Dear reader,

It is a pleasure to present the fourth issue of Marginalia to you!

Marginalia is our way of building an original corner of freedom of expression concerning Eastern Europe. The comments and opinions stay on the margins of the texts, as well as on the margins of the mainstream. They facilitate a unique interaction between authors and readers.

This time around a great number of fascinating articles reached us, and we hope they will inspire your own thoughts, also for subsequent editions. The increase of interest in the project came alongside new ideas about its development. The editorial team are engaged in furthering the concept of Marginalia, which is one of dialogue and textual openness, and we always enthusiastically receive suggestions from our readership. How can commenting be made available to everybody and not only to the editorial team? Should authors be able to reply to the comments received? If yes, how can these replies be integrated into a single issue? How should they be presented on the page?

To discuss these (and more) questions, you are all warmly invited to the launch event, which will take place after the Christmas break. Watch out for the flyers!

If you have comments, suggestion, or you would like to get involved in the journal, do not hesitate to contact us at marginalia.ssees@gmail.com.

With best wishes for the holidays,

Your Marginalia Editorial Team

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Multiple Mirrors

The Shifting Polish Identity through the Prism of Andrzej Wajda's Shakespeare Productions

Following Poland’s loss of independence in 1795 and right up to the fall of communism in 1989, Polish culture and, indeed, identity were constructed within the traditional Romantic paradigm and subject to a premodern framework of national collective consciousness based on myth, tradition and history. As Hegel and many scholars of identity hold, this collective identity was strongly defined by the notion of an external ‘Other’, creating the binary us/them.1 Therefore, Polish identity was defined, on the one hand, by its relation to the ‘West’, predominantly characterised by a superiority/inferiority complex, and on the other, to its adversary [Russia]. This leads us to the key question, an issue that has formed the focus of many scholarly discussions since 1989: in a free and democratic nation, is the Romantic cultural paradigm still the defining framework of Polish national identity?

An interesting slant on this question is to perceive Polish theatre, and more specifically four of seven Shakespeare productions by one of the most renowned Polish film and theatre directors, Andrzej Wajda, as a mirror reflecting shifts in conceptions of Polish identity during a crucial period in Poland’s recent history: before and after the collapse of the Soviet bloc and communism. By dividing these productions spanning from 1960 to today into three chronological phases, it is possible to chart the changes taking place from a more traditional concept of collective Polish identity founded on the myth of Romantic ideals in a Slavic and communist nation, to a distinctly postmodern version based on

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individualism and consumerism in a fledgling Central European democratic country.

The pre-1989 phase examines Wajda’s first two versions of Hamlet in 1960 and 1981. Both productions were heavily reliant on Polish tradition, reaching for the Polish (neo-) Romantic Stanislaw Wyspiański’s 1905 Studium o Hamlecie as inspiration for artistic representation in the style of the ‘Polish Staging Theatre’, in the case of the 1960 version, and for political and patriotic significance in the latter production. This 1981 production appeared to appeal specifically to the audiences’ collective consciousness not only through tradition, but also through Jerzy Stuhr’s performance of Hamlet. Dressed in the symbolic blazer/cardigan of contemporary Polish intelligentsia, he came to represent every Pole (see Fig. 1). Most importantly, both pre-1989 productions were defined by the nation’s political situation; the Thaw (1956 onwards) and the rise of Solidarity (1981) required a form of collective opposition against the ‘them’ — communist Russia. This is testified to in the choice of repertoire: Hamlet fights the external ‘Other’ of the corrupt courts of Denmark.

What can be discerned from the 1989 Hamlet production is that the fall of both communism and the Soviet Union in 1989 marked a shift toward a distinctly modern form of identity. This Hamlet was about the theatre and yet was also an examination of the Self, with the actress in the title role of Hamlet, Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska, exploring another identity as well as reflecting on her own. Wajda explained her interpretation as such: “Why indeed an actress? If Hamlet is a work about theatre, that means that the place of action of Hamlet is the stage and Hamlet is an actor and, if Hamlet is an actor, that actor fills the role with himself […] I searched for an actor who could […] give over all of himself […] and I think that such an actor is Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska.”

Comment: What is this other identity? [LJ]
role of Hamlet and Budzisz-Krzyżanowska blurred before the audiences’ eyes, the self-reflexivity of this Hamlet extended beyond that of metatheatre towards the exploration of personal identity as self-constructed, flexible and, therefore, subject neither to a predetermined and stable collective tradition nor an ‘Other’. Set in the dressing room, the production stood as a metaphor for the times of transition; the audience had now vacated the political auditorium and, packed into the private sphere of the dressing room, were given an opportunity to reflect on new, self-determined forms of identity. 

And yet it seems that over the course of Poland’s fifteen years of democracy in the post-1989 phase, Poland’s identity is already entering its postmodern phase, as Wajda’s latest production of Macbeth has shown. Indeed, the notion of a self-reflexive identity is once again explored, although this time in the choice of repertoire; Macbeth is about the Self struggling with an internalized, ambitious and evil ‘Other’ – the Self against the Self. Moreover, Wajda’s Macbeth is an ordinary man, who has the potential to transform into an evil murderer. Thus, identity is arguably presented as increasingly fluid, a quality of postmodern identity according to Douglas Kellner: “Both modern and postmodern identity contain a level of reflexivity, an awareness that identity is chosen and constructed. In contemporary society, however, it may be more ‘natural’ to change identities.”3 We can also apply the general failure of this production to postmodernism. In his concerted effort to return theatre to an aural practice with meaning and messages, Wajda was, in fact, battling ‘against postmodern notion of culture disintegrating into pure image without referent or content or effects.’4 In this way, Wajda is also arguably protesting against the postmodern identity, which constructed from mass media and consumer culture, offers packaged and temporary mass identities subject to variations in fashion.

It is clear then that in the twenty years of freedom and democracy that have followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Romantic cultural paradigm has become redundant, replaced by modern mass-mediated culture. In turn, it would seem that identity models, which were once provided by the Romantic myth and based on collectivism, history and tradition, are now constructed and marketed by the media. Therefore, as Roland Barthes in his Mythologies, as well as Kellner argue, mass-media culture, such as television and advertising, in fact “assume some of the functions traditionally ascribed to myth and ritual […] by integrating individuals into the social order, celebrating dominant values, offering models of thought, behaviour, and gender for imitation.”5 This shift towards unstable and

amorphous modern and postmodern conceptions of identity risk, however, provoking identity crises, as the leading scholar on Polish Romanticism, Maria Janion, suggests: “man is increasingly disappearing, reduced to statistical units whose uniqueness is lost among the masses.” [6] This fact could explain the resurgence of more solid nationalist and (neo-) Romantic organisations; the literary movement of the literature of ‘little homelands’, which illustrates a new found interest in local regions and personal roots; [7] and Poland’s membership in the European Union, which serves to offer a new European identity. Perhaps Janion’s title to her 2000 book offers the best model for Poland’s identity for the future: “Towards Europe – yes, but together with our dead.” [8]

Camilla Brice

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Comment: So what would this mean? What’s next? Does the present situation call for the same kind of ideal escape/alternative/reversion that Romanticism offered under communism? Might the current (post-) modern consumerist, mediated, etc. etc. world be the new systemic Other that communism once was? Anyway, if Wajda’s postmodern failure is any indication, good old-fashioned Romanticism may have to swoop in to save the day again. But can it work its soothing magic without an Other more tangible than the ‘postmodern condition?’ [BS]
Eastern Europe’s Responsibility to the World

As I am writing this text, the world is getting ready for the summit on climate change to take place in December in Copenhagen. One of the main issues to be settled is how much aid rich countries are willing to give to developing ones in order for the latter to invest in green technologies, and thus grow without sacrificing the environment (as the global North has done). Meeting in late October, European Union leaders agreed that the developing world should receive 50 billion euros per year until 2020, but failed to make a strong commitment on how much money the Union itself will give. The new Bulgarian prime minister, Boyko Borisov, came back satisfied from the negotiations. Nine Eastern European countries, including Bulgaria, had managed to persuade the other EU leaders that they need to pay reduced amounts. Borisov estimated that Bulgaria would save 40-50 million euros in this way. Whether the Eastern Europeans’ reduced contributions will decrease the final amount made available by the EU is not clear. But what comes across from the attitude of the Eastern European leaders is clear: these countries are too poor to help others. However, the aid to be given by rich states to countries from the global South is a matter of justice. The global North has achieved current levels of prosperity through massive industrialization, which led directly to the environmental damage threatening the entire world today. Eastern European countries grew through state-driven industrial production, the other countries through capitalist industrialization, but it is environmentally-damaging industrialization in both cases. The responsibility belongs to Eastern Europeans too, and the excuse that they are poorer cannot be used. Otherwise, why should countries in the global South accept the idea that their own economic growth strategies should take environmental concerns into consideration? After all, many of these countries are even poorer than Bulgaria.

Denying responsibilities to the rest of the world is quite a trend in the region, explained away through self-victimization, i.e., “we are poor” and “we are victims of Communism.” Some of the Eastern European countries now represent Europe’s borders, at a time when Europe is struggling to contain the continuous waves of migration coming in from Africa, the Middle East or Asia. Bulgaria is on the spot again, as it is the European country which, together with Greece, links Europe to Turkey. This is the land route that migrants coming from Asia or the Middle East use to get into Europe. Greece’s asylum acceptance rates are around 0.1 per cent, making it a virtually closed access point. More migrants have turned to Bulgaria over the past years. The response was swift: in 2008, acceptance rates for asylum seekers were dropped radically; Iraqis were...
especially affected, the number of migrants granted asylum dropping from hundreds before 2008 to tens in that year. An Iraqi refugee I spoke to in Sofia told me asylum seekers from her country are being told by Bulgarian authorities that their country was safe, there was no reason for them to leave Iraq. But the UN said the real reason for the high rejection rates is that Bulgarians do not have the capacity to receive so many refugees. Even truer is that they do not want to have the capacity, as they still perceive themselves as a poor country which needs to put its own people first. They do not wish to see that the peace they enjoy is most valuable and really the main thing Iraqi applicants are looking for.

Contributions for developing green production technologies and accepting asylum-seekers from war-torn countries are just two examples of areas where the region denies the positive role it could and should play in the world.

The reluctance to accept responsibility for the world became clear to me as I was speaking to an activist involved in fair trade promotion in Eastern Europe. The activist was speaking about Eastern Europeans’ attitude to global trade, another core issue for global justice, another area where the global North, having benefitted from centuries of unequal commercial relationships with the rest of the world, should act more justly. The activist said: “Central and Eastern Europe is not used to think of itself as belonging to ‘the developed part of the world’. Being closed countries for so long (during the Communist period) has also contributed to the limited awareness of problems faced by the global South. So it is important to raise awareness that our region does now belong among the rich and ought to take responsibility for other regions of the world.”

Whether we are from Eastern Europe or just care for the region, I think it might be our role to see this group of countries in a different light. To leave aside the eternal victimization and point out some of its responsibilities towards the rest of the world. This might play a role not only in creating a more just world, but also in strengthening Eastern Europe itself.

Claudia Ciobanu

Comment: Isn’t it in some way actually a question of whether there is political capacity? Obviously there has to be will behind it. But unemployment numbers play a big part in this, I think. [MV]

Comment: I feel a certain degree of uneasiness in addressing the region as “ours”. Whose is it? Who can claim the property? Does that mean that they can exclude “the others”, whose it is not? Or is it only stressed here to mobilize the people who are regarded as politically passive? Eastern Europeans? I would say that is also very general, so does not help to pin point the problem. [TS]

Comment: Quite right… and not only to reaffirm that they ‘belong to the rich’. EU membership is supposed to mean not only economic development, but also respect of human rights. Openness and concern about sustainable development and consumption are essential. They need to be adopted in the mindsets of the population as much as in the agenda of the politicians. [TP]

Comment: It seems like the old narrative understandings of victimhood will have to be replaced by something else, and that something else has to come from somewhere. It doesn’t necessarily seem like the EU would be offering any especially empowering narratives to countries like Bulgaria, as long as they are part of the internal poor (and recipients of financial aid, etc.). I agree that taking a more proactive international role would strengthen the region in the long run, but it seems so much more politically expedient to blame internal shortcomings on external factors and cling to the victim card. And these narratives are deep. What could affect a shift in perspective? [BS]

Comment: Do you mean strengthening the EE states in a International Relations sense or heightening the moral standards of its inhabitants and improving its image abroad? The overarching problem of climate change is that it doesn’t pay off in the short run, so it will weaken the Eastern European countries if they have to further burden their troubled economies by transferring money (some would have to loan first from a third party) to the global South. In the long run, it might however pay off, as EE will have to contribute with first aid as the global South faces an increasing number of catastrophes caused by climate change. From a global justice point of view you are of course right that the richer, industrialized countries ought to contribute to the comparably poorer developing countries. [SH]

Comment: For me the question why each country should contribute to international aid is answered by Amartya Sen. He claims that no matter upon what kind of conditionality one acts (i.e. economic or political), one cannot view poverty reduction as something that leads to a better condition for the poor, but actually as the better condition in itself. The reason for that is that the duty should be to help the suffering of the poor as this directly enhances the freedom of the individual. And finally, I would add that I doubt that the “strengthening of Europe” has that of an importance… [ASz]
Some Thoughts on Nationalism in the UK

One issue that has cropped up repeatedly in the years after the fall of communism has been the resurgence of nationalist politics across the countries of Eastern Europe. There are a variety of theories, which attempt to explain this phenomenon, for example, that since nationalist sentiments were ‘frozen’ during the communist period, the end of communism inevitably led to an explosion of nationalism. However, recent years have seen a parallel to nationalism in Eastern Europe in the electoral gains made by far right parties in the UK and other countries of the West, discrediting the view that nationalism in Europe today is predominantly a post-communist issue. This development culminated in the UK with the controversial invitation of Nick Griffin, leader of the British National Party (BNP), onto the BBC’s Question Time. The question that was subsequently posed by politicians and the liberal media ran along the lines of: “how is it that a political party with a far right agenda can gain a following in our progressive, liberal-democratic, multicultural society?” The answer runs along well-trodden ground and goes something like this: “there are members of our society who feel disenfranchised and betrayed, those who live in broken communities and who are therefore susceptible to nationalist imagery and a right-wing politics.” The solution is based around reintegration and education. Politicians argue that we must make more effort to “get through” to so-called ‘vulnerable communities’, in order to show them how their concerns can be addressed through mainstream politics. It should be clear that this will prove a futile tactic. The crux of the problem for mainstream politics is that the success of the far right does not stem from a failure to communicate the multicultural, liberal-democratic project to certain segments of society; instead, it represents the emphatic rejection of that project.

I would argue that no amount of education in multiculturalism and tolerance will succeed in correcting this illiberal element of our liberal society. The discrepancy between our espoused liberal-democratic ideals and the presence of right-wing elements, far from being a kind of malfunction, is an inevitable outcome of the liberal-democratic, capitalist project in its ‘normal’ operation. To understand this, it is necessary to turn

1 I should state at the outset that this article is unashamedly Freudo-Marxist in orientation, drawing heavily on the following works: Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment (particularly the last chapter, Elements of Anti-Semitism) and Slavoj Žižek’s Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology.
to the key insight proposed by Marx, that there exists a basic structural antagonism inherent in the capitalist economic system. The interests of various social groups conflict one another along class lines. This repressed truth of the inherent imbalance returns to us in the form of a politics based on antagonism, a politics which draws on the energy generated by this antagonism and turns it toward its own ends. This is why we should not be so complacent as to call for reintegration, education in multicultural values, focus groups to address concerns, and so forth. The presence of right-wing political parties on the political spectrum constitutes a rejection of multiculturalism and the failure of the liberal-democratic attempt to diffuse various class interests. Where right-wing politics succeed, it is because they offer a false resolution of social antagonism, namely, that the elements responsible for our lack (the immigrants who steal our jobs) can be removed in order to regain a kind of mythical state of national harmony. We see a dynamic played out in almost all fascist politics in which a foreign element, which both threatens our way of life and exploits us economically, must be purged. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that in Nazi Germany this element was anchored in the image of the Jew; in British society, it is attached to the immigrant (who simultaneously steals jobs from hard working Brits and exhausts tax funds by illegitimately claiming benefits). The common mistake is to reject this manoeuvre as simple scape-goating. The fact is that immigration really does adversely affect the economic situation of the working class whilst also serving corporate interests since an influx of labour enables employers to reduce wages and/or cut jobs. The error of right-wing politics is that instead of perceiving antagonism along class lines it reduces the antagonism to one of its symptoms. Rather than revealing the contradiction which is inherent to our society, the source of antagonism is located in an image of the Other, whose removal is required to restore social harmony. Such a move is seductive because it attempts to provide a guarantee of the very existence of society by reifying an inherent deadlock (the impossibility of social harmony under conditions of capitalism) in the external figure of the immigrant. The shift is from an internal logic of antagonism which makes social harmony impossible, to one that, by reconstituting antagonism as existing between internal (nation) and external (Jew/immigrant/gypsy) groups actually guarantees society’s consistency.

The political frenzy surrounding the rise of the BNP in the UK seems to support this argument. Liberal-democratic politics simply has no convincing answer to populist demands. Our attempts to mitigate the impact of capitalism on the working class not only fail to redistribute wealth effectively, thereby inadvertently adding weight to the nationalist logic. It

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Comment: What about the BNP’s significant middle-earning support? These people are often not directly threatened by immigration, at least not in an economic manner. [DR]

Comment: But the immigrants are also working-class. I know what you mean, but the way this is termed makes it sound like you see only the “originally British working classes” as working classes. [LJ]

Comment: I agree with Lisa, but in addition I’m unsure if this is really the case. I’m no expert on this, but it would be good if you could give some evidence. In addition, your argument implies a clear-cut distinction between Briton and immigrant, which isn’t the case (for instance, differences of long-term/short-term, origin, degree of willingness to assimilate/engage with local society, etc.) [FJ]

Comment: This is not so much due to immigration as such as to the way politics deals with immigrants, for example forcing many of them to stay illegal. So I think there’s a basic rejection of immigration within liberal politics itself; and is the BNP just *more* right wing on a scale where everyone is slightly right-wing? [LJ]

Comment: Isn’t that a very old-fashioned Marxist way of looking at it? To me this sounds like you’re proposing class struggle as a preferable alternative to interethnic strive. [FJ]

Comment: What could be the objective reason for this, if it is so persistent? Helplessness of the present discourse compared to the easily unearthed historical answers? [TS]

Comment: Am I right in understanding that you unquestioningly accept Marx’s dictum of class struggle? Any personal agreement or disagreement aside, I think in the year 2009 this has to be qualified in some way. And again, I find this distinction between ‘our British society’ and ‘those foreigners’ far too simplistic and verging on reiterating the nationalist attitude, although this is exactly what you criticize the BNP for. [FJ]

Comment: Can we then reinvent the means of fight that are not rooted in the antagonism itself? Out of the oppositional stance? Is there a possible exile form this usual binary? [TS]
is not our economy, our way of life that is the problem; our society could provide for us if only it weren’t for the Jew/immigrant/gypsy who exploits our economy and contaminates our way of life.) But these attempts are also seamlessly integrated into populist rhetoric. So, just as the Third Way programme implements social-democratic initiatives such as welfare provisions and the NHS in an attempt to deliver capitalism with a human face, these initiatives are appropriated by the BNP, who encourage the image of the jobless immigrant, dependent on the state and burdening the taxpayer.

A final point: it is interesting to note that the liberal reaction to the BNP’s success in the UK was often itself rather illiberal. There were calls from many senior politicians to bar the BNP from Question Time, running against the BBC’s mandate to include all legitimate parties with a significant constituency of voters. Likewise, anti-fascist protesters outside the BBC studio expressed their critical stance by injuring several police officers. These attempts to silence the BNP are not merely a rejection of right-wing politics; instead, the frantic reaction among liberals is a desperate attempt to repress the real antagonism which the BNP indirectly gives voice to, which is that of class struggle.

Comment: On this point and the comment above: perhaps I’ve been unclear. When I point to the distinction between “our society” and “those foreigners” it is intended to illustrate the nationalist distinction, not one that I recognise myself. Likewise, when I say that framing the antagonism as existing between internal and external groups guarantees society’s consistency, I am still referring to the seductive logic offered by the BNP, and certainly not my view (as an old fashioned Marxist).

Comment: The BNP’s public programme, as I see it, does contain economic aspects, but tends to foreground issues of cultural incompatibility and fears about Islamification. Do these arguments merely mask underlying economic grievances? I have doubts about this. After all, we should not forget that the BNP had made no significant gains in the UK prior to 9/11.

Comment: Yes, I would say they do. We should bear in mind that nationalism was operative prior to 9/11. The BNP is only the current incarnation of a long-standing nationalist tradition in the UK.

Comment: You make a convincing argument, but I think there are also other important issues in play. The recent referendum in Switzerland to ban the building of minarets (and other xenophobic, conservative policies going back farther) speaks to something more, I think. I don’t have the impression that the primary offence that immigrants are supposed to be committing is an economic one, even under the surface; rather, strong cultural/religious and ethnic/racial elements are the focus of the push, speaking to a more national, cultural, racial ‘identity-based’, ‘way-of-life’ fear, not one of class conflict, or at least not exclusively so. I know we try to stick the concept of ‘identity’ in where it doesn’t belong sometimes and miss the point, but I think it has to be taken more seriously into account here. Even if Marxism would see this as a symptom of the global capitalist system, I think that mezzo-(national)-(level of identity still wields an important agency.

Jack Reilly
ObSerbvations

The first night on Romanija was spent discussing trivial matters on a grand scale. Two and a half litres of rakija tend to affect a man in that manner.

I woke up at twelve or so, completely soaked from the waist up in what appeared to be a mixture of partly digested Ćevapčići and tomatoes. No evidence of the rakija was present... I took this to be a good sign, as the resounding hangover seemed to be justified.

I can't speak for others, but rakija goes right to my head. It makes friends out of strangers and makes acquaintances into family. I have to admit I felt as though we were sharing our life stories when in actuality we were probably debating a questionable chess move, or pussy.

We got the rakija from Račo, who claims he is incapable of drinking one bottle without finishing on his third (a single shot being completely out of the question).

Račo is the village butcher who, apparently, wants to wrestle me anytime I feel ready. Anyway I am sure he is well familiar with that putrid smell I had to wash out of my sheets the morning after, and if not, then God bless him; these Serbs can drink like there's no tomorrow.

I've been in this cabin in the woods for too long. Francesca and Nemanja are growing tired of my company and are most likely beginning to comprehend my warped personality ... not as though they or anyone else here actually cares! Although they did seem a bit overly concerned with my nuptial welfare and even aided my acquaintance with various fully toothed, burly, mustacheless village women. It got to the point where I even felt obliged to take a woman home just to please them!

So I'm stuck up in this little cold garret complaining about my state of affairs while there is a Yugoslav knock-off version of an A. Kalashnikov 47 laying right beside me, along with three fully loaded clips of ammunition, and Francesca has just begun crying once again for some unknown reason.

I am sleeping on a mildewed foam mattress with an old wooden door beneath it for support. They say in Bosnia that if you sleep like that you'll never get a bad back, or much worse, a hump. Those two are downstairs and I can already smell the meat beginning to burn. Every night we devour several kilos of meat. Francesca eats less than us and immediately complains of digestive problems. We usually suggest she drink some rakija (though we've recently rethought this remedy due to her inevitable drunken rages during which she...
attempts to steal the car with the intention of driving herself back to Italy). My candle is almost out now, so I will venture downstairs to see what is happening. Francesca claims to have a parasite. I am quite certain I had one as well. In this village, the only cure for tapeworm is: rakija. The cure goes thus: one shot of rakija is to be administered every 20 minutes for a period of 24 hours, or until the “guy” kicks the bucket. I have had several acquaintances that followed this routine and were successful in their convalescence. Sometimes you have to substitute vodka or grappa for rakija, depending on the nationality of the parasite. Usually they say that immediately after a food poisoning you should keep an empty stomach and as soon as you can tolerate it, the first thing through your mouth (in order to expedite the healing), must be rakija.

Apparently Francesca was toying with the idea of making the “guy” a new pet, because she insisted on tea instead of the recommended antidote.

Trust me on this! I know all about parasites. Most of my clothing belongs to other people, and I’ve never had my own home. I do pay though. I pay homage. Sometimes when I wear friends’ clothing I take it upon myself to exhibit some of their mannerisms, or even act like them, utilizing some of their personal dialogue—a kind of tribute to their kindness.

Now we are hurrying to the Sarajevo film festival. I am sitting on the toilet shitting as fast as I can. How can you hurry a shit? Francesca’s “guy” has returned and we are out of rakija. From what I understand Račo’s wife hid it somewhere behind their butcher shop. I think I’m pissing straight wine now, shitting as well. After a liquid shit you must shower. There is no other possible way to cleanse yourself of such sin.

Jeffrey Andreoni

Comment: Seems truthful in the way that every experience like this in so foreign a place can be so individual and uni-directional, so self-absorbed at the same time that it’s ostensibly pushing into something beyond itself—fixations form on the closely tangible and experientially violent (rakija, here) and so much passes by without notice. Very nice. [HS]

Comment: I was a little confused with the beginning in Romania followed by the main script being about Serbians (except Francesca) and then suddenly being in Bosnia. Obviously it is possible that these are Bosnian Serbs but the Romanian bit threw me (also it should be in rather ‘on’ unless they were discussing Romanian things)! Without wanting to sound too harsh, I found myself wondering what the point was to this short story, it begins with a story of the effects of rakija and continues about parasites, lack of ownership and then the Sarajevo film festival. I was a bit confused, it all seemed a bit rushed even for a Gonzo styled piece (I am assuming the objective was along the lines set by Hunter S. Thompson). [LC]
A Dreamer from Kirghizia

The kids, all five of them, climbed the bench, stood up on their toes and pressed their noses against two windows of Aunt Anya’s house. They had been doing this every evening for two weeks now. They would patiently wait outside beneath their Aunt’s windows, pretending to play or chat, but what really captivated their minds was the moment when the blue light came on. The blue light appeared just a few minutes before eight and the living room suddenly became a magic realm every kid wanted to enter. Now, five of them were hoping to get inside, so they stared, in silence, at Uncle Andrey, the owner of the house.

Uncle Andrey, Aunt Anya, and their son Petya enjoyed an enormous popularity among children by virtue of owning the first and only television set in their village. No one else had the luxury or the connections to buy household electronics, let alone a television set. So after the neighbors heard about the Davidenko family’s new purchase, they would visit the house to watch the evening news on weekdays, and films on weekends. A warm night like this could draw up to twenty people to the house. As an accidental but welcoming hostess, Aunt Anya always put out a huge metal bowl with water near the front door for everyone to wash their feet.

But today she was not home. Instead, Uncle Andrey adjusted the volume and stretched comfortably on the sofa, with his back turned to five pairs of attentive eyes behind the glass. It seemed the mysterious world of the blinking screen had been shut off for tonight. The kids’ faces stretched with sadness. Then Lenya, the oldest of them, carefully tapped on the window trying to defy tonight’s misfortune. Uncle Andrey turned around and motioned at them to come in. Within a few seconds they were sitting on the floor in the living room, cross-legged and happy. Among them was a six-year-old girl, Lyuda, who was not tall enough to see anything from the bench outside, but who ventured to get a glimpse of the evening news from Moscow with her brother Lenya and their three cousins.

It is 1958 and the place is the village of Aleksandrovka in Kirghizia, or what today is Kyrgyzstan. The little girl is my mother who was born and grew up in this remote locale in Central Asia. Geoffrey Wheeler estimates that nearly two million Ukrainians and Russians left their homes at the end of the nineteenth century to settle in Central Asia. Lyuda’s great-grandparents were among them.°

Slowly, this village became a home to a very diverse population. During the 1960s, the majority of its ten thousand inhabitants were Dungan. They spoke the Dungan language, which is similar to Chinese and they are adherents of Shia Islam. Russian-speaking Ukrainians, including Lyuda’s family and the Davidenkos, were a small group, among other minorities – Kirghiz, Uzbek, Kazakh, Jews, and Russified Germans. In fact, Lyuda’s class at primary school had thirty-two students, twenty-six of whom were Dungan, two Uzbek, and four Ukrainian. Classes were taught in Russian, which worked well for Lyuda, but disadvantaged her Dungan classmates, who had started learning Russian in first grade.

Lyuda would have loved to make friends with the Dungan girls, who had long black hair and snacked on rice cakes they brought from home, but she found herself tongue-tied every time she approached them during recess. And, unlike her other Ukrainian friends who lived in the same street as Lyuda, Dungans lived on the other side of the village. Sometimes she wondered whether their friendship would take off if she managed to invite them to Aunt Anya’s house to watch television. It would have worked perfectly on a night like this, when Aunt Anya was not there to enforce her “wash-feet-first” rule. Besides, Lyuda was certain that her Dungan classmates had heard about the television and now wished to join other kids in this communal pastime.

The only problem was that while watching the news was a pleasure in and of itself, the commentator used words which Lyuda had heard only at kolkhoz meetings and the meaning of which she hardly understood. Besides, the news program which claimed to cover the whole Soviet Union mentioned Kirghizia only once, in a feature about the capital Frunze. No one in the vast expanse of the USSR seemed to know about Aleksandrovka.

Despite this setback, Lyuda secretly hoped that the news team would come and interview her dad, who worked as the head engineer in the kolkhoz. Would they want to interview her, as well? Well, if that happened, she knew exactly what she would say. First, her father was the most innovative and talented engineer in their area. During the war, his battalion stayed in Germany for two months, so he observed all kinds of agricultural technologies there. Later he used that knowledge to build gadgets, such as an automated drinking system for pigs, something their kolkhoz became famous for far beyond its borders. Second, Lyuda would ask the crew whether they could send more refrigerators to Aleksandrovka. Only one household had a refrigerator – it belonged to the kolkhoz director. A fridge would save Lyuda a lot of trouble: it would keep milk fresh and it would keep it inside the house, so she could get a sliver of her favorite buttery fresh cream without having to run to the cooling place in their
backyard. But most of all, Lyuda wanted to say that there were very few children’s books in their library and since she had just learned to read this past summer, she could really use more of those, please. The news team probably wouldn’t want to hear this, but books were just as exciting as television, if not more so. Every time Lyuda opened a new book, her worries about not making friends with Dungan girls, or not being able to understand words on the news, waned. All she cared about was how many pages she would read before mom told her to go to bed…

Katya Peremanova

Comment: I like the style of this story, but with the ending it seems incomplete, almost too child-like. The images are great and have a lot of potential, but there is nothing to make this memorable, no central idea that would be enticing enough. [MV]
Diary: 24 July 2009, Kyrgyzstan

The morning of the election found us still in the mountain hamlet of Düngürömö. We’d arrived there two days previously, shattered after a twelve hour walk over the mountains from the Naryn valley, shattered and reeling from the fermented mare’s milk – kymyz – pressed on us by tented pastoralists. In Düngürömö we’d stumbled upon Azamat, an unexpected English-speaker leaning on his pitchfork; a recent graduate of a Bishkek university. He with his brother and sister were helping their grandmother gather hay on the family farm, and offered us a bed for the night. As rain was threatening, we spent the day after we arrived helping with the haymaking. But on election day, the family was re-clothed in fashionable city attire, a bleating lamb and obstreperous goat were piled into the boot of the elderly Audi, and we tore off in a cloud of dust, leaving the grandmother drinking tea, more or less alone until the next summer. On arrival in the capital six hours later, Azamat went to cast his vote: “I’m going for Atambaev. I think it’s for the best.”

We’d been introduced to Kyrgyz politics in Barskoon, a village sprawling along the shore of Issyk Kul, by the garrulous Nurlan, whose glasses were as cracked as the windscreen of the Lada which had driven us there. Akaev, he told us, as we drank bowl after bowl of tea, had been president since independence, but had been ousted in the so-called Tulip revolution of 2005 after rigging the vote; he’d had to run away to Russia, he added with amusement. But Bakiev, who’d replaced him, had been no better – even more dishonest, he grumbled; all the money goes to his family. But there was an alternative, he declared: of the five opponents of Bakiev, Atambaev offered real hope of change; he was an honest man – as prime minister, he’d been so disgusted by Bakiev’s corruption that he’d resigned. I cynically suggested that maybe Atambaev would turn out like Bakiev, but Nurlan was emphatic: no, he is a good man.

After that, as we’d travelled around northern Kyrgyzstan by whatever mode of transport we could find, a pattern would develop. As we would pull out of whatever town we were in, the disintegrating tarmac would give way to muddy gravel, and as the car crashed over yet another pothole, the driver would wearily launch into a diatribe against Bakiev’s nepotism, throwing in anecdotes about how the whole country had been without electricity when Bakiev’s son and his mates bartered Kyrgyz water for Uzbek gas. There were exceptions. The elderly family in the decrepit Lada Niva reeking of kymyz: in muted tones, they’d declared that what the country needed above all was continuity. And the well-fed local politician, in his Toyota Landcruiser, who’d praised Bakiev’s skillful attraction of Chinese investment. And some people we met were cynically
apathetic: Bakiev would rig the vote anyway, they said. But many were adamant that it was possible to unseat him – just as Akaev had been unseated. Once we were given a lift by some border guards.

The Chinese border was closed, as there were riots in Urumqi, so they’d popped down to town for cigarettes, sugar, and vodka. As the road deteriorated into gravel, I provocatively asked whose fault the state of the road was – they humorously blamed Britain, for withholding aid. I asked who would win the election – they glibly replied, ‘Bakiev’. But after a moment’s silence they went on: ‘But we have to say that: we work for the state!’ At this point we shuddered over a particularly nasty pot-hole, and a tirade against Bakiev’s nepotism ensued, culminating with the familiar refrain: ‘That’s who’s responsible for the roads!’

When we reached the tree line, we stopped for vodka, as is the tradition. After this extended pause, the driver, Aslan, his voice decidedly slurred, asked: ‘Aren’t you scared to be here for our election? There’ll probably be a revolution – there was last time.’ We became quietly hopeful: if the election was to be fought on roads, there seemed to be some hope for change.

On the evening of election day, idly flicking onto CNN, we watched in interest as the presenter, stumbling heroically over the pronunciation first of Kyrgyzstan, then of Bakiev, then of Atambaev, informed us that Atambaev had withdrawn from the poll on grounds of fraud, and had called for mass demonstrations. But this news hadn’t reached Kyrgyz channels yet, and Azamat was sceptical when we told him. We strolled round central Bishkek; Azamat pointed out the square where the Tulip revolution had taken place. Tonight it was completely quiet, apart from a few workmen re-painting the road markings.

The next day we helped our hosts carry some boxes of Nesquik down to the ever-bustling Osh Bazar, where they all worked; the rest of the city was lethargic in the 40° heat. Official results trickled in: 88% for Bakiev, 8% for Atambaev. The OSCE dutifully condemned the election as flawed, while the SCO predictably declared it free and fair. Otherwise the international community did nothing. A few desultory protests died out. We left for Taraz, Kazakhstan.

We were disappointed with the ease with which Bakiev had retained power, and appalled at the hypocrisy of the likely fraud. Yet the traveller’s view is subjective. No observers had predicted an Atambaev victory. Crucially, we’d only been in the north of the country – and Bakiev is a southerner. Yet it was disheartening how Western commentators, so titillated by the Tulip Revolution, relapsed into essentializing discourses of a country mired in clan politics. The clan aspect of Kyrgyz politics, institutionalized in the Soviet era, is undeniably real: every régime change has involved a shift in power between northerners and southerners. Yet the voices we heard did not speak of clan loyalty or clan rivalry,
but of a desire for development, for improved infrastructure and reduced corruption.

Clan structures cannot but condition the development of democracy in Kyrgyzstan; but the opinions we heard suggested that such structures can and must be transcended.

William Wheeler
It is somewhat odd that the cinemas of France and Germany have attracted considerable English-language interest, whilst the national cinemas once stowed away behind the Iron Curtain continue to be lumped together. Czech cinema is distinct from say, Slovenian, and Romanian film production and the four decades of comparable experiences with communism should not overshadow the two subsequent and four preceding decades of cinematic history. Thus, in his new book on Czech and Slovak cinema, Peter Hames endeavours to focus on the particular themes and traditions pertaining to them. Altogether, the films from Central and Eastern Europe face a “wall in the head” of the all-important gatekeepers, critics and distributors, who decide the fate of a film. Because the cinemas of Central and Eastern Europe remain uncharted territory, the films are rarely allowed to travel abroad despite their considerable significance and frequently positive audience responses. It is this terra incognita that the author intends to illuminate.

Peter Hames is certainly the right choice for such an undertaking. He has already written extensively about Czech, Slovak, and Czechoslovak cinema, most notably in The Czechoslovak New Wave (2nd ed. 2005), which also included a chapter about post-communist cinema. In this new book however, he scrutinises a remarkable number of Czech and Slovak films. The book is organised in partially logical, partially idiosyncratic chapters, including: animation and avant-garde (areas of production), comedy (genre), realism and surrealism (artistic movements), and history, politics and the Holocaust (important subjects). This structure nevertheless appears well-chosen since the ambition is to follow themes and traditions, rather than individual film-makers or overall chronology.

The chapter on historical themes in film spans from St Václav (Svatý Václav, Jan S. Kolář, 1929), the first government-supported film, to Jan Svěrák’s 2001 epic, Dark Blue World (Tmavomodrý svět), about the Czech pilots who flew for the RAF during the Second World War. In this chapter we find an analysis of the Czech film voted the best ever made, Marketa Lazarová (František Vláčil, 1967), about a doomed love affair set in an intangible dark age. The film broke new ground as it carried Žižo moral or ideological message.

One chapter is devoted to social realism and the approximation of everyday life. In Czech cinema this tradition is primarily associated with the 1960s, but Hames also sheds light on the earliest attempts in this direction. Most attention is however given to Forman’s Black Peter (Černý Petr, 1963) and Loves of
a Blonde (Lásky jedné plavovlásky, 1965), which “were recognizably authentic and no one could say that about any other films purporting to deal with contemporary Czech life.” A curiosity observed by Hames is the influence Forman’s realism has had on Ken Loach, who, on the other hand, has been an important source of inspiration for the director Martin Šulík. With City of the Sun or Working Class Heroes (Slnecní stát aneb hrdinové dělnické třídy, 2005), Šulík arguably made the first Czech film to question the problems of unemployment that followed the post-communist transformation. In the ensuing chapter on politics Hames states that overtly political films about post-communism are rare because the risk of being labelled a crypto-communist is simply too high.

Czech comedies have always travelled well and received prominent awards. The most successful films ever made, Closely Observed Trains (Ostře sledované vlaky, Menzel, 1967) and Kolya (Svěrák, 1996), both won an Oscar, while other comedies such as The Firemen’s Ball (Hoří, má panenko, 1967, Miloš Forman), My Sweet Little Village (Vesničko má středisková, 1985, Jiří Menzel) and The Elementary School (Obecná škola, Svěrák, 1991) were nominated for one. In the chapter about this particular genre Peter Hames again presents a convincing historical overview of the topic from the earliest production until today with a special focus on Menzel’s oeuvre. The newest film included is Svěrák’s Empties (Vратné lahve, 2007). Empties is one of the most successful films ever, with 1.2 million tickets sold at home. In Hames’ words its success is “puzzling”. Truly, I was perplexed when I first saw the film at the Karlovy Vary film festival in July 2007. Having premiered four months earlier the film was nevertheless shown in a crammed Grand Hall where not one of the 1145 seats was left unoccupied. While I considered the film a rather dull comedy the 65-year-old protagonist kept the audience in stitches. A scene where he placed an electric water boiler on the gas cooker seemingly unaware of plastic’s material qualities caused the greatest outburst of laughter. Afterwards the film makers were given a standing ovation lasting several minutes. Main actor Zdeněk Svěrák has enjoyed an unequalled popularity with the Czech audience since the nonsensical Jára Cimrman Theatre emerged in the 1960s. His appearance probably goes a long way to explaining the film’s success.

Altogether Peter Hames has composed a slender, yet comprehensive book that will serve as a good guide for future students of Czech and Slovak cinema. All the chapters are characterised by a great understanding of the historical developments combined with a good taste for the most important details. Fully equipped with a detailed index, filmography, and bibliography it certainly maps the uncharted territories.

Comment: Who does this? The public? Film critics? Politicians? Also, do Czech and Slovak funding councils avoiding funding films of this contentious period or not? Is it different in other C&EE countries? [PS]

Comment: As far as I can tell, you don’t mention any Slovak films. Do you think there is an imbalance towards Czech cinema in the book? While the Czech film industry was of course predominant, there were important Slovak contributions to the New Wave, e.g. Štefan Uher’s Slise v sieti (The Sun in a Net, 1963). [FJ]
Never before have I seen an author who in the first print of a new book ‘reprint-proofs’ the text by stressing that a certain event happened prior to the time of the book’s first publication. Peter Hames however envisaged future editions of his new book while working on the original manuscript and duly did so. A paperback copy will be needed for the book to sell out though, as £60 for 250 pages is far beyond the budget of most students.

Sune Bechmann
Genes and Stereotypes in Petra Soukupová’s K moři

Petra Soukupová’s first novel, K moři¹ (“To the Seaside”), was a literary sensation in the Czech Republic: it won the Jiří Orten Prize in 2008, and was also shortlisted for other literary prizes. K moři was compared to Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse (1927), but this appears to be a rather shallow comparison, since Soukupová’s style is different from that of Woolf. Soukupová’s second work, a collection of novels called Zmizet (“To Disappear”), was published in 2009 and it was nominated for the Josef Škvorecký Prize. Soukupová relates to the problems of modern families in her works. The voice is given both to adults and children whose accounts reveal how poorly they understand either their surroundings or their family members. In K moři, the reader follows the life of a man called Petr and his two families. The climax of the novel comes when Petr decides to take all of his four daughters from both families to the sea (presumably to the Croatian coast). The journey to the seaside reveals essential things about all the characters, and emphasizes the miscommunication in the family that distances them from one another.

In K moři, the narratorial focus changes frequently from one character to another; sometimes the sections are only a couple of lines long. This creates an impression of a kaleidoscope, although the narration is still under the control of an omnipresent narrator who filters the characters’ thoughts. Soukupová also uses prolepsis, that is, relates to the future of her characters before the story has reached that point in time. Some of the prolepses are in the form of summaries, which speeds up the narration and makes it possible to squeeze in most of the events in the characters’ lives. Prolepsis also creates a notion of fate: the course of the characters’ lives is already been determined and there is nothing they can do to change their lot.

All the characters of K moři are stereotypes and therefore points to a strong element of social satire in the novel. Petr is the absent father who rarely spends time with his children and does not know how to act around them. His daughters represent two groups; the beautiful (Bárka and Johanka) and the ugly (Jiťa and Aděla). Petr prefers the beautiful and determined ones to the ugly and quiet ones. His first wife Madga and second wife Klára are shallow, though well-meaning women who do not have any particular ambitions.

Apart from stereotypes, also genes play a role in K moři. Years go by, but the four daughters do not grow up at all: they keep to the same fundamental characteristics they had as children. Their parents’ modest efforts to cultivate

¹ Petra Soukupová, K moři, Prague 2007.
them are useless: especially Johanka refuses to be guided in any direction. She is a demonic child (and later a demonic adult) who does not care about anyone else except herself and enjoys bullying others, especially her sister Aděla. Johanka is the one who finds out that Aděla is adopted, and she does not hesitate to reveal this fact to her and enjoys seeing Aděla’s reaction. Johanka also competes with Bára since they are both their father’s pets, little princesses, who crave Petr’s attention. Jiťa and Aděla, on the other hand, are quiet and withdrawn children. Aděla becomes quite well-off in life, whereas Jiťa’s fate is miserable. First it seems that she finds happiness when she travels to Finland and discovers that the Finns are her soulmates: withdrawn, quiet and somehow pathetic people. She marries a Finnish man who, however, turns out to be a violent brute. Here, Soukupová attempts to depict national stereotypes and life abroad which is not a good choice either for Jiťa nor Johanka, who also leaves the Czech Republic. Johanka starts working as a model and moves to America where she becomes a drug addict and ends up destroying any chance she may have had to be happy. In Johanka’s case it would appear that the ‘zlá’ (evil) one gets what she deserves. Bára, the eldest of Petr’s children, lives a life which is quite mediocre, nothing too bad happens to her but neither does she attain any particular success.

In Soukupová’s novel the existence of a predetermined life affects the moral responsibility of her characters. They cannot be responsible of their actions, since everything is written in their genes. The author asks whether one can talk about moral standards if one has no responsibility at all. Blaming everything on the genes ultimately frees people from morality. This is also what takes place with Soukupová’s characters: they are stereotypes which are supposed to illustrate certain things in society and not ‘living’ human beings whose actions would be affected by a sense of responsibility. Perhaps because of this, there is a suffocating atmosphere in K moří: the characters have neither the responsibility nor the freedom to change their lives. Also the employment of prolepses as a narratorial device breaks the illusion that fiction usually tries to sustain; the illusion of the story somehow being ‘real’.

On the whole, Soukupová’s novel is a fascinating study of what can be communicated through stereotypes. It is in no means boring to read because of the frequent changes in focalization. Soukupová also offers an insight into the modern Czech society and social critique of it which ranges over the past few decades. Nevertheless, the focus is on the family and not on politics: there are no detailed references to the change of régime or any current political situation. In essence, K moří is a modern-day family saga with all its twists and turns.

Ilona Pallasvuo

Comment: Pathetic? Does she regard herself as pathetic and thus see Finns as soulmates? In that case, she’s surprisingly conscious of her own lack of self-esteem. [FJ]

Comment: It seems like distance or isolation might be a theme here; from how you describe the family’s interaction, everyone is sort of detached from their own social surroundings, and this ultimately continues in the next generation with the girls’ isolation within their own preordained fates, distant from any kind of agency or connection. [RS]

Comment: Is it explicitly written in their genes, or could their social/emotional formation, their upbringing (their parents’ relationship with them, for example) also be to blame? [RS]

Comment: Interesting, so is the author playing god for her own pleasure? Is she the one who likes watching her characters squirm? [MV]

Comment: This certainly fits well as a critique of Czech society, for example in their sense of eternal victimhood. [FJ]

Comment: Not really like a family saga if it doesn’t give the characters realistic features (sense of responsibility, etc.). Or do you mean that ‘modern’ family or life is made up of these kinds of people? [MV]
Maria and her Son
Ivan Horváth

Four floors with seven rooms each, cramped with unnecessarily large beds. On the ground floor a Chinese laundry, and to the right of the entrance the office, in which the landlord slept when he wasn't drunk. This ensemble was called Grandhotel de Lys and it reeked of cats. Like every good Parisian hotel landlady, Madame Fochet bred cats, on a large scale. They had names like Mimi, Fleurus and all sorts of others, and they often frightened people in the darkness of the night, when the electric light was switched off.

The soul of the Grandhotel, however, was neither the drunk landlord, nor Madame Fochet, who was responsible for the keys. It was Maria, who cleaned the rooms in the morning, darned stockings in the afternoon and slept with the lodger she fancied most at night. The landlord paid her for cleaning, the tenants promised payment for darning and the last activity was also easily accounted for.

"Monsieur, it's so cold in those godforsaken Parisian rooms. Nothing but fireplaces that can't be lit and a central heating that never works."

Incidentally, Maria came from the south.

Every morning, I was awoken by a powerful rapping on the door.

"Monsieur, it's already eleven, rise and shine!"

Maria, mop and broom in hand, settled in the room, opened the windows and let the dust fly. Sometimes she sang, and she always talked a lot.

"Monsieur, who is the girl in that photo there?"

"My girlfriend Maria."

"She's chic, I like her. It's kind of you to be faithful to her!"

"How do you know I'm faithful, Maria?"

Maria's smile grew bigger. Her red made-up lips were reflected by the whiteness of her teeth, like fresh blood.

"I just know what our residents are up to."

She shook off the dusters out the window, glanced at herself in the mirror and left.

A couple of days later she came to show me a photograph of a man.

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1 Ivan Horváth, “Mária a jej syn,” in Európa koktail, Martin (Slovakia) 2004, 42-44.
“Look, Monsieur, my fiancé. Isn't he handsome?”
“I didn't know you were engaged, Maria. Do you love him?”
“Of course I do. In a couple of years, once I've saved up some money, we'll get married.”

Maria lovingly looked at the photo and adjusted her hair. A child's cry from the street resonated through the windows. Maria frowned.

“Oh, these children. They never stop screaming.”
“Don't you like children, Maria?”
“No.”

“Wouldn't you like to have some once you're married?”

“Absolutely not, Monsieur. Why should I? They're just pests. Oh, I hate children, I'm sure I wouldn't survive giving birth.”

On days when drizzle washes the streets clean and the money is gone, there is nothing to do but sit at home. I stretched my hands towards the radiator, smoked and prepared for my studies. Maria was singing old sentimental songs in the next room, lulling me to sleep.

In January a friend of mine arrived and I organised lodgings in the Grand Hotel for him. He was slender and dark and Maria immediately took a fancy to him. After some time he no longer wanted to go out and when I asked him how he liked Maria, he got angry and accused me of suspecting him. He had been in the room next to mine, but moved rooms soon thereafter.

When Maria woke me in the mornings, she talked of the weather too much. Sometimes she didn't say anything, but just smiled. Once, when I wanted to visit her in the evening, it was dark in the corridor and that bloody Mimi, or another one of the cats, entangled herself in my legs. The cat let out a painful meow and I tripped, hitting the door as I fell. Behind it a conversation with Maria's voice was audible. The next day, Maria's smile was even bigger and she said:

“Your friend is funny, Monsieur, why does he want to hide that from you?”
“I don't know, Maria. Do you like him?”
“I do. I'd like a son from him.”
“But Maria, you don't want children.”
“Why, I don't mean that seriously. It's just a figure of speech when you really like someone.”
Maria was sitting on the armchair, laughing and drawing letters on the carpet with the broom. I don't know what was riding me when I asked:

“What would your fiancé say to that, Maria?” She stopped laughing and sneered:

“You foreigners are a funny lot.” She was pissed off.

From then on, Maria wouldn't talk to me any more in the mornings. When she came with mop and broom, I had to leave the room. And for quite a while, my friend would grumble at me every day.

Around the same time Madame Fochet left her drunkard of a husband and the keys. Mimi, Fleurus and the other cats departed to a better world. Cleaning my room in the mornings, Maria had tear-stained eyes and bloodless lips.

“Maria, I didn't know you liked the landlady that much. You're mourning her too much.”

“But no, Monsieur,” Maria said and started sobbing once more. “What do I care about the landlady. Read this.” She took a copy of Matin out from under her blouse and pointed to an article entitled: Bloody Unrests in Toulon.

“Police were forced to use arms in a clash with demonstrators... Among the casualties are...”

“Look Monsieur, my fiancé,” she said, pointing to a name.

After the death of the owner's wife, Maria rose in the hierarchy. The landlord took on a new girl for the cleaning. Maria took Madame Fochet's place in the office, where she watched over the keys and darned stockings. She had circles under her eyes, perhaps from the sorrow of losing her fiancé; whenever I stopped by the office, she constantly talked about him and about the police. And she read l'Œuvre and l'Humanité. With time she stopped talking about the fiancé and instead took to railing against the government.

Months passed and nothing changed in the hotel. New cats arrived, my new cleaner was called Enriqueta, and the landlord carried on getting drunk. Until one day I noticed that Maria was going to be a mother.

Out of surprise I wasn't even aware of how improper my remark was.

“But Maria, you told me you didn't want children!”

Irritated, she looked at me. Her face was austere, she had changed in general.

“I need someone to avenge my poor fiancé, don't I?”
A month later, I left the city, bidding farewell to Maria on friendly terms. When she shook my hand, she glanced in the mirror and adjusted her hair.

A year later I returned to the Grandhotel de Lys. I had come to visit my friend. I heard singing in the office. Maria was lulling her son to sleep with the Marseillaise.

Translated from the Slovak by Felix Jeschke
Lost in Translation?
On the Linguistic Consciousness of Magdalena Tulli
and the Struggles of her English Translator

Out of the novels Magdalena Tulli\(^1\) has written, the third one, Tryby (Moving parts, Archipelago Books 2005), proved to be the most controversial, since Polish critics have not yet been able to reach an agreement on the interpretation of this text\(^2\). Some would like to see it as an instance of the ‘literature of exhaustion’\(^3\) or a metanarrative on the process of writing fiction.\(^3\) Others argue that the novel aims at exposing the superficiality of human relationships and life in general and depicts the struggle to reach the truth, which ends in failure.\(^4\) Yet, whatever one’s final interpretation of this text may be, it cannot be denied that one of the recurrent and foregrounded themes of this novel is language.

Throughout the whole text Tulli does not allow her readers to forget that once they have opened the book they enter the linguistic reality and she does it by means of an original, highly metaphoric style, abundant with imagery and similes. With each sentence and each paragraph it becomes more and more evident that Tulli is extremely conscious of the resources of her mother tongue. She overtly comments on the metaphors, tenses, verb forms, noun cases and gender of the words and phrases she uses. By doing so she invites her readers to a guided backstage tour of the writer’s workshop and shows them the “moving parts” of literature, usually hidden from our eyes.

This linguistic hyper-sensitivity of the text makes its comprehension difficult and complicates the task of the translator to an enormous extent, who cannot limit himself to conveying the plot, which by itself is very scarce, but should also aim at rendering the style of Tulli’s writing.\(^5\) When it comes to translating the novel into English, the task is even more challenging, as one has to render Polish, a Slavonic language with fully-developed nominal and adjectival declension patterns, as well as conjugational paradigms, into a West Germanic language with only some remnants of the genitive and accusative

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\(^{1}\) Magdalena Tulli, born in 1955, is one of the most interesting contemporary Polish novelists. In 1995, she was awarded a prize by the Knöchel Foundation for her first novel Sny i kamienie (Dreams and stones, translated by Bill Johnston in 2004). She has been nominated for the NIKE award, the most distinguished Polish literary award.

\(^2\) Mizuro, Marta, “Śmieszne ruchy,” Fa-Art (51-52) 2003, 1-2, pp. 112-113.

\(^3\) Ostaszewski, Robert, “Koniec w środku,” Dekada Literacka 2003, 5-6, pp. 81-83.

cases and a very simple conjugation pattern. A short analysis of two passages of the novel will highlight the difficulties with which its translator, Bill Johnston, had to struggle.

The following passage comes from the very beginning of the text and consists of an insight into the inner thoughts of the narrator, who reflects on the quality of his existence:

Za całą treść egzystencji wystarczyć musi historyjka wytrząsnięta przez kogoś z rękawa od niechcenia. Złakniona podmiotów i orzeczeń, wczepona w tkankę niczym rzadkiego rodzaju żarłoczny pasożyt.  

A tale someone has nonchalantly conjured up must suffice for the entire substance of his existence. A tale hungry for subjects and predicates, lodged in their tissue like a rare species of rapacious parasite.

The second sentence from this quotation describes “a tale” by means of anthropomorphism, depicting it as “a parasite” which is hungry for subjects and predicates. The striking thing about the Polish original is that the sentence in an iconic way actually shows an utterance being indeed “hungry” for the subject and the predicate, as it lacks both. Nevertheless it is a perfectly correct grammatical sentence, as the first word – “złakniona” (“hungry” feminine gender, nominative case), which is an adjectival participle, agrees in gender with the subject of the previous sentence – “historyjka” (“a tale” feminine gender, nominative case), and thus points to it as the implied subject of the second sentence. The utterance lacks also the predicate; there are only two adjectival participles: “złakniona” and “wczepiona” (“lodged”). Yet in the English translation, the sentence is no longer an iconic depiction of the phenomenon it describes, as the subject “a tale” must be introduced – otherwise the adjective “hungry” would refer to the first noun that precedes it: “his existence.”

The second passage, which clearly shows the difficulties of rendering the novel into English, consists of the narrator’s thoughts on the surname of the wife of one of the characters, Feuchtmeyer. The narrator is wondering how to form the feminine for form of this surname so it may be inflected.

W ostateczności można by nawet utworzyć zwyczajową żeńską formę, każąc doszlusować do rozwiętej kolumny pododdziałowi kobiecej służby pomocniczej w sile dwóch.

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sylab. Dopiero dzięki niemu można pokonać zasieki dopelniczą i ruszyć dalej.7

In the last resort the language allows the conventional feminine form “Feuchtmeierowa,” ordering a subunit of the female auxiliary corps comprising two syllables to reinforce the deployed column. Only with this reinforcement will it be possible to cross the barbwire of the genitive and push on.8

In the Polish original, when the narrator, using a military metaphor, speaks of adding two additional syllables to the masculine form of the surname, he does not mention its new form, as the readers are capable of reconstructing it themselves. In the translation, however, it is necessary, otherwise the meaning of this passage would not be comprehensible to the reader. The second sentence, which states that one can come out victorious from an encounter with the genitive only now, also requires additional knowledge on the part of the English reader – he should be aware that only nouns ending in a vowel “-a” (apart from few exceptions ending in consonants) may take the endings of the feminine inflection, therefore the previous form of the surname, “Feuchtmeier,” would not be able to “cross the barbwire of the genitive.”

The sentences quoted above, even though they hardly do justice to the accomplished literary workshop of Magdalena Tulli, depict fairly well the problems arising when it comes to translating her work into English. One could ask whether it is at all possible to render a text which is immersed to such enormous extent into a flectional language into another, much more analytic one. Yet Bill Johnston attempted it and thanks to his efforts – even though many of the linguistic nuances have inevitably been lost – Tulli’s creation has been made accessible to a vast English-speaking audience, by which it has been very well received.9

Joanna Rzepa

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Commentators for this issue were:

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LC – Lianne Claydon
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LJ – Lisa Jeschke
TP – Tena Prelec
JK - Jack Reilly
PS – Paul Sims
TS – Tijana Stevanović
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ASz – Anna Szász
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The next issue is due to come out in March 2010, so start writing and get in touch!

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