter over it and moving them into a sphere of iconically dense image.

Spectre-dolls – vanishing to observe

Still, some among the dolls have closed their eyes, as if they rolled inwards and look into the back of their heads. Paradoxically, in those cases one has the impression that they observe us equally penetratingly with the unseeing eyes. Perhaps they sleep and dream, or perhaps they are irrevocably dead (cf. figures 5, 8, 9). Their physiognomies are thus even more post-faces or spaces in-between, while their exposure value is profoundly infected and permeated by *das Unheimliche*. If, on the other hand, one agrees with Georges Didi-Huberman who, inspired by fragments of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, asserted that seeing is a process of continuous loss, then one should close their eyes in order to see (Didi-Huberman 1999, 30f.). We are dealing with spectres we are able to see and who also see



Figure 11: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*



Figure 9: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*

us. After all, Piasecki often relinquishes clarity and vividness in favour of vagueness and blurred contours – perhaps the dolls moved suddenly while posing and the motion was captured by the watchful camera? An aura of a kind arises around their sometimes twofold silhouettes, while the striation marking the direction of their supposed movement invest the entire composition with electrifying dynamism. There is a demonic and ghastly side to it, which Piasecki achieves using an opulent range of possibilities offered by photographic techniques.

In order to enter into a dialogue with those spectre-dolls one cannot carry out a metaphysical inquiry or essentialist investigation, but “learn to converse with what is to be found in the undecided realm of ‘to be or not to be’. A spectre does not have an established definition as it indulges in indeterminacy, resorts to a violent breaking-and-entering, it is always an intruder (*sans-papiers*), therefore

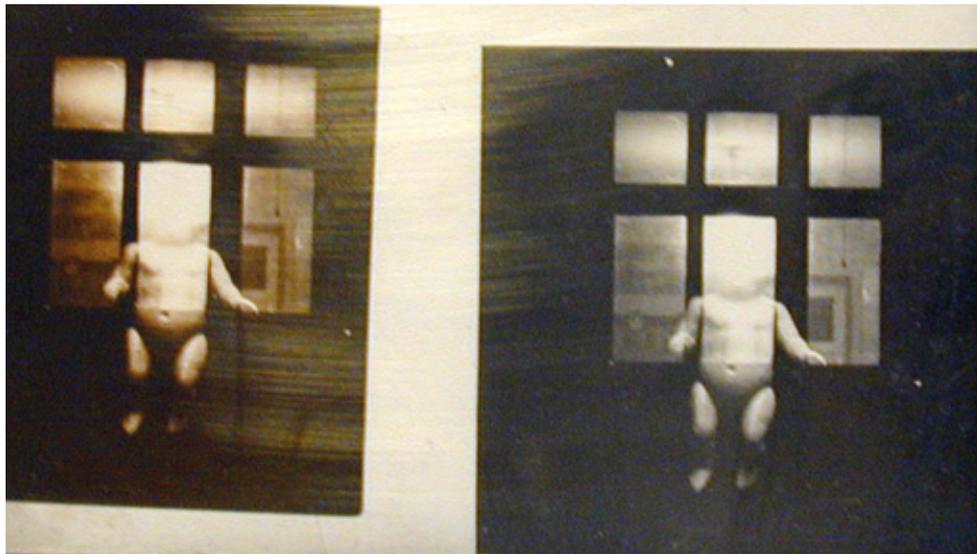


Figure 14: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll* —

it would be futile to ask it to produce an identity card” (Marzec 2015, 206-207). Moreover, “we never encounter a spectre alone, they always come in droves, creating societies and communities, hordes and packs” (Marzec 2015, 212). This is exactly what happens in some photographs by Piasecki, where the dolls are so ethereal as if they were only materializing or dematerializing, attracting our

eye with a transparency that sometimes yields the element of the background – a luminous window with a tangible, black grille (cf. figure 14).

For a dialogue with the spectres in one’s own oeuvre, one has to come forward with a thoroughly exceptional repertoire of visual devices. Hence Piasecki sets a stage for the spectre-dolls, a setting in which they can make their appearance and look at us so poignantly. Philosophers aptly note that “an apparition is impure, indefinite, and construed only vaguely, fuzzily, and therefore it cannot claim notional, fully accessible representation” (Marzec 2015, 133). Much the same applies in visual arts. A spectre cannot attain a complete, saturated, convincing presence. It has to merely – and as much as – manifest itself, remaining all the time on the verge of vanishing. Insinuate its headless figure into our world, in this case into a windowed room, to make its presence felt and then dissolve, leaving us changed and haunted.

The doll, in itself a phenomenon of highly uncertain status, becomes additionally ambivalent: it is *incarnated* into a spectre. Consequently, its identity is even more inconclusive and fluid: “Spectres mock identity, since they are capable of assuming any and changing it at will, masquerading as any subject, whose boundaries thus unravel and become blurred, while the hitherto stable sense of one’s existence is undermined” (Marzec 2015, 206-127). This, however, does not attenuate the poignancy of the message they convey: they emerge from our own memory, to tell us forcibly that our life is *being-towards-death* which, as if that was not enough, takes place in times after the Catastrophe in Piasecki’s case.

One of the dolls has an unnervingly dismantled head, which appears shattered and fragmented. The eye sockets are empty, while the *body* is exposed against the backdrop of a sheet of paper with a regular, square ruling – as if the figure was being subjected to some mysterious measuring or scaling (cf. figure 4). Ostentatiously, the doll manifests its inner void, and yet it still possesses a soul. Much the same happens with an object combining the rear section of the head of some unidentified doll, as if the latter had been hollowed out, with a white, plastic rabbit. The rabbit appears against the background of that empty “shell” like on a stage and implies that *something* always remains inside, though the body may be absent. Georges Didi-Huberman, who addressed seeing as a loss and disappearance of things, concentrated on a volume comprising an empty space: what kind of volume may demonstrate the loss of a body? What kind of volume can harbour a void and be able to show it at the same time? (Didi-Huberman 1999, 31).

Although the French historian and theorist of art deliberates on objects created within minimal art, his intuitions are applied here to photography and objects created by Piasecki, which in that very sensitive manner of theirs seek to pose questions about the act of showing the void. Furthermore, following Didi-Huberman's line of reasoning, he asks immediately how one turns the act into a form, a form which looks at and perceives us (Didi-Huberman 1999, 31). This hollowing-out and inner emptiness may in fact affect any body, mine included, while the work's inevitable sense of loss is all the more vocal. With a humanoid doll, the effect seems even more powerful than with the cubic forms of minimal art, such as Tony Smith's *Black Box* which Didi-Huberman analysed. The empty, gouged sockets do perceive us; perhaps more potently than if the eyes were there. We are looked at by the same emptiness with which Piasecki imbued the *body* of the doll, a body defenceless and akin to ours. The entire photograph is an *intense form*, which may be defined as a return of the repressed into the visual and aesthetic sphere (Didi-Huberman 1999, 222).

The hair are also a highly disquieting element. Piasecki thus endows one of his dolls with an opulent hairdo, perhaps even to an excess, which makes us ask whether the hair of the character are its own or whether it is a sea of strange hair it sunk into (cf. figure 9). Hair of such an ambivalent status and uncertain link with a person become an oddity that can never be familiarized. As a typical *object* they attract as much as they put one off; their presence verges on unbearable as it awakens the anxiety of death. The cut-off hair are haptic, seducing and tempting the touch, yet the hand refuses to make contact. They are haunted and spectral. In a viewer from Poland, the immediate association brings tons of hair from Auschwitz to mind, triggering knowledge of the industry which used hair of the Holocaust victims as raw material. The awareness translates into an atavism which causes cut-off hair to be treated in a very singular manner, manifesting as a fusion of fascination and abhorrence. Once cut off, hair becomes an *unnatural excrescence*, something which provokes disgust because it is a "detached part" and an "early death" (Menninghaus 2003, 53). This is why that *something* is horrifying. Disgust, as underlined by Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre later, is nevertheless a token of genuine experience of existence, connoting the medium of cognition itself, and enabling an insight into "the eternal essence of things" (Menninghaus 2003, 9). The constricted, stifled frame, the closed eyes of the doll and its parted lips add to the uncomfortable atmosphere. Even the flat photograph

appears fleecy, tousle-haired and ruffled, just as the monstrous hair it shows. One is tempted to state much the same as Éluard, saying that the doll is heavy, opaque, coarse. In short, it is alone. Alone in its cold and clammy frame, alone and without its eyes, inexorably alone. The only exception is that we are positioned directly in front of it, which makes us realize our own condition. Deculturated and intensely present, it will not let itself be ignored, since in the hierarchy of things it ranks above objects and so close to us.

When Freud sought to justify the tendency to attribute life to inanimate objects (in his discussion of animism in *Totem and Taboo*), he quoted the following passage from the third section of Hume's *Natural History of Religion*: "There is an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object those qualities with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious." (Freedberg 1989, 190).

Raised above objects – giving testimony of the human condition

Piasecki knew that dolls are worth being dedicated his purest aspirations, because then they would *utter* what strikes our most sensitive spots and concerns the most critical aspects of the human condition, most often those which are repressed. Fragmentation of *bodies* is not a device of eroticization or fetishization, as in Bellmer, but makes one aware of their defenceless fragility and mortality (cf. figures 4, 5, 12). Some of them are shattered, convulsive, while the relations of body parts have nothing to do with anatomy, just as in Andrzej Wróblewski paintings from the series *Rozstrzelania* [*Executions*]. The alignment of arms and legs of one of the dolls resembles a running person – perhaps we see her during some dramatic escape; another doll seems thoroughly immobile, dead. In the objects-assemblages, fragments of *bodies* appear under glass domes, in



Figure 12: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll* ■■■

cabinets which at times look like coffins, such as the red “rocket”, completing the visual narrative of fragmentation which began in the black-and-white photographs. In a 2005 poem entitled *The House of Dolls* Tadeusz Różewicz writes thus: “[...] at night in the house of dolls / cries are heard and screaming / and the gnashing of teeth [...]”. In one of the objects-assemblages a solitary hand is a source of horror: the hand stretches out towards the head which is severed from the rest of the *body* too. The parts are chaotically intermingled with metal elements, bits of tulle, cord, buttons and wires... Thus, the head and the arm have the same status as the surrounding objects; the *body* is objectified and disintegrated, bearing marks of violence. Another object features a naked, overturned torso, separated from the rest and accompanied by a red sphere and bits of some matter. The cabinet is constricted and oppressive. Since Piasecki’s dolls are by default endowed by the artist with soul and imagination, this fragmentation is felt even more acutely. They have already been raised above mere objects in hierarchy and now, in these two works, parts of their *bodies* are suddenly elevated equally high: the effect is all the more powerful and ghastly.

The backgrounds of photographs and objects-assemblages tend to be dark, oneiric, indeterminate. Piasecki experiments with photographic techniques and situates his dolls on what seems to be a juncture of darkness and our world, enhancing their spectral nature and the exposure value of the physiognomies, whose usually exaggerated and grotesque features draw the eye so much. In turn, his play with chiaroscuro is as vivid as it was in Caravaggio and the Tenebrists. By this means, we are even more emphatically introduced to the partners in a colloquy in which voices may unexpectedly stick in one’s throat.

Conversations with the spectre-dolls are therefore neither easy nor pleasant. Yet they foster an insight into the essence of one’s own existence, and draw attention to the fact that “the present is not such a solid, homogeneous, self-sufficient, cohesive and coherent actuality as may have seemed initially. Spectres fracture and undermine the stability of ‘now’, revealing anachronicity of reality and heterogeneity of time: the past is unwilling to go away and the future does not want to come” (Marzec 2015, 193). The ghost of war and the Holocaust is there to stay for certain as well. In a manner which is perhaps not that obvious, It returns – albeit not that plainly – in the series of spatial compositions, in which various forms, e.g. spheres, are put to display on cuboidal, cylindrical or polygonal plinths, bringing miniature anti-monuments to mind.

Their impenetrable black and the mysterious, abstract form commemorate the dramatic fates of dolls, whose *bodies* have been dismembered in the merciless mangle of history, offering a realization of our own mortality.

Walter Benjamin, citing a 1896 text by Paul Lindau, observes that at a certain point, the motif assumes the nature of social critique (Benjamin 2017, 1157). Perhaps, the latter also *shows through* Piasecki’s works with the doll motif, on top of all sorts of existential and meta-psychological threads? Perhaps the world, or more precisely Polish post-war and communist realities of the 1950s and 1960s in which the artist happened to live were so gruesomely foreign that the dolls had to be *permanently* imbued with soul and imagination, and raised above objects in order to survive and leave a testimony to the complexities of the human condition?

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List of Figures

(The series of black-and-white photographs are from the 1950s and 1960s).

Figure 1: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, 12,9 x 15,9 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań

Figure 2: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, 15,9 x 12,9 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań

- Figure 3: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, 14 x 18,5 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań
- Figure 4: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, 17,6 x 11,8 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań
- Figure 5: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, 17 x 24 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań
- Figure 6: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, 42,5 x 31,5 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań
- Figure 7: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, 21,6 x 16,6 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań
- Figure 8: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, 24 x 17,8 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań
- Figure 9: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, 24 x 17,8 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań
- Figure 10: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, 12,9 x 15,9 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań
- Figure 11: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, 12,9 x 15,9 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań
- Figure 12: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, mixed technique, 24 x 18 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań
- Figure 13: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, 8,5 x 11,5 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań
- Figure 14: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, 8,5 x 11,5 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań
- Figure 15: Marek Piasecki, untitled, from the series *Lalka / The Doll*; black and white photograph, 10,2 x 13,2 cm; courtesy of the Gallery Piekary Poznań

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