

BOOK REVIEWS

Richard Gott, *Britain's Empire: Resistance, Repression and Revolt*, London & New York: Verso, 2011, pp. 568, ISBN: 9781844677382

Richard Gott's 2011 study *Britain's Empire: Resistance, Repression and Revolt* taps into recent "history wars" about the legacy of the British Empire and its "secret" history. In sixty-six brief chapters arranged both chronologically and spatially, Gott presents the less sunny and often shameful story of the Pax Britannica i.e. the Empire's dealings with the "lesser nations." The book records numerous instances when the Empire used military conquest and dictatorship to gain new lands and then often resorted to extreme violence to quell the violent reactions that its rule by the sword sparked.

Gott's study spans two hundreds years of imperial history, from the 1750s to the mid 19th century, and it straddles various locations such as Ireland, America, the West Indies, India and African countries. It is a pity that the book does not finish with the demise of the Empire, but, on the other hand, there are other books that engage with the late history of the British Empire, such as Jeremy Paxman's *Empire: What Ruling the World Did to the British*, Kwasi Kwarteng's *Ghosts of the Empire* or, first and foremost, Mike Davis's *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World* (also published by Verso) to name but a few. Gott's narrative of the conquest, subjugation and extermination of various indigenous peoples' and their heroic, though futile, resistance can serve as a prelude to these earlier studies. What seems even more important is that the book can also be considered as a welcome corrective to the official history of the Empire disseminated by mass media, complacent educators and apologists for British imperialism, such as the maverick historian Niall Ferguson whose widely read books (*Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* published in 2004; *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* published in 2006) circulate an uncritical perspective on the history of Anglo-American imperialism.

By concentrating on the stories of the colonized rather than the Empire builders and rulers, and by reckoning with the often unheard-of stories of resistance to British encroachments, the book achieves a very important objective—it brings to light the underside of British imperialism and shows the extent to which it was resented by local societies. As Gott argues in his introduction, “wherever the British sought to plant their flag, they met with opposition. In almost every colony they had to fight their way ashore. While they could count sometimes on a handful of friends and allies, they never arrived as welcome guests, for the expansion of empire was invariably conducted as a military operation. The initial opposition continued off and on, and in varying forms, in almost every colonial territory until independence.” Gott gives voice to those who defied the imperial expansion such as the Northern American Pontiac, Jamaican Nanny and Tacky or Quebecois Louis-Joseph Papineau, challenging “the customary depiction of the colonized as *victims*, lacking in agency or political will.” In this way Gott demolishes the triumphalism of the history of the British Empire, convincing the reader not to purchase “a self-satisfied and largely hegemonic belief . . . that the empire was an imaginative, civilizing enterprise, reluctantly undertaken, that brought the benefits of modern society to backwards people.”

Gott’s book is liable to touch a raw nerve of British society by challenging and contesting the dominant stories of British imperialism. When read contrapuntally with the work of such ideologues of western imperialism as Niall Ferguson, for example, Gott’s counter-narrative shows that the Empire was certainly not a godsend “obtained with a minimum degree of force, and maintained with maximum cooperation from a grateful indigenous population.” It was not a benign and benevolent power that brought the underdeveloped world into the modern, liberal and capitalist fold, but a vicious foreign force that operated through fierce repression, wholesale slaughter, nothing short of genocide or holocaust, as Mike Davis has pointed out.

Gott’s book is narrated in a dispassionate tone—he does not explicitly denounce the Empire (except in the “Introduction”), but the gruesome stories of the brutal oppression and violent resistance do make the point, bringing it home to readers that all empires come notoriously with shockingly high death tolls among the native peoples. This message seems particularly relevant not only for some historians who remain trapped in the colonial mindset. It is particularly important for many British consumers of heritage cinema, who in words of Paul Gilroy’s, are still suffering from “post-imperial melancholia.” According to Gilroy it is very difficult for an average British person to look back at the history of the Empire with

shame rather than pride-British society, argues Gilroy, "found itself oddly unable to mourn and work through its loss of the Empire" or come to terms with "the shame that has attended the exposure of Britain's colonial crimes." Tapan Raychaudhuri, an Indian historian, offers an interesting explanation of the British postcolonial malaise. Namely by drawing on the example of the Japanese post-war reckoning of their historical past, he quotes a Japanese historian who "pointed out that nations do not assess their historical past radically unless they have gone through the experience of social revolution or crushing defeat in a war." Since Britain was spared such experiences it is quite natural for its public opinion to turn a blind eye to the Empire's crimes and lend an ear to historians who, like Ferguson, glorify its achievements. But Gott's book provides irrefutable evidence that the British Empire was not "an Empire of good intentions," but an entirely "wrong empire," to quote Simon Schama out of context. Its civilizing mission was only a smoke screen for extermination and exploitation, extortion, killings and tortures. Its ultimate source of power was not the enlightened civilization but military operation, routine violence and raw coercion.

Thus Gott's book challenges the mainstream history of the British presence in various nooks and corners of the world. It is an honest and thought-provoking book, difficult to read at times, because of the harrowing atrocities it describes. But this is a much needed book which may finally annul the feeling of regret and nostalgia that often accompany the recollections of the British imperial past. It invalidates any attempt to use the story of British colonial past as a means to teach patriotism to the masses, as it makes impossible the repetition of the old lies about the grandeur and goodness of the imperial mission.

According to Gott, "Britain's colonial experience" was characterized by the "physical and cultural extermination" of native peoples. It "ranks more closely with the exploits of Genghiz Khan or Attila the Hun than with those of Alexander the Great, although these particular leaders have themselves been subjected to considerable historical revisionism in the recent years." Consequently in Gott's study the great heroes of the British Empire are on their way to becoming the great villains of the twenty-first century. They "provided a blueprint for the genocides of twentieth century Europe," and consequently they "rank with the dictators of the twentieth century as the authors of crimes against humanity on an infamous scale."

The only shortcoming of this extensive and inspiring study seems to be the swiftness with which Gott takes the reader through the ignoble episodes of the British imperial history. The laconic, shorthand manner of narration swamps the reader with overwhelming facts. Gott does

explain how the Empire managed to secure its continuity, but he does not explain the rationale behind its existence i.e. the economic underside of the imperial ideology, in a way that some other historians, most notably Mike Davis does. Also the arrangement of the book, which resembles a chronicle with quickly alternating sections about different loci of resistance, makes it a little bit difficult to follow Gott's narration and to grasp the larger sense of the events he describes. To follow one particular story of resistance, let's say of the Jamaican people, the reader has to flick through half of this massive book. Moreover, the author devotes the same amount of attention to each of these events so the reader might be at a loss in trying to assess their scope and relevance to the world's history. A little bit of authorial guidance or comment would certainly help the reader to create a more comprehensive and cohesive picture of the historic context in which they appear. This is, however, a small inconvenience that is fully compensated by the book's numerous accomplishments. The great strength of this provocative book, and its greatest achievement, is that it brings in one volume, in brief but vividly narrated chapters, compelling stories of resistance of the conquered and the vanquished, which together "make nonsense of the accepted imperial version of what went on."

Izabella Penier

Reghina Dascal, Ed., *Episodes from the History of Undoing. The Heritage of Female Subversiveness*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, ISBN: 1-4438-3611-7

Female Rebels with a Cause:

"Whenever you see a board up with
'Trespassers will be prosecuted,' trespass at once."

Virginia Woolf's rebellious statement noted above encouraged an army of heretical women to act politically, to have a cause. For a woman to break the law as an illegal trespasser has meant, in a metaphorical sense, to disembowel herself from a stereotypical female nature, which like entrails, culturally formed her substance. Discussions on the essence of femininity have a long tradition, and one contention is worth recalling here. It is believed that many generations of women passed on to other women a "hereditary disease," which might be called cultural inertia.

The term suggests that since mass can be considered a measure of a body's inertia, they contributed to a heavy production of cultural inactivity. Even though women were biologically fertile, for centuries they did not count as (visible) cultural producers. That their bodies matter has been acknowledged differently by themselves and by those, who wished to boil it down to a very minor matter, that is to say, to "an empty vessel" (an ancient Greek concept), *per analogiam* to an internal space of their bodies that is open, waiting to be filled by men, or to be occupied by growing children.

As the life inside a maternal environment develops, it is not aware of the fact that when it leaves this safe "envelope," the cultural territory that awaits it has a long-lasting tradition of fashion patterns, namely gender clothing. It is a newborn "penis" that is culturally most wanted, not "a vagina." Here are some reasons (or just a small portion of argument), explaining why gender difference (and inferiority) are in effect and maintain "the law of the father" (as Jacques Lacan describes the symbolic-linguistic order of Western culture) as well as certain social practices. In *Women, Science, and Myth: Gender Beliefs from Antiquity to the Present*, Sue V. Rosser explains that:

If the baby is a girl, in addition to receiving a pink cap and diapers with different reinforced padding than that given to boys, the adults will talk more to her and describe her as smaller with finer features than they would the same if told he was a boy. These responses suggest the initiation of a series of behaviors, expectations, and stereotypes that will determine parameters and norms for whom that baby is likely to marry, what career she is more likely to have, and a probable series of other likes, interests, and outcomes for her life. If the baby is a boy, he'll be described as larger, be talked to less, and be given more visual stimulation. The adults will also anticipate gender determinations based on his sex such as falling in love with a woman and being more likely to become an engineer than a nurse. These determinations result from the beliefs that masculinity and femininity are associated with particular roles and behaviors in a particular culture, time, or society.

It is worth noting that within a globally shared human condition, a patriarchal structure (having many "local" variants), men are privileged, promoted and stimulated to repeat societal norms that re-create a mythical scenario, in which a strong, virile, active and rational male figure is worshipped. Generally, women also reinforce these qualities, be it as mothers, wives or widows, therefore male domination is still a norm. By changing societal norms of masculinity, situation of both, "colonizers" and "colonized" might be negotiated, or more radically speaking, gradually altered by "tunneling through" a solid cultural ground. Especially women, who shed the light on some facts and figures about the status of women in Western society, have played a pivotal role

in this process. Acting as tunnel-diggers, remaining in hiding, they found a way to act subversively: ooze, infiltrate, pervade, foray from under the ground. Taking actions against the oppressive system belowground, they also acted against gravity. If this natural force of attraction is taken into consideration, a male discoverer—Isaac Newton—has to be evoked. Perhaps, if women were allowed to establish physical laws, we would not associate gravitation with Newton's apple but with Émilie du Châtelet, one of the most enlightened feminine minds of the French Enlightenment-era, a physicist and a translator of Newton. Recalling such prominent figures as the above-mentioned female trail-blazer has a short tradition, yet as women became aware that only through "thorough excavations" within history or his-story (as it was suggested by feminists), her story might be found.

Among many "digging tactics," one has definitely left tangible evidence, that of writing against the grain. Subversiveness as a strategy of women's resistance and manifestation of their cultural presence is discussed in a collection of essays, *Episodes from a History of Undoing: The Heritage of Female Subversiveness*, edited by Reghina Dascăl and prefaced by Margaret R. Higonnet ("Unwinding Narratives of Gender and the Weaving of Antistructures"). Eleven articles written by women from different cultural backgrounds, namely American, Brazilian, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian and Turkish, raise the issue of "trespassing" when it is forbidden, recalling and refreshing the stories of feminine daredevils. In their attempts to revive particular styles of resistance, they evoke examples ranging from Queen Elizabeth I to contemporary feminists, who not only theorize but use their provocative and ground-breaking ideas in practice. The collection of essays is organized in five sections/chapters, each presenting "the history of undoing" (the term is inspired by Rada Khumar's title of the book (1993), *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990*).

Chapter one is devoted to "Early Fashionings of Agency and Auctorial Self" and comprises two illuminating articles: Dana Percec's "Elizabeth I: Creativity, Authorship, and Agency" and "A Woman for All Seasons: Christine de Pizan" by Reghina Dascăl. The Virgin Queen is portrayed by Percec not only as one of the most admired English monarchs but, thanks to a discovery and discussion of a large body of her writings (poems letters, prayers, speeches, translations and even prayers), as "a refined scholar, and a talented author." Another example of a subversive woman writer at the turn of the 15th century, who "was the first professional female author to write in her own name since Sappho in Ancient Greek," is a Frenchwoman, Christine de Pizan. Whereas Elizabeth I crosses gender boundaries, revealing maleness/femaleness of

(her)self, de Pizan-the target figure of Dascăl feminist analysis-lays bare social inferior position of women, urging them to refuse remaining silent and invisible.

In the second part Nóra Séllei and Voichita Nachescu deal with "Feminist Consciousness Coming of Age" in two compelling essays: "An Island of Dissident Thoughts": Orwell versus *Three Guineas* by Virginia Woolf" and "Feminist Consciousness-Raising and the Psychotherapeutic Sensibility of the 1960s: Rethinking the Connection." Séllei's intention is to juxtapose Woolf's and Orwell's attitude to politics, its institutions and ensuing power/gender relations. She finds Woolf's writing more radical than Orwell's and concludes that the text of the first author aims at "the radical critique-or undoing-of all the major elements of Englishness in history from a markedly feminine perspective." Nachescu's article shows the complex relationship between radical feminism and the psychotherapeutic discourses of the 1960s. The latter were criticized by radical activists, but simultaneously some aspects were adapted to their philosophy in order to remain subversive within the Women's Liberation Movement.

Part three-"Re-reading and Re-writing the Past"-consists of three essays, which turn to different narrative forms as places of resistance, where history might be undone and rewritten. In "Herta Muller and Undoing the Trauma in Ceausescu's Romania" Adriana Raducanu explains that Muller, a Nobel prize winner, exploits "the particular type of Gothic that pervades her novels" that becomes a textual strategy of coping with traumatic experiences from the past and her fight for being acknowledged as a female writer. In the next essay by Rita Terezinha Schmidt, entitled "(Re)Engendering the Past/Recovering Women's Writings: The Works of Feminist Criticism in Brazil," the author considers a recovery of Brazilian women's writings (non canonical texts, written in an unconventional way) as crucial to understanding national identity, based on gender and racial discrimination. Gender stereotyping is an issue raised in another essay within this section, namely Andreea Serban's "(Little) Red Riding Hood: A British-American History of Undoing." She selects four narratives that use the concept of Red Riding Hood to "challenge and break gender and social schemata" and demonstrate how crucial fairy tales are to building an imaginary gender-related schema.

The subsequent chapter focuses on "Undoing Interlocking Systems of Oppression," exploring how "cultural outsiders" (women) might be brought back to their "motherlands" and finally become visible and audible. It opens with Amber West's "Power Play: Two Black Feminist Playwrights (En)counter Intersectionality," where the author clearly

demonstrates how “interrelated forms of oppression,” especially experienced by the most subordinated, that is to say, groups of African American women, are presented in literature created by the oppressed themselves: Adreinne Kennedy and Ntozake Shange. Another inspiring essay, entitled “Undoing the History of Engendered Nation in Three Narratives of Caribbean Feminism: *In the Name of Salome* by Julia Alvarez, *The Autobiography of My Mother* by Jamaica Kincaid, *Krik? Krak!* by Edwidge Danticat, is a contribution by Izabella Penier. She investigates how “the three expatriate women writers,” “daughters of a different West Indian nation,” become consciously entangled (within their narratives) in the issue of nationalism and nationalist discourses while they criticize patriarchal structures repeatedly recreated by male authors through their usage of a gender-biased rhetoric of the nation.

In the last section—“Challenging the Curricular Canon”—two different essays: “English Cultural/Gender Studies: An Eastern European Perspective” by Nóra Séllei and “Loitering with Internet: Gender Studies and English Studies in the Romanian Academe” by Reghina Dascăl, address an issue of the status and presence of gender/cultural studies as an academic discipline in Eastern Europe, discussing Romania as a case study. Both authors highlight the fact that these fields of studies are still treated with tolerance, yet characterized by a tongue-in-chick-attitude. In Dascăl’s opinion: “academic feminism is seen as a challenge, as a critique of a severely hierarchical, rigid and ossified system, authoritarian, excessively competitive and revolving around the “boys’ networks.”” The closing articles confirm the thesis that in order to survive, women of different cultural backgrounds still have to follow Woolf’s advice and “trespass at once”, no matter the consequences. All in all, they have a cause . . . and they are crafty and shrewd rebels. On the one hand they may run the gauntlet, while on the other—they meticulously and persistently dig the tunnels.

Episodes from a History of Undoing deserves attention since it keeps the reader awake each time either a new subversive strategy is presented, or a “dynamiter’s” story retold. It offers a valuable publication to a gender-minded reader. The volume attests to the importance of the need to contest, change and correct the mistakes of the past. This book is also a tribute to women actively negotiating, reconstructing, and re-imagining their identities in opposition to dominant cultural constructions. This ambitious collection of daring and elaborate essays should not be overlooked by those readers, who wish to become textually engaged in the way women “break the law of gravity,” constituting new laws that revolutionize the cultural worlds they inhabit.

Marta Wiszniowska-Majchrzyk, *Studies in 20th Century Literary/Cultural Britain*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kardynała Wyszyńskiego, 2011, pp. 440, ISBN 978-83-7072-707-9

Professor Wiszniowska-Majchrzyk's latest study, entitled *Studies in 20th Century Literary/Cultural Britain*, is a very ambitious project to map out major developments in British literature, culture and criticism in the previous century and to outline possible new trajectories in the twenty-first century. Not surprisingly the book is sweeping in scope and massive in volume. It focuses primarily on drama and theatre (about half of the book's chapters) and will be of particular interest to scholars and students working in this area. The book is meant to be a continuation of Professor Wiszniowska-Majchrzyk's previous study *...by action dignified... British Theatre 1968–1995: Text and Context* published in 1997 by Nicholas Copernicus University Press (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika). The present study, as the author explicates, is meant to be a revision and expansion of her previous publication. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, Professor Wiszniowska-Majchrzyk looks critically back on her previous assumptions by placing them against the backdrop of momentous cultural and social transformations of the twentieth century such as globalization, multiculturalism and rise of new social movements such as feminism.

The book shows how the dramatic social and political changes in Great Britain were intimately intertwined with cultural production and criticism. The book not only provides an overview of all important traditions and concepts that are still relevant to the cultural landscape of the twenty-first century but it also investigates the connections/collusions between literary studies and current political issues. The book discusses for example the highly politicized theatre of the 1970s and 1980s and numerous clashes between the so called heritage drama and its anti-heritage postmodern rewritings. It draws the reader's attention to the new visibility of the contemporary alternative feminist theatre. It also mentions some notable re-stagings of Shakespeare whose aim was to explore current agendas, not only political and feminist but also existentialist or environmental.

Studies in 20th Century Literary/Cultural Britain presents a subjective and authorial point of view on the history of English prosaic and dramatic literature. It proposes a re-periodisation of English literature by arguing that postmodernist aesthetics is a "common denominator" for much of literature produced in the twentieth century. Thus the study takes issue with many outlines of twentieth century British literature that write its history in two large strokes: first there was modernism and then, in due time, postmodernism. Professor Wiszniowska-Majchrzyk

convincingly argues that it is a history that abbreviates and misleads because the seeds of modern practices can be found in many writers publishing their work from the first to the last decade of the previous century. In books by writers from various epochs, such as Oscar Wilde, Rudyard Kipling, Lawrence Durrell, V. S. Naipaul or Tracey Chevalier, a discerning critic will be able to see some of the characteristic postmodernist aesthetics such as “merging arts, conventions and traditions, resigning from their verifying/verifiable goals, balkanizing genres, transgressing conventions (hybridization), negating probabilities both external and internal . . . rewriting history (history as text), using ‘classics’ as ‘memory blank,’ thus partaking in the ongoing debate on the using of intertextuality, carnivalizing registers and personalizing texts, oscillation between almost de-personalization of criticism and literature and the insistence on the writers’ re-defined authority, rejecting and re-writing ideologies.” It is this “postmodernism in hiding or *avant la lettre*,” combined with “the globalization of themes” in postcolonial literature, that, as Professor Wiszniowska-Majchrzyk provocatively contends, was the vehicle of acculturation and maybe even cultural imperialism in contemporary Great Britain. As the study surveys the literary scene from the early 20th century to the present, it excavates, as a part of its revisionist project, some undervalued literary creations of both famous and lesser-known literary figures.

The book will also acquaint readers with major theoretical contributions to English literary studies. One chapter of *Studies in 20th Century Literary/Cultural Britain* is devoted to the upsurge and flourishing of British cultural studies. It recounts famous debates on the meaning and definition of culture, ranging from Mathew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* to Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society*, and it relates the ongoing discussion with reference to Terry Eagleton’s *The Idea of Culture* (2000) and Raymond Williams’s 2004 study *Mass Media and a Mass Society*. Professor Wiszniowska-Majchrzyk seems to concentrate a lot on the negative critical assessment of mass culture, bypassing those critics who showed more appreciation of its democratic vistas. Numerous citations, almost exclusively offering negative views of popular culture in 20th century Britain, reinforce the impression that, on the average, British critics favored high culture and were averse to popular culture. Moreover, what also seems to be missing in Professor Wiszniowska-Majchrzyk’s account is the contribution of Black cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall or Paul Gilroy, who emphasize the continuing relevance of race in any analysis of culture in Great Britain. But to include even more in this otherwise sizable and comprehensive volume would perhaps be too much to ask.

Of particular interest to Polish readers will be the chapters that explore the connections between the English studies and European and

Polish culture. For example, the chapter titled “Creeping counterrevolution’ or “Hamlet behind the Iron Curtain” illustrates how Hamlet’s rich political potential was used in Polish performances in the communist period. On the other hand, the chapter “Sex, gender and the female body” proposes a comparative reading of female authored texts from England, Poland and Germany, which bear, in Professor Wiszniowska-Majchrzyk words, “striking ideological and artistic convergences.” Finally, the chapter “Narrating foreign culture in the Age of Globalisation: British writers on Poland” presents post-war British literature that features Polish protagonists or has a Polish setting, such as, for example, in the plays: Rattingan’s *Flare Path*, Mercer’s *The Birth of a Private Man*, Poliakoff’s *Coming to Land* or in the novels: Tuohy’s *The Ice Saints* or Murdoch’s *The Flight from Enchanter* or *Nuns and Soldiers*.

Due to its immense scope, the study may give an impression of drifting off in different directions that seem to be less relevant to its main subject matter, but, in the end, Professor Wiszniowska-Majchrzyk always manages to deftly tie up all the loose ends. On the whole, the book is highly original, compelling and thought provoking. Professor Wiszniowska-Majchrzyk is very persistent in her attempt to highlight various elements of postmodern practice in its various literary oeuvres of the twentieth century and she manages to steer clear of the pitfall of oversimplification. Therefore *Studies in 20th Century Literary/Cultural Britain* is a good introduction for anybody with serious interest in English studies.

Izabella Penier

***Man, Chicks are Just Different (Baby są jakieś inne)* dir. Marek Koterski, Poland, 2011, 90 min.**

*This is a man’s world, this is a man’s world
But it wouldn’t be nothing, nothing
without a women or a girl
He’s lost in the wilderness
He is lost in bitterness
– James Brown, Betty Newsome*

*Why should I be bothered, what people in America might think about me.
I care if dudes from the neighborhood appreciate my movie.
– Marek Koterski*

Marek Koterski is one of the few contemporary Polish film directors cultivating the tradition of auteurism. His previous projects mostly concerned matters concerning locals and compatriots. Nevertheless, this

latest film touches on the universal phenomenon of the battle of the sexes. *Man, Chicks are Just Different* (*Baby są jakieś inne*) is a controversial work both because of its content and form. The film is a feature-length work, but it lacks conventionally understood plot and gender roles-in it the "feminists are guys with fake boobs." However, before I focus on the film, I think it is worth taking a closer look at Koterski's filmography.

Adaś Miauczyński, the director's alter ego and the main character of his films, is a perpetual malcontent, a red-hot nonconformist, an obsessive-compulsive loser in life, an alcoholic-intellectual full of big dreams and even bigger claims about the world which he despises. He appears in various guises as an assistant director of a poor film, an unfulfilled writer, a culture critic, an educator who hates his students, a divorcee who is constantly looking for an ideal woman, a sissy who did not bear the burden of fatherhood. He is a reflection of a generation which had fed their dreams on socialism, which later on without any warning, was devalued and turned into loose change by capitalism. He is somebody who we (Poles) all laugh at and, at the same time, are terribly afraid to discover as a part of ourselves. Adaś Miauczyński is a cult figure of Polish cinema, a successor of national archetypes, a bard-philologist, who inhabits a post-Soviet block of flats, where all his ideals are trapped. Koterski fits him in the pageant of national heroes and myths, and places him on the Akkerman steppes (see the author's notes) of capitalist concrete car parks among the jungle of monumental Soviet-style architecture of his youth, and, flagstone by flagstone, block by block, unveils a mosaic hidden underneath the slap-dash atmosphere that surrounds him.

But most of all, it is language that is one of the keys to, if not the most important element of, Koterski's cinematic work. Koterski is best known for the movie entitled *Dzień Świra* (*Day of the Wacko*, 2002), which made Adaś Miauczyński a peculiar celebrity in Poland. It is a parody of the national epic *Pan Tadeusz* (the full English title is *Sir Thaddeus, or the Last Lithuanian Foray: A Nobleman's Tale from the Years of 1811 and 1812 in Twelve Books of Verse*), written as a syllabic lyric with specific meter. It is almost like a national bible, whose introduction every Polish child must learn by heart, even before the Lord's Prayer. Koterski, in the same sophisticated metric form of this idyllic apotheosis of Polishness, incorporates the contemporary slang of the Polish streets, the language behind the closed doors of ridiculously small flats, the language of unintelligibly long corridors, trashy subways, concrete backyards and devastated playgrounds, the language of flashy media and clamorous parliamentary sessions.

Similarly, in *Man, Chicks are Just Different*, language carries a certain critical weight. On the one hand, as a ground for gender stereotypes, it

reflects the patriarchal culture; on the other hand, the main characters in the film—two guys in a car—carry a conversation that lacks the words to establish their position in the reality they happen to inhabit. The language becomes a kind of restraint, a game, in which the men are deprived of their dominant position and so they fight with hags, chicks, whores, businesswomen, feminist-gladiators, butch women, witches and bitches in an effort not to lose, not to become fags, sissies, queers, an unemployed Mr. Housewife or clumsy Mr. Mom. The weapon with which the director equips his characters Adaś (Adam Woronowicz) and his mate Pucio (Robert Więckiewicz) is the language itself. It is a very insidious tool, an armament of discrimination, but also of law, science and superstitions, which you simply cannot escape or hide from. The battle field is set in the car on the road with few intersections. The roadway space seems to be the last male bastion, where men find themselves unrivalled, and, thus, safe.

Traffic regulations are the provisions of the male-dominated world: clear, transparent, analytical and dependent on a dichotomous choice. They allow the characters to navigate seamlessly if you read the signs in a proper way. There is no room for discussion, hesitation or emotions. These are the kind of rules that women find so hard to adapt to. Maybe because it is not inherent in their nature to make quick decisions or perhaps due to the fact that, according to popular belief, they have a poor sense of direction, or maybe because the world for them is not divided into the left and right side.

Koterski takes us on an hour-and-a-half journey with two frustrated, socially castrated males, who, while talking about women, reveal unconsciously their own fears. In the words of one of the protagonists: "I feel hemmed in by women, I am afraid of them, I am in retreat, pushed against the wall, cornered." In the very first scene the director sets up the rhythm of the film, smoothly moving from the prosaic situation where two buddies are complaining about the chick behind the wheel to the broader discussion, which will become the subject matter of the film, and which opens with a diagnosis of the female brain. Koterski, the screenwriter of all his movies, through his characters carries out a sophisticated dialogue between scientific or sociological research and the superstitions and prejudice that such research may inadvertently encourage. He is juggling with statistics, colloquial sayings, scientific theories and sexist vulgarities. However, he is not legitimizing any of the discourses. He undermines them and puts question marks after all cardinal statements.

In the very beginning of the embryonic development all human beings are women. It is the activation of androgens at some point of that

development that determines that the fetus will be male. The protagonists of the film discuss the condition of the Y gene associated with the male sex, which seems to disappear over the course of evolution. *Man, Chicks are Just Different* refers to another cult Polish movie, *Seksmisja* (*Sexmission*, dir. Juliusz Machulski, 1984, see the author's notes), in which two men are put into a state of hibernation as a part of an experiment. When they wake up, after fifty years instead of three, it turns out that they are the only men left in the world. In the diegetic world of this movie, a civilization created only by women in the mine underground is the result of disaster, an outbreak of nuclear war that led to the extinction of the Y gene. In this story, the men are presented as heroes, who by rescuing women trapped underground restore the natural order of things and the joy of life generated through sex and procreation. Those two male characters are supported by her Excellency, the leader of apocalyptic feminism, who turns out to be a man with numerous complexes and stuffed fake breasts. Koterski's characters, Adaś and Pucio, apparently live in a nightmare which has come true; they will not save the world with their penises, will not inseminate it with their views, as this world has been intentionally castrated and with premeditation. It is a world which is not the result of a cataclysm, but a development of civilization. This is where they find themselves during their conversation in the car on the roadway, a road to doom. According to the film's protagonists, equal rights for women and men are in fact discriminating against men. Women are taking over male domains one after another, but for men there is no social acceptance to function in stereotypically feminine roles. As Adaś and Pucio speak, important and not very politically correct opinions emerge, a male point of view suggesting that men are now a modern cultural minority.

The virtues traditionally attributed to men, such as strength and care-giving, are nowadays perceived as being brutal and patriarchal, while, at the same time, women's magazines are filled with articles in search of "true" men. The modern man must be both a knight and an empathetic partner, weak and strong at the same time. A lack of cultural patterns, which could conceivably establish a certain balance in all this ambivalence, is one of the reasons, as the director suggests, for what he calls the "Peter Pan syndrome." One of the characters defiantly declares: "Since I do not know what kind of man I should become I'll remain a boy." Among different and more or less humorous statements that criticize feminism, there is also a position which defines feminism as a movement that, paradoxically, legitimizes the patriarchal order. Instead of searching for a new order, women are said to prefer to wear trousers just to gain access to knowledge and power, which for ages they were

denied. Nevertheless, the male characters admit that if one day women disappeared, they would not see any reason to live.

It is worth noting how perverse the promotion of the film was. The poster, featuring a naked female torso with her nipples covered with censor-like titillating stars, and the sexually-explicit trailer, suggested this was not going to be an overly sophisticated film. It clearly appeared this would be a light-hearted comedy colored with trite chauvinistic jokes, outright politically incorrect in all form and manner, the kind of talk usually shared among male buddies in a locker room or bar. The only part that did not fit into this jigsaw puzzle was the slogan: "The most feminine comedy about men." This vicious game that Koterski plays with the audience is constructed on several levels. Almost like a self-referential chess game with social expectations, this is a significant commentary on a phenomenon shaping mainstream society, but it also carries a certain self-ironic humor as the most effective weapon in the fight against stereotypes. Koterski aka Miauczyński is an uncompromising observer, whose provocative, ironical and often outrageous diagnoses cause extreme reactions on the part of spectators. The director claims he does not have any predilections for his audience. If he had to name an ideal recipient it would be just a typical "dude" from the neighborhood. There is only one rule: he treats the spectator as being at least as intelligent as himself, with no simplifications or generalizations, which have recently become a lame excuse for many poor productions intended for mass consumption.

Man, Chicks are Just Different is not built upon story; it is not a feature film in the classical sense. There are meanings that are revealed in the conversation between the main characters, and, for this reason, it may be classified as a 'parametric narration', according to David Bordwell's terminology, or as a film with a discourse dominant in accordance with the Tomasz Kłys classification. The director himself declares: ". . . When it comes to cinema, I believe that I have developed my own style, that I am beginning to be involved in the creation of the language of film. Some rules of narration, which are not principles, without systematized turning points or the American structure." If we were to perceive Koterski's latest film as a road movie, then it would undoubtedly evoke the style of the Jim Jarmusch's films in which the road leads nowhere. To be on the way is a goal and end in itself, like a conversation that can be a search, the mapping of meanings and not the provision of pre-set coordinates. It is also an inner journey revealing personal fears, a quest for the right language that can express them.

Most of the movie was filmed on green screen and the picture was filled in during the post-production process. Unfortunately, there is

a discrepancy between the film's form and its discursive level. Even though in Koterski's previous projects the picture was secondary to the narrative layer, dialogue and the construction of the protagonist, and it was often used only as illustration, all of these elements were clearly outlined in the story. In *Man, Chicks are Just different*, however, the layer of the text and dialogue dominates all the other components to such an extent that it could just as well be a theater performance or a radio play, or even a book. This production lacks the cinematic means of expression that would enrich this text with a new and greater quality or meaning. Therefore, some critics and the general audience expressed the opinion that the work is too "wordy" and, in the end, boring.

Despite a formal asceticism of the dense text, the film is definitely well worth seeing, and its message is worth talking about, worth disputing. It is self-ironic cinema not intended for a specific IQ or an audience with multiple diplomas. It is the cinema of a reflective man, the cinema of moral anxiety.

Tamara Skalska

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Author's Notes:

1. In trying to accurately translate the title of the film it is important to note the difficulties in capturing the true meaning and tone. "Baby" is a term sometimes used to describe women, but it encompasses a very wide semantic field, which, on the one hand, can be identified with the English word "chick," but, on the other hand, carries a shade of the term "hag." A particular meaning of the term depends on the way it is uttered and the context of its use; it is similar to the different uses of the word "women" in English.

2. Adaś Miauczyński, the character's name, is a self-ironic game the author is playing. It refers to his mother's words—"Stop meowing"—which she used to say when he was pestering her for something.

3. "Akkerman Steppes" is part of the *Crimea Sonnets* written by Adam Mickiewicz, perhaps the most preeminent poet in Polish literature, and a prime example of the Polish Romantic Period. It is a matrix for a certain nostalgia and mindset that colors Polish culture. Koterski is one of the first contemporary artists to showcase the national bard in pop culture.

4. It should be noted that the mentioned film *Sexmission* is mostly a parody on the then prevailing Communist system. The futuristic science fiction approach was used in an effort to avoid censorship. This common trick, thus, carries an even greater message about authoritarian regimes and their tendency toward homogenization.

5. There is a trend in Polish cinema known as the Cinema of Moral Anxiety, which has been internationally recognized in Krzysztof Kieślowski's films.