

On the Borderline of Cultures. Recent Polish Speculative Fiction in the Face of Cultural, Artistic and Religious Inspirations from Different Nations

1. Introduction

Polish speculative literature has a very rich tradition and it continues to develop dynamically. The last decade has seen an increased interest in speculative fiction. As a result, a number of newly published writers have emerged – talented, imaginative, and original writers, drawing their inspiration from a variety of cultural phenomena across the world: literature, the plastic arts, religion, philosophy, history, mythology.

This paper deals with the Polish literary fiction published mostly in the last decade, 2001-2011, which saw the emergence of a handful of publishers focusing on speculative fiction, e.g. Fabryka Słów (The Word Factory) – established in 2001, Red Horse – 2005, Runa – 2002, Grasshopper – 2008. By promoting new authors, introducing new genre variants, and supporting domestic science-fiction, fantasy, and horror, these publishers have brought dynamics and variety into Polish speculative literature.

Acquiring and processing elements borrowed from other cultures characterises the quest for new quality in the creation of fictional worlds, which is especially typical of literary activity in the realms of fantasy and science-fiction in all their manifestations. The references to other-than-familiar cultures back up the narration, assist the creation of protagonists and the story, tend to be symbolic, or function as conventional signs which suggest added meanings, yet in this way remain intelligible to the reader. Polish contemporary speculative fiction employs several types of cross-cultural influences.

2. Mythologies and religions of other cultures

Firstly, these are references to mythologies of other cultures (for instance, Scandinavian). The best and most interesting example here is *Pan Lodowego Ogrodu* (Lord of the Ice Garden), a series by Jarosław Grzędowicz, which draws on science fantasy conventions. The multicultural origin of the main protagonist materialises as a set of features and events which directly hint at the Scandinavian roster of gods and heroes. The hero warrior, Vuko Drakkainen, is endowed with features that make him fit to complete a Mission, but also – to ascend the pantheon of heroes. Given such a context, it ought to be noted that

in German epic narrative [...], one of the wise man's features is the desire to play a role in big events so that one should be remembered as a famous hero [...]. The moment of death is, thus, of great importance [...], because it means merging with the past, but not disappearing – since the memory of the man, of his glory, remains preserved in the song. By doing great

deeds, man places himself in the past, side by side with the heroes of the past, thus becoming one of them¹.

Although Drakkainen does not show similar aspirations overtly, everything that befalls him predestines him to immortality in songs. The hero's undoing at the end of the first book in the series (in fact, this is more like a suspension between life and death and at the same time an endurance test for the prospective hero) reflects Scandinavian philosophy or vision of the warrior's fate, because "... he, who had perished, became god's favourite. He avoided the horrors of the dead men's land and remained in close relationship with sacrum. In this way he gained superhuman features, such as immortality through fame"². Drakkainen does confirm his extraordinariness by sacrificing his own life and gets transformed into the World Tree when hit by an ashen spear. The convergence of Drakkainen's life story with that of Odin – who also sacrificed himself and got nailed to Yggdrasil by a spear that pierced him and stuck in the tree – becomes obvious especially in the light of the exchange between Drakkainen and his adversary that takes place at the end of the fight:

– This sarcasm in the face of death – how Norman. You still think this is like in the song of the Nibelungs' ring? Well, it's not – this time [...] the snake kills Sigurd. – [...] The triangular spike went through Drakkainen's chest [...]. – Odin's spear [...] – said van Dyken. – Ashen. The spear of the friend of people – the lord of the ravens and of the hanged. Just like you. [...] I'm the ash tree [...] of the world – like Yggdrasil. [...] I'm turning into a tree³.

The similarity to the Odin myth is also attested by the motif of the raven: Odin had two ravens, Thought and Memory, who told him of what was going on in the world. He was called "God of Ravens", which also referred to battle strategies. The hero in *The Lord of the Ice Garden* acquires an intelligent raven, named Nevermore, who can speak human language. It ought to be stressed that the raven is an important element of the Scandinavian warrior myth – the raven appears as the harbinger of victory, "bringing luck to the warrior, if it accompanied him on his way"⁴. The hero's name is, too, related to the animal aspect of the warrior tradition. The Croatian "Vuko" means "wolf", which has well-established connotations, present not only in Slavic mythology, but also in Scandinavian and German myths. "Although the wolf is commonly seen as a symbol of evil [...], it does sometimes get to be treated as a protective spirit and then it commands due respect. In its dark aspect, the wolf is associated with death gods: it often appears – as does the raven – as a companion of the primal deities of the dead or it may represent death itself"⁵. In Scandinavian tradition, for instance, Odin rides the wolf. Besides, it is closely connected with the warrior symbolism and, consequently, with 'berserks' – "highly prized warriors". Alternatively, the hero protagonist gives "Ulf" as his name, which unmistakably binds him with the berserks

¹ Słupecki, Leszek Paweł. *Wyrocznie i wróżby pogańskich Skandynawów*. Warszawa: Instytut Archeologii i Etnologii PAN, 1998. Print. p. 174.

² Maciszewski, Rafał. *Mity skandynawskie*. Warszawa: DiG, 2002. Print. p. 22.

³ Grzędowicz, Jarosław. *Pan Lodowego Ogrodu*, t. 1. Lublin: Fabryka Słów. 2005. Print. p. 543-546

⁴ Kempniński, Andrzej M.. *Ilustrowany leksykon mitologii Wikingów*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Kurpisz. 2003. Print. p. 172

⁵ Kopaliński, Władysław. "Wilk". *Słownik symboli*. Eds. Bożena Chicińska, Barbara Gers, Januara Sikorska, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo "Wiedza Powszechna" 1990. Print. p. 294.

from Egil's Saga – one of whom was known as Ulf (from 'Ulf' – 'wolf') – or Kweldulf (the Evening Wolf). Grzędowicz also gives his hero the nickname "Night Wanderer" (originally "Nocny Wędrowiec" who is, by the way, *homo viator* from Hieronimus Bosch's imagination), clearly alluding to that name. The hero's status predestines him to great deeds and defines his way in both life and strife. By no means is it accidental that he is given such names, since they bind him with the heroic tradition and make him responsible for what happens with the world. This responsibility is closely linked with the world tree topos: the tree "is a frequent element in the cosmogonies of various peoples. [...] On it rests the cosmos [...]. Being the foundation of the 'divine order' structure, the tree guarantees stability, thus becoming the Tree of Life. When it dies, the world will have to die, too"⁶. In the case of warrior-turned-ash Drakkainen the same principle applies. If the hero-tree does not survive, the world, too, will be threatened by extinction, since there will be no-one brave enough to challenge the forces of evil.

Scandinavian mythology seems to be among Grzędowicz's favourite sources, as he draws on it also in his story *Wilcza zamieć* (Wolves in the Snowstorm) for which he received one of the most coveted Polish prizes – 'The Janusz Zajdel Polish Fandom Prize.' Another author, Michał Krzywicki, in his two fantasy novels, *Plagi tej ziemi* (Plagues of This Earth) and *Psalmody* (Psalmodies) makes references to cultural heritage somewhat closer to the Polish culture: by combining Christian motifs with the ancient beliefs of the Slavs, he creates a vision of the world riven by the conflict between the old and the new faith. The richness of historical detail produces a vivid description of the fictional reality. In the depiction of the characters, the focus is on their negative traits, which amplifies the authenticity of their conduct and adds to the brutality of the fictional world, governed by the primal laws and inhabited by beings found in Slavic tales and legends.

All the relationships between the fictional world and a particular mythology are meant to draw the reader into a literary-intellectual game. The cultural context sets the limits for possible interpretations, suggests specific leitmotifs, and satisfies the need for experiencing realities which one is to some extent acquainted with but which at the same time remain mythic and, thus, inaccessible. However, "the sub-creation of a world in which protagonists and whole societies have a pre-scientific, mythic mentality, remains the chief method for fantasy to relate to myths. [...] Such novels try to use realistic language to describe people's lives in so created a world"⁷.

3. Culture, religion, and traditions of other nations

A different kind of influence is derived from references to the culture and traditions of other nations (for instance, Japan, China, U.S.A.), whose purpose is to emphasise certain models of behaviour, specific to particular cultures, rooted in the tradition or mentality of a nation. Therefore, quite an important role in speculative fiction is played by oriental influences. In speculative fiction, the fascination with Japanese or Chinese culture gets translated into a quasi-oriental fictional world. The overexploitation of the traditional construction and aesthetic models has made authors turn their attention to the philosophical thought, art, and customs of the Far East. The clash between two radically different cultures makes a tough subject for analysis. In some ways, the text highlights the boundary between the unquestionably eastern and the typically western. Such a confrontation takes place with

⁶ Maciszewski, Rafał. *Mity skandynawskie*. Warszawa: DiG, 2002. Print. p. 15.

⁷ Szostak, Wit. "Degradacja mitu – degradacja fantazy", *Wokół źródeł fantazy*. Eds. Tomasz Ratajczak, Bogdan Trocha. Zielona Góra: Oficyna Wydawnicza Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, 2009, Print pp.21-31.

regard to both the form and the content – it involves semantics, motifs, and symbolism. Two processes may be at work here: a selective use of Japanese motifs or a consonance or compilation of western and eastern elements. One should note that “references to the culture of the Far East have always been meant to complement the European context”⁸. Such an approach results in the creation of a hero whose task is to restore order in the fictional world which has gone awry. The hero’s conduct and fighting skills reflect those of a specific type of warrior ideal, for instance the one found in the Japanese culture. This form of presentation is especially characteristic of fantasy (the hero), and is exemplified by the earlier mentioned series by Grzędowicz. Reflections of the Japanese knight ideal can also be seen in the behaviour of the protagonist in *Mrok nad Tokyoramą* (Darkness over Tokyorama), a science-fiction story by Robert Schmidt. Oriental elements seem to help describe an exotic reality, culturally distant from both the author and the reader’s world or civilisation. This is what Dawid Juraszek does with his novel *Xiao Long. Biały Tygrys* (Xiao Long. White Tiger). Here, the author’s inspiration clearly comes from Chinese culture and enables him to construct a reality which is oriental and fantastic at the same time. References to Asian legends, tales, and beliefs abound. Each story is interspersed with sayings and proverbs, which adds to the atmosphere and vividness of the events.

The exoticism of the fictional reality makes for its attractiveness, otherness, and distantness. The author does not need to weave a complicated mesh of social relationships and to describe the details of day-to-day life: it is enough to embed elements of an existing culture. This, in turn, frees the author from the need to explain all the nuances of the created reality, since they exist already – both facts and the reader’s range of images or guesses about the particular culture. It is easier this way to construct the fictional world, to fill it with exoticism that somehow feels familiar and not so distant. This is how Jacek Piekara constructs his *Planeta Masek* (The Planet of Masks), a short science fiction series. The author mostly makes references to daily-life motifs, hinting at the characteristic, Japanese society of the past. The juxtaposition of the hustle-and-bustle, garrulous style of the Western/earthly civilisation with the reticence or meaningful silence typical of Japan/Tauryda is among the most important motifs in Piekara’s stories. The clash of the two civilisations and the resulting misunderstandings (as seen from the perspective of the protagonist who finds himself on the border between the two worlds and sometimes also from the perspective of the Taurydians) resonate with Japanese-European misapprehensions. The description of a culture inspired by Asian morality becomes in effect a description of a totally alien culture. The etiquette, linguistic reality, and ceremoniousness of interpersonal relations are all derived from Asian mores and traditions (including military ones). The Japanese influences are strikingly obvious and function as cultural clichés. The fictional Tauryda is in fact a feudal Japan – also with regard to the endless conflict of morals and mentality between the West and the East (Earth and Tauryda).

While references to Eastern cultures bring in some exoticism and help speculative fiction fulfil its aspiration to present the otherness of faraway countries, references to American culture quite unambiguously define Polish authors’ views of the U.S.A. The homogeneity of those references fits the popular picture of America as an almost mythical land of absolute freedom and unimaginably high standard of living. However, it is interesting to see that this fiction set in American reality tends to reflect literary or cinematic models. This especially applies to horror fiction which not only re-creates the

⁸ Piskor, Stanisław, Paźniewski, Włodzimierz. “W poszukiwaniu siebie”, *Poezja*. 1 (1975), no. 1, p. 42.

topographic, social, and economic reality of America, but also re-creates the way this kind of fiction is created. These are chiefly references to the characteristic, easily recognisable literary style of Stephen King. An example here is Adam Zalewski's trilogy (*Biała wiedźma; Rowerzysta; Cień znad jeziora* – White Witch; The Cyclist; Shadow over the Lake) which copies King's fictional world: a small town, dark powers hidden under the surface of general wealth, a growing spiral of violence. There is even an Indian cemetery and a curse which affects the locals' lives.

Other horror writers succumb, too, to Americanisation – like, for example, Paweł Paliński. Although he does not rely so heavily on the 'Kingian' model, his characters' names, customs, and topography easily give away their American origin. Another example of such a trend is Magda Parus's lycanthropic trilogy (*Wilcze dziedzictwo: Cienie przeszłości; Wilcze dziedzictwo: Przeznaczona; Wilcze dziedzictwo: Ukryte cele* – Legacy of the Wolves: Shadows of the Past; Legacy of the Wolves: The Predestined One; Legacy of the Wolves: Hidden Goals) which combines novelistic and detective fiction – and also horror and thriller. The story takes place at the present time and is set first in America and then in Europe. American reality also becomes the constructional foundation of *Pies swojego pana* (The Dog of His Master), a story by Paweł Siedlar. The protagonist is an alien who has invaded the body of the four-legged favourite of the president of the U.S.A. – with the intention of capturing the president's mind, which is a strategically all-important aim due to the U.S.A.'s military, economic, and political power.

A criticism of the American lifestyle appears in *Krawaty Koltaya* (Koltay's Neckties), by Paweł Paliński who in this horror story proves that even "the American dream" may turn into a nightmare if certain conditions are met. Here, the regulations on immigrants allow the eponymous protagonist to get a job as a toilet cleaner at a coach station. "'Want job' everyone may, since America is a free country, but 'have job' only few may, because America is extremely demanding"⁹. The mechanism of employing people is shown as a bureaucratic procedure which strips people of their dignity, at odds with the "paradise" immigrants dream of. Koltay goes through the successive stages of the process and changes into a man indifferent to the plight of others, eventually becoming a machine automatically executing tasks. The moment of transformation into an automaton is shown as a result of the work of bureaucrats who only see successive numbers on a list – and never the actual people behind them.

The requirements I had to meet just to [...] get the brush and scrub loos were pushed to the extreme. I was even taken to a surgery where I was given a phial and a short stick and asked kindly to put that stick up in my ass. [...] For five days in a row a round piece of wood landed in my anus [...]! Any question I asked, they only came up with one answer [...]: "safety regulations". [...] So on the sixth day I felt uneasy, not being able to put anything in "there". I grew so used to it! Would you believe that?¹⁰

Koltay finds American democracy unjust, menacing to all the people from "outside". The sharp division into "our citizens" and "immigrants" can be seen not only in the type of job he gets, but also in the officials' ignorance – as when they ask "Where the hell is Hungary? [...] Next to Germany?"¹¹. The protagonist gets accustomed to his fate in

⁹ Paliński, Paweł. "Krawaty Koltaya". *Pokój do wynajęcia*. Ed. Ł. Orbitowski. Lublin: Red Horse 2008. p. 23. Print.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 23.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 23.

two ways: by adopting an ironic attitude (*vide* the medical check-up scene) and by collecting neckties of the deceased. This macabre hobby is for Koltay a way to detach himself from the depressing reality “filled with human excrement”¹². The collection of ties resurrects the dead in Koltay’s memory, but in order to make it complete, he must commit an act of self-destruction. Paliński diagnoses the society as one based on the principle of the dissolution of individuality and subordination to the objectives of the group. Such a concept echoes the idea of “subman”, often present in science-fiction, which has characters reduced to “grotesque beings, almost non-human, [...] mere numbers, puppets, generic products”¹³ – which is a result of the spread of de-individualising tendencies.

Such tendencies are well depicted in the literary fiction that draws on American reality. Showing American society is meant to exemplify the process of transformation or the sinking of one into the whole. Polish reality would not serve this purpose well, since certain social mechanisms or cultural phenomena are only beginning to appear. In Polish eyes, America is a symbol of prosperity – achieved, however, through hard, ungrateful work which leaves almost no time for private life. No wonder horror fiction authors readily use the “American” lifestyle as a point of reference.

The authors of speculative fiction also look for inspiration to countries which are geographically closer: in Europe, French culture seems the most attractive. Medieval France is presented in Bartosz Grykowski’s novel *Piąty Anioł* (The Fifth Angel), while France of the 17th century is used in a number of stories by Anna Kańtoch as the background of the fictional events and as a constructional element of the fictional world – whose imagery reminds one of American films based on novels by Alexander Dumas the father. France of the 17th and 19th centuries inspired Siedlar to write the novel *Czekając w ciemności* (Waiting in Darkness) which closely follows the tradition of the Gothic romance with regard to the construction of the fictional world as well as the protagonists, events, and plot – retaining most of the elements and “props” characteristic of the genre, modified or complemented by the adjustment of artistic tropes and motifs to the literary standards of the 20th – 21st century.

4. Artists, works of art, and the philosophy of artist creation

An interesting topic is the writers’ fascination with artists’ biographies, works, and methods. A good example here is *Pocałunek Loisetty* (Loisetta’s Kiss), a horror story by Grzędowicz in which the protagonist, Collet, artist and murderer, is driven by the desire to negate religion, science, and art (i.e. faith, knowledge, and beauty). He creates macabre sculptures from the bodies of the people he abducts and fills with them a sort of gallery, documenting thus the concept of the sacrifice on the altar of art only too well – for the murdered people are to him a medium which enables him to carry on with his artistic and scientific pursuits simultaneously. The control over man is shown here as an absolute and totally disinterested observation and a transformation of experimental matter into a work of art. To a large extent this idea reflects the concept of art and science developed by Gunther von Hagens (Gunther Liebchen), author of the plastination method. In his controversial exhibition “Bodily Worlds” he shows prepared human bodies set in particular poses:

This exhibition of plastinates (bodies or their parts or organs solidified in transparent plastic) shows over two hundred exhibits: bodies, prepared

¹² Ibidem, p. 23.

¹³ Graaf, Vera. *Homo Futurus*. Warszawa: PIW. 1975. Print. p. 22.

organs, corpses cut into several tens of slices – two to eight millimetres thick. The Fencer, The Lasso Thrower, The Runner (in a pose reminiscent of a sculpture by Umberto Boccioni) show the details of the muscle system. The Chess Player, bending over a table, shows the details of the nervous system. The Orthopaedic Figure alludes to a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci. In the womb of The Woman, lying, one can see an eight-months-old foetus. The human figure with the skin cast over the shoulder shows a man without his protective coat¹⁴.

Like in Grzędowicz's story, human body functions as artist's medium, as a model recreating art or simply being art.

Authors of Polish horror fiction have a predilection for turning to controversial works and artists who have a penchant for crossing the limits of imagination, such as Edvard Munch and Hieronymus Bosch. The fascination with them stems from the general conviction that their art is linked to the dark side of human nature and that a work of art may contain a record of the artist's suffering – which, in turn, rests on the assumption that each artist is tormented by some demon. In horror fiction such mental disturbances are interpreted quite literally and unambiguously as the clash of "normalcy" with "preternaturalness". An example here is *Krzyk Malarza* (Scream of the Painter), a story by Robert Cichowlas, which echoes the history of the creation of the famous painting by Edvard Munch. The figure with a grotesquely twisted face, standing by the balustrade on a bridge under a blood-red sky, is assumed to be a symbol of the deforming power of fear. The inspiration for the painter was the idea of the threatening sky as a ubiquitous scream of nature. Cichowlas develops this idea further, by setting the history of the creation of the painting in the context of supernatural phenomena. The artist is shown as being tormented by hallucinations and misgivings. His visions involve mainly scenes of violence and they are both terrifying and inspiring. Relief comes when he enters the world of his fears and incorporates them in his creation – thus becoming reconciled to their presence. The plot serves as an illustration of the conventional assumption that "the original linearism exhibited by Munch's painting is an expression of his obsessive preoccupation with the basic emotions, such as desire, jealousy, and fear of death, boosted by Kierkegaard's existentialism and [...] Strindberg's pansexualism. Munch's works were supposed to be a diary of his soul in the face of self-destructive temptations and the discovery of the workings of cruel transcendental forces"¹⁵. Mental aberration, as the story's leitmotif, refers to certain facts from the life of Edvard Munch who "was genetically predisposed to depression and fascination with death and suffering." The condition of the protagonist in Cichowlas's story reflects the popular belief in the primary importance of mental illness in the process of artistic creation. This belief nicely fits among horror fiction themes, while the motif of a tormented artist who experiences hallucinations gets strengthened and multiplied by the references to supernatural factors.

A different concept of art as created under the influence of the experience of suffering is presented in *Śląski naśladowca Hieronima Boscha* (Hieronymus Bosch Silesian Copycat), a story by Jarosław Moździoch. The title suggests the sameness of experiences and similarity of artistic output between the protagonist and the Flemish painter, famous for

¹⁴ Cywiński, Piotr. "Lekcja anatomii doktora Günthera von Hagensa", Wprost. AWR Wprost. 17-05-2000. Web. 03-01-2009

¹⁵ Crepaldi, Gabriele. *Schiele i ekspresjoniści*. Warszawa: Arkady, 2006. Print. p. 20

his unique style and extraordinary visions. The plot of the story basically confirms the belief that Bosch's art was misunderstood by his contemporaries. It should be noted, however, that "Bosch's work was assessed only using formal or superficial criteria and, at best, treated as a helpful illustration to a certain thought, but never as autonomic imagination, i.e. image-based sensory perception"¹⁶. In this sense, Moździoch's story can be viewed as a simplified intellectual interpretation of the dark and deeply symbolic work of the Flemish master and also as an attempt at the explanation of the tangled creative processes.

Even Bosch's trademark hybrid characters, deeply mysterious and disturbing, take on an air of naturalness, because, according to Bosch, they embody the evil that lurks in every aspect of life. Adopting this approach seems justified and useful for an analysis of Grzędowicz's literary fiction – especially his horror fiction, e.g. *Popiół i Kurz* (Ash and Dust), *Księga jesiennych demonów* (Book of Autumnal Demons) and techno-fantasy (*Pan lodowego ogrodu*) – works which are in a number of ways engaged in a dialogue with iconic art. Therefore, Grzędowicz, too, introduces in his works equally grotesque anthropo- and zoomorphic creatures. In *Popiół i kurz* and in several stories in *Księga jesiennych demonów*, these are humanoid beings, whose human features show contamination with features of birds or various objects (especially the jug – so often featuring in Bosch's paintings). They chiefly perform a fear-arousing function, thus being an important element of "the world between."

The classification of Grzędowicz's stories and novels with regard to genre taxonomy as if a priori suggests the sources of his inspiration, storylines, and imagery. Bosch's art is traditionally referred to as "mysterious", "dark", "infernal", or "fantastic". This multiplicity of meanings – "twinkling meanings" – which emerge before the viewer depending on the interpretation used (from esoteric explanations to Freud's psychoanalysis) seem to a large extent responsible for making Grzędowicz resort to allusion and quotation, too – as well as to elaborate description of a particular fragment of a painting by Bosch. With the latter, the writer puts Bosch's visions into a narrative form and they become an important component of the fictional world, i.e. of a particular locality, place, landscape, and protagonists with their interests, characters, systems of values, and biographies.

The atmosphere, symbolism, and elements of Bosch's technique of creating the setting are also quite visible in the not-yet-finished series *Pan Lodowego Ogrodu*. At first, a connection with Bosch's paintings is suggested to the reader by means of numerous allusions and quotations, and then it is openly expressed by one of the protagonists: mad and stigmatised as evil, hiding his identity under the real name of the Flemish painter (Jeroen Anthoniszoon van Aken), known as Bosch, he creates a world modelled on the phantasmagorical paintings of the master, justifying the choice of his inspiration in an unexpected way.

The numerous references to Bosch's oeuvre attest not only the renaissance of his popularity – which owes much to labelling him as a precursor of Surrealism – but also his incredible imagination which still continues to inspire. The iconographic content of his paintings, full of fantastic creatures, serves as a repository of monsters – so often used by modern authors. In the case of Grzędowicz, this way of finding inspiration is complemented by a rather ambitious attempt at "reading" the content and moral message of a painting. It becomes a sort of subjective translation – which manifests itself as the more

¹⁶ Popek, Stanisław Leon. *Psychologia twórczości plastycznej*. Kraków: Impuls, 2010. Print. p. 46.

or less overt decoding of the senses hidden in particular details of the paintings (e.g. fountain, fortress, bridge, zoomorphic creatures) and, above all, as the construction of settings and protagonists' biographies in accordance with (or questioning) the messages from the painter's mind. One can see here both the influence of Bosch's fatalistic philosophical attitude, originating in the Augustinian and Jansenist doctrines (especially the concept of the mutual interference of the sacred and the profane), and the echoes of the idea of transcendence, combined with transgressiveness – according to the idea that “there may occur a relationship which, by accepting the existence of the “beyond” area (e.g. beyond the ordinary experience of reality), makes it an area which can only be explored using magical means and methods”¹⁷.

5. History

One other way to look for inspiration in other cultures is to make use of historical events, by setting the plot in specific places and times past. Basically, historical reality has the same purpose as cultural reality: to create a suitable background for a fictional story.

Horror fiction, for instance, quite often feeds on the belief that history, as a dynamic element, conceals in itself dark, destructive forces which affect not only the fates of individual people but those of whole nations as well. An example here is *Griot*, a story by Jacek M. Rostocki. Its leitmotiv is the history of a military conflict, greatly reminiscent of the recent strife and genocide in Rwanda. The historical mechanisms are explained as the results of the work of a demon who is manipulating people. The process of igniting a military conflict is shown also in Grzędowicz's *Pocalunek Loisetty*, which touches on the French Revolution. The eponymous protagonist personifies the hidden desire in people to shed blood. She, too, becomes a symbol of bloody terror and uncontrollable murderous instincts. The motif of a demon manipulating the history of humankind is also found in Pilipiuk's story *Czerwona gorączka* (Red Fever) which describes the fascination with the power of revolution. The protagonist concludes that “socialism is an epidemic [...] The virus of revolution. Red fever. [...] Your revolting idea is impossible to accept for a normal, healthy person. It can only be accepted by somebody who's already infected [...], whose brain functions in a different way from that of a healthy person”¹⁸. And later in the story:

this disease does not produce socialism among its symptoms. Your idea has simply coincided with a surge in sick cases. Due to the brain damage this illness causes, a new entity comes into being: an individual who has no love, compassion, or remorse, for whom to satiate his instincts and desires is the guiding principle, who can't resist the barbarous temptation to destroy, incinerate, rape, torture, and murder¹⁹.

The presentation of the symptoms of a disease serves as a criticism and a fantastic explanation of the methods used by revolutionaries. Aggressiveness and a total lack of scruples – the first symptoms of an epidemic – result in monstrous atrocities committed

¹⁷ Handke, Ryszard. “Fantastyka wobec transcendencji”. *Fantastyka, fantastyczność, fantazmaty*. Ed. Anna Martuszczyńska. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 1994. Print. pp 9-19

¹⁸ Pilipiuk, Andrzej. “Czerwona gorączka”. *Czerwona gorączka*. Ed. Andrzej Pilipiuk. Lublin: Fabryka Słów, 2007. Print. pp. 42-87.

¹⁹ Ibidem, pp. 42-87.

during revolutions: for the virus breaks the will of individuals, making them vulnerable to “the lies told by those who speak the loudest”²⁰.

The time gap enables the writer to bring up certain associations connected with the knowledge of history. Since particular worlds of the past and their realities are known to the reader, there is no need to construct, laboriously, new fictional ones. Referring to a particular period in history automatically defines the character of the fictional world and suggests those of its features which are necessary for the proper interpretation of the fictional characters’ behaviour so as to understand their motivation.

History fulfils two functions: it is used as a background for the plot and it is a source of inspiration, point of departure, or centre of gravity of a novel. It is an integral element in the construction of atmosphere in horror fiction, it conditions and limits characters’ behaviour, it may constitute one of the fundamental ingredients in the creation of the fictional world in fantasy fiction, because it promotes “the development of utility fiction based on religious and mythic paradigms”²¹.

6. Foreign literature

Literary works by foreign authors can also be a source of inspiration, although the geographical scope is limited to Europe or the works referred to are generally accepted as belonging to the literary canon. A good example here is *Sloneczna dolina* (Sunny Dale), a novel by Stefan Darda, published in 2010, whose plot and several motifs immediately bring to mind *Germelshausen* by Friedrich Gerstäcker. Although Darda’s story of a cursed, isolated village is set in contemporary Poland, its literary source is easy to identify. Darda introduces bloody events, thus brutalising the fictional world. The horror is intensified by the gradually growing tension which is achieved through the use of scenes of violence and the increasing proximity of macabre and dangerous events and characters.

Of the Polish contemporary writers of speculative fiction of special interest here is Wojciech Sztyda, author of the novel *Hotel ‘Wieczność’* (Hotel ‘Eternity’), published in 2005, in which among various influences one can detect Jorge Luis Borges. In fact, the allusions and references to works of other writers make up a dominant component of this novel – even superior to its plot. The fantasy-detective convention serves here as a pretext for presenting wider, philosophically-existential views – which is a trend found across Sztyda’s oeuvre.

An interesting approach seems to be literary experimentation with the convention of weird stories – as used by Siedlar in *Opowieści okrutne* (Cruel Tales), a collection of short stories, whose title is identical with a collection of short stories by Auguste Villiers de l’Isle Adam, published in 1883. Not only are the titles the same – the six stories by Siedlar, too, show a penchant for horror motifs and their leitmotifs are supernatural beings and phenomena.

The mastery of literary conventions makes it possible for Donat Szyller, in his collection of short stories *Martwe dziwki idą do nieba* (Dead Tarts Go to Heaven), to construct fiction which combines black detective fiction, horror, and humour. His fictional world abounds in allusions to literature, film, culture, and even modern politics and mass media. Some of his secondary characters are the opposites or remakes of real personages. In

²⁰ Ibidem, pp. 42-87.

²¹ Trocha, Bogdan. “Fantasy – spekulacja czy ucieczka? Lektura czasu zdesakralizowanego”. *Wokół źródeł fantasy*, Eds. Tomasz Ratajczak, Bogdan Trocha. Zielona Góra: Oficyna Wydawnicza Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, 2009. Print. pp. 72-89.

the story *Martwe dziwki idą do nieba*, there is a gangster called Hieronim Bosch; in *Śpij, słodkie kochanie* (Sleep Tight, My Sweetheart), there is Dan T. Alighieri, film producer; in *Wiele znad Innsmouth* (It's Blowing from Innsmouth), the protagonist is helped by doctor Lovecraft²².

This phenomenon of interference of various genres and conventions is to a large extent conditioned by the aesthetics of postmodernism whose characteristic feature is "the multiplicity of coexisting literary languages and the unlimited access to the spiritual heritage of various times and cultures"²³. Such intertextual ostentation is significant, because it "shows that both the literary work and the targeted reader belong to a common culture sphere, to the Great Shared World, inhabited by the author and his oeuvre and all the other works (the intertexts) to which he relates and which make up the joint knowledge of the author and the targeted reader"²⁴.

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²² A character known better as an autor of very popular weird fiction series, e.g. Cthulu mythology.

²³ Jasionowicz, Stanisław. "Intertekstualność w świetle badań nad wyobraźnią twórczą". *Intertekstualność i wyobraźniowość*. Ed. Barbara Sosień. Kraków: Universitas, 2003. Print. pp. 25-40.

²⁴ Balbus, Stanisław. "Intertekstualność a proces historycznoliteracki". Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 1990. Print.

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