

Bugging: The Kaleidoscopic Literary Politics of Insects¹

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Abstract

This article analyses the appearance of insects in Polish literature of the mid-socialist period. It will elaborate a post-humanist perspective on the peaking presence of flies, wasps, bugs or worms in literary texts both as a motif and as an aesthetic strategy. The article investigates the way the deployment of insects in and through the text modulates the view of and the perspective on their human fellows, and how these modulations can be traced to the social reality of the socialist 1960s and 1970s.

Keywords: *insects, literature, film, Poland, socialism, 1968, post-humanism, surveillance, WW2*

A fly is sitting on the pillar behind a fake entertainer on a Vistula River cruise boat. The reeling departure and reappearance of the fly on the pillar, the negligent but slightly nervous scraping of the human fingers at the layer of paint on the rail they hold: marginal micro movements on the screen, interactions of living bodies with the space around them that happen almost unnoticed by the viewer of *The Cruise (Rejs)*, a Polish comedy film shot in 1970.² Both movements are utterly irrelevant to the story, and they become evident only in a mode of heightened attention to the corporeal dynamics in the film. Yet, they reveal just as much, if not more, about the tense situation on board than the linguistic level. The words stammered in the meeting of the fake entertainer with the passengers rebuild nothing but a skeleton of incorporated linguistic patterns. The fly and the fingers enable a shift away from this language devoid of content. They are matter, space, and time; corporeal beings, movement, and relation. Their ulterior dynamics correspond to and challenge the atmosphere of insecurity, stupefaction and isolation that dominates on the narrative level – not only of this one film, but also in the late Polish 1960s in general, the middle of the socialist Polish People's Republic (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, PRL).

Insects swarm the Polish literature of the mid-socialist period. Though hardly ever present on the first plane, their secretive interference into narrative practices of several authors creates the eerie experience that an armada of insects traverses the intertextual field of the Polish 1960s and 1970s. They erupt as worms in the soil of the former borderlands, as a wasp in a café, as cockchafers haunting memories in a luxurious apartment, as flies going crazy over some alien matter. The insects appear as a long

¹ Work supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), Project 'Crisis and Communitas' / 100016 182586.

² Marek Piwowski, *Rejs: The Cruise* (Second Run, 1970), 17:00-18:30; available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6GUI7qia_I [accessed 30 September 2021].

disregarded *other* dimension of living on the very same place: minuscule, quickly overlooked, forgotten in their alienness to the human understanding of movement, sociality, perception, and reasoning. They are inevitably, indisputably *there*, a sort of latency embodied and enacted. Buzzing in and out the ear at night, sitting unmasked on one's leg or clinging dead to one's shoe, interlinking human skin with horse manure, flowers, and dead rats, eating away at jam, beer or sweat and dropping the occasional shit on a window pane or a package of viruses in a human organism. In the context of the Polish mid-socialist society, however, the insects' appearance in the cultural text not only links humans to the insect world that lies at their feet and buzzes around their heads. Insects multiply their functions in the text. They allow decentring the silenced human subject and pluralize perspectives on a petrified society. But their indestructible yet abjected *being around* refers also to the haunting memories of WW2 and the Holocaust, as insects become the textual remainders of death, dirt and desperation. Finally, the insects' view and their incessant, uncanny presence overlaps with the growing (un)presence of state invigilation bugging the members of human society. The insects become the *things* looming behind the curtains of human society, things that are there but not spoken about, anxiously or scornfully shaken off one's mind. I will examine these multiple 'bugging' functions of insects in diverse literary examples and one film, reading the Polish cultural text against the background of the mid-socialist ideological crisis.

Shattered Hopes of Marxist Humanism

The year 1968 marks in Poland, as in Western countries like France or the USA, a decisive turning point of post-war society. Youth protests were taking place here and there – however, in socialist Poland the protests did not last for long, but were beaten down by militia force. 1968 in Poland thus stands not for the destabilisation of a too rigid social system and for a turn towards individualised life styles, but for the powerful installation of an already petrifying political and ideological system. While the political thaw of 1956 had brought hope for a liberal socialist system 'with a human face' after the dreadful Stalinist years, 1968 finally proved these hopes to be futile.³ Many parts of civil society as well as the political nomenclature realised for good that there would be no bright Marxist humanist Poland, that the 'system proclaiming social justice' would neither bring freedom, equality and solidarity nor 'finally end racial and ethnic discrimination.'⁴ Instead, there was an upsurge of anti-Semitic and anti-intellectual resentments fuelled by the propaganda apparatus, dividing society and bringing a new generation of pragmatist and disillusioned functionaries to power.⁵ Ethno-nationalism

³ See Jerzy Eisler, 'March 1968 in Poland', in *1968: The World Transformed*, ed. Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert and Detlef Junker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 237-51; Jerzy Szacki, '8 marca 1988 roku', *Krytyka. Kwartalnik polityczny* 28-9 (1988): 21-3; Marcin Zaremba, '1968 in Poland: The Rebellion on the Other Side of the Looking Glass', *The American Historical Review* 123.3 (2018): 769-72; available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/123.3.769> [accessed 30 September 2021].

⁴ Krystyna Kersten and Jerzy Szapiro, 'The Contexts of the So-Called Jewish Question in Poland after World War II', *Polin: A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies* 4 (1989): 257.

⁵ See Anna Barbara Jarosz, 'Marzec w prasie', in *Marzec 1968: trzydzieści lat później: Referaty*, ed. Marcin Kula, Piotr Osęka and Marcin Zaremba, vol. 1 (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1998), 99-125; Krystyna Kersten, 'Marzec 1968 a postawy intelektualistów wobec komunizmu', in *Marzec 1968: trzydzieści lat później: Referaty*, ed. Marcin Kula, Piotr Osęka and Marcin Zaremba, vol. 1 (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1998), 177; Jacek Kochanowicz, 'Marzec 1968 i

and social mistrust were the dominant paradigms of the late 1960s until the early 1970s, when they were replenished by a proliferating consumerism that would later turn the demands of 'fulfilling basic social necessities' into an awakening discourse of human rights and liberalism.⁶

The year 1968 marks thus a period where the hopes of Polish society for a better future were rapidly dwindling, where an atmosphere of social anxiety reigned, and the state and Party apparatus was again perceived as the decisive superstructure that could eventually interfere in anybody's life. The strong anti-Semitic current of the social dynamics of the years 1967-1970, moreover, revived distressing memories of the Holocaust and brought to light (at least retrospectively) the lacking acknowledgement and remembrance of the Jewish victims.⁷ Anti-Jewish violence haunted Polish society like an undead creature, the abject⁸ interfering with the constructed smooth surface of the ethnic Polish, rural or proletarian society of the new socialist middle class – the subject of the PRL. The anti-Semitic and anti-intellectual dynamics overlapped in the spheres of the intelligentsia still featuring a certain amount of Poles of Jewish descent that had stayed in the country because of their belief in a socialist future.⁹ The intelligence, including the academic and culturally productive circles, were thus affected the most by the 1968 discriminations. Accordingly, in the cultural production of the late 1960s, there dominates an atmosphere of disorientation, resignation and social estrangement, mistrust or outright anxiety.¹⁰ The events and the atmosphere of the anti-Semitic and anti-revisionist campaign that the Party unleashed in the media was hardly nominally present in the literary, theatrical and cinematographic works or in fine arts. What we can find from these years are indices of great social depression and heightened mistrust in language, for example in the so-called 'Generation '68' in poetry.¹¹

życie intelektualne Uniwersytetu', in *Marzec 1968: trzydzieści lat później: Referaty*, ed. Marcin Kula, Piotr Osęka and Marcin Zaremba, vol. 1 (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1998), 133.

⁶ See Anna Delius, 'Universal Rights or Everyday Necessities? Translating Human Rights between Local Workers and Transnational Activism in Late 1970s Poland', *East Central Europe* 46.2-3 (2019): 188-211; available at <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763308-04602001> [accessed 30 September 2021]; Kochanowicz, 'Marzec 1968 i życie intelektualne Uniwersytetu', 139; Ireneusz Krzemiński, 'Antysemityzm, socjalizm i "nowa świadomość". Długofalowe konsekwencje Marca '68', in *Marzec 1968: trzydzieści lat później: Referaty*, ed. Marcin Kula, Piotr Osęka and Marcin Zaremba, vol. 1 (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1998), 271-83.

⁷ See Piotr Osęka and Marcin Zaremba, 'Wojna po wojnie, czyli polskie reperkusje wojny sześcienniodniowej', in *Polska 1944/45–1989*, ed. Krystyna Kersten, vol. 4 (Warszawa: Instytut Historii PAN, 1999), 205-39; Feliks Tych, 'The "March '68" Antisemitic Campaign: Onset, Development, and Consequences', in *Jewish Presence in Absence: The Aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland, 1944-2010*, ed. Feliks Tych and Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 451-71.

⁸ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁹ See Irena Grudzinska Gross, '1968 in Poland. Spoiled Children, Marxists, and Jews', in *Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion, and Utopia*, ed. Vladimir Tismaneanu (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2011), 43-53.

¹⁰ Nina Seiler, 'March Minusivity: Strategies of Immunising and Counter-Immunising in the Atmosphere of the Polish 1968', *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 38.4 (2020); available at <https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/prt/article/view/28143> [accessed 30 September].

¹¹ See Lidia Burska, *Awangarda i inne złudzenia: o pokoleniu '68 w Polsce* (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2013); Sławomir Buryła, 'Proza epoki Marca i wokół Marca '68', *Ruch Literacki* 54.2 (2013): 219-37; available at <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10273-012-0064-5> [accessed 30 September 2021]; Alina Molisak, 'Kilka uwag o różnych odmianach "marcowych" narracji', in *(Nie)ciekawa epoka? Literatura i*

With the disbelief in human bonds and solidarity comes a social estrangement and a retreat into the own self; social bonds are portrayed as unstable, untrustworthy and sometimes even undesired. While there will be a trend for so-called inner migration and philosophising individualism in the cultural production of the later years, the culture of the late 1960s looks stupefied. In this context of social resignation, we occasionally encounter attempts at the transgression of the human self – a self that cannot connect with its human fellows any more – towards a non-human world, a material-corporeal world of animals, plants and things, apart from a greater interest in the bodies and body parts of humans themselves. These might be seen as attempts at coping with the disappointed hope in a humanism that promised progressing social equality.

A very interesting phenomenon is the increased reference to or sensitivity for insects. Like other animals in texts, insects feature as specific single beings, but unlike those, they appear more often still as anonymous *masses*, indistinctive, wriggling or humming multitudes. These features become relevant in the context of the mid-socialist Polish society, a society marked by social anxiety and fear of the other. Insects in a way become anxiety materialised – not primarily as the source of phobias, but as the creaturely space where the seemingly objectless anxieties¹² of the Polish society take form. Insects are the both singular and plural otherness: the arthropods' features, logic and perspective remain widely impenetrable for the human confronted with it, presenting thus a cognitive alienness.¹³ Despite their being classified into distinct species in human techniques of control, insects of all sorts regularly elude the status of object. Their mobile, microscale and intimate presence and vantage point often escapes human consciousness in everyday situations, featuring environmental traits instead. This eluding (non)presence evokes coping strategies like abjection in the human subject. The insects' oscillation between being objects and objects of the human attempt at achieving and maintaining biopower shifts the focus of attention of this article towards 'not so much the state of things but the relations between them.'¹⁴ In a desmological – relation-based – approach as suggested by Michel Serres, then, I will investigate the appearance and functions of insects in the Polish cultural text of the mid-socialist period as fractures of the material and phantasmal surroundings by which humans feel 'bugged' in their everyday practices.

A presence that is both here and nowhere, observing and ignorant, perceptive but obscuring the further processing of the perceived information, evidently applies to both types of 'bugs': the organic insect with its miniature alien features and the electronic listening device that links a private kitchen to state surveillance bureaus. Yet 'bugging' is just one of the surveillance practices; potential denunciation also threatens from

PRL, ed. Hanna Gosk (Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2008), 275-88; Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany, "'Wiersze suchego pogromu" – Marzec '68 w poezji polskiej (rekonesans)', *Studia Litteraria et Historica* 6 (2017); available <https://doi.org/10.11649/slh.1486> [accessed 30 September].

¹² See Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 3rd ed. (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 1318.

¹³ Even though Emile Benveniste states that out of all animals, the communication system of bees most closely resembles a 'language'. Emile Benveniste, 'Animal Communication and Human Language: The Language of the Bees', *Diogenes* 1.1 (1953): 2; available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/039219215300100101> [accessed 30 September 2021].

¹⁴ Michel Serres, 'The Art of Living (Interview)', in *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*, by Mary Zournazi (New York: Routledge, 2002), 204. See also Rick Dolphijn, 'Introduction: Michel Serres and the Times', in *Michel Serres and the Crises of the Contemporary*, ed. Rick Dolphijn (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 7.

reports by fellow humans. Interhuman communication becomes utterly problematic; but so does the relation to the material surroundings. The subjects of the Polish People's Republic try to disentangle themselves from the 'improper'¹⁵ ties and relations of the world that could incriminate them, destabilise their lives, careers, their social status. These attempts at immunisation yet again overlap with the insects' co-living with humans that is often seen as parasitic and marked by uncleanliness. Insects challenge the integrity of humans as they contaminate their bodies, affect their movements, effect disgust or terror. The human techniques of negation of the insects' doings – e.g. by killing a mosquito feasting on human blood – intend to uphold a state of subjectivity and order as humans see fit for themselves. 'Normality is [...] a condition that has continually to be regained,'¹⁶ and insects continue to resist surrendering as the perfect creaturely embodiment of what Serres calls 'noise' – the material buzzing of the world.¹⁷ As a kind of contrapuntal signal to the existing order, noise reappears as soon as order loosens, like a parasite in the system; it is simultaneously the underlying condition of communication and its threat,¹⁸ the abject that constitutes the subject.

The insectal contrapuntal signal that interferes with the human subject in a way also jams the textual order, unearths buried topics and links words to corporealities to memories to movements. As abjects of the Polish self-understanding and consciousness, insects like flies and maggots figure in post-war literature as remainders of the war years, swarming memories that cannot come to rest. The material remembrance of death and devastation demonstrates the various trajectories of insect and human interaction. The role insects play in the decomposition of human corporeality can be a terrifying thought or a soothing perspective; the same is true for the shared experience of arthropodan and human vulnerability.¹⁹ Sometimes, insects in literature enhance the human experience; but sometimes they cross out human perception and understanding, and replace it with an unsettling kaleidoscopic vision. The multi-faceted perspective of the eyes of a fly, or of the multitude of insects that throng the earth and sky, a sort of agency without established subjectivity,²⁰ invites post-humanist textual strategies. Insects introduce architectural elements of a kaleidoscopic text that de-centres the perspective of the human figure. The shift in vantage point questions the order of things

¹⁵ Timothy Campbell, *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); available at <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816674640.001.0001> [accessed 30 September 2021].

¹⁶ See David Webb, 'The Virtue of Sensibility', in *Michel Serres and the Crises of the Contemporary*, ed. Rick Dolphijn (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 13. For conceptions of the maintenance of everyday life, see also the Polish philosopher Jolanta Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo eFka, 1999), 97-103.

¹⁷ See Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 3 ff.

¹⁸ Webb, 'The Virtue of Sensibility', 25.

¹⁹ See Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 28, 29; Cora Diamond, 'The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy', in *Philosophy and Animal Life*, ed. Stanley Cavell et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 46-56; Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 5.

²⁰ See also Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson's reading of bees as 'a representative of the political activation of the multitude'. Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, 'Commentary: A New Fable of the Bees', in *Animal Acts: Performing Species Today*, ed. Una Chaudhuri and Holly Hughes (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2014), 105. However, the "'busy" bees' status in human imagination of insect masses may not be representative, see also Benveniste, 'Animal Communication'.

that humans installed; maybe other things, other dynamics, other understandings are important, too? These questions emerge on the textual margins in face of the Polish societal crisis of 1968 that almost suffocates the humans themselves.

Order and Abjection

As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, in the film *The Cruise* a single fly ever so slightly disturbs the already unsettling atmosphere of the gathering of cruise passengers that expect their (fake) entertainer to start his (inexistent) programme. The fly is hardly noticed – both by the figures and by the viewers – if at all, as it melts into the thick atmosphere: an atmosphere full of social expectations and cautiousness about one's own setting in the context of the other participants. The verbal level of the meeting wavers between strict formalities and almost nonsensical utterings about the figures' personal impressions or experiences – utterings striking as either too formal or too personal, utterings that no one is able or willing to understand. Yet despite their being annoyed and insecure, the figures against all odds seem bent on going through with the content-lacking meeting. The corporeal level brings to the fore the effective uneasiness of the participants yet more obviously. They are fidgeting, sweating, kneading and scraping the handrail, eyes flicking about nervously or staring unchangeably at the entertainer. The collective immobilisation in the meeting is traversed by micro-movements that underline the caging of the present bodies in the social setting – a setting of imposed sociality that will continue throughout the film.²¹ In this setting, the fly is the only being that does not obey the rules of the meeting, its ignorance of the tense atmosphere posing a challenge. Despite its co-participation in the space and the image of the screen, it seems located in a completely different reality, free from the human social restrictions. Even if the presence and movement of the fly is an invitation to break one's attention loose from the discomforting reality of the gathered humans, they are unable to see it as an invitation and to respond to it. The inviting but ignored presence of the fly thus underlines the anxious immobilisation of the social structure.

The fly, an intervention into depressing social realities: the motif of micro-interference reappears with more emphasis in the poem *Family (Rodzina, 1972)* by Anna Świrszczyńska. The poet depicts a situation of domestic violence that is well-known in the late 1960s and 1970s.

He approaches her
with fists.
From his pants he flicks off like a fly
two little hands
that wanted to stop him.²²

Świrszczyńska in a few words sketches a relation and directed movement in which a 'he' threatens and attacks a 'her'. Into this movement, 'two little hands' intervene and try to break the dynamic of this movement; however, their impact is far too subtle to

²¹ See Nina Seiler, 'Toxic Community. Incorporated Scripts, Bodily Resistance: Immunitarian Processes in the Comedy Rejs', in *Unsettled 1968 in the Troubled Present: Revisiting the 50 Years of Discussions from East and Central Europe*, ed. Michał Przeperski, Aleksandra Konarzewska and Anna Nakai (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), 129-45.

²² Anna Świrszczyńska, *Jestem baba*, 3rd ed. (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1975), 26. All translations from Polish are mine.

bring the attack to a halt. The disturbance by the ‘third’ is annulled in a single, dismissive and violent gesture. Świrszczyńska introduces the fly as a metaphorical image of this interference only. The image of the fly replacing the child’s hands normalises the casual gesture by which the attacker ‘flicks off’ this disturbance. The gesture comes without much thought, automatically: the hands of the grown-up are trained in the gestures repeated to chase away the annoying guest on the skin or clothes. Similarly, the child’s hands fall into the category of the annoying yet negligible iterative disturbance: they are hardly noticed and brushed off without second thought; their impact on the situation tends towards zero just as the fly’s in *The Cruise*. But unlike in the film, the poet’s attention zooms in on this gesture of dismissal.

The parallelism between the disturbing fly and the child’s desperate hands highlights the delicacy of this intervening force – one stroke, and its life could be extinguished. This parallelisation brings up the question of integrity of creatures: just as we imagine the (hands of the) child to have its own claim to not experience violence, the question arises of the fly’s claim for uninterrupted living.²³ Moreover, the intervention of the child takes place in order to stop the force that is going to hurt ‘her’, the mother and spouse. Świrszczyńska thus constructs a sort of transposition from the fly to the child’s hands to the woman that is beaten; a transposition that also moves in the other direction and raises the ethical issue of the supposed human’s right to hurt and kill the fly. The poem illuminates the status of the violent man who, in his claim to the right to hurt, falls out of the continuum of woman – child – fly; his hands distorted into fists, a symbol of (toxic) masculinity.

Maybe it is not without significance that the child’s hands fall onto the man’s pants, the cloth being a marker not only of human civilisation but also of the process of losing contact with one’s own corporeality.²⁴ Is this the reason why the child’s intervention ricochets? The pants come to stand in for the screen of a sociality that petrifies human subjects in their respective social patterns, unable to see different realities or acknowledge the suffering of others. In Świrszczyńska’s poetic vision, the (male) society of the late 1960s and early 1970s is unable to acknowledge the hardships of the female social destiny, hardships that are evident but pushed beyond the borders of social discourse, abjected with each domestic attack.²⁵

The flies in *The Cruise* and in *Family* are thus representatives of a differing order, subaltern to the dominant structure of apparently toxic human interaction. The flies introduce diverging possibilities that cannot find their space in the human (man’s) world; their interference lies beyond the capabilities the human subjects entangled in their anti-communicating scripts can allow themselves to acknowledge. The flies’ abjected world nonetheless clings to the human bodies, interferes with their motion, provokes an ever so small reaction. Abjection renders the dominant order all the more unbearable due to the incessant violence of the process of ‘keeping order’. The subconscious knowledge of the other, the *différance*²⁶ that constantly undermines the

²³ See Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, 67.

²⁴ Derrida presents some interesting thoughts on the nakedness of human and non-human animals and its implications; see Derrida, ‘The Animal’, 372-83.

²⁵ For the issue of the Polish family crisis, see Nina Seiler, ‘Imposed Belonging: Family Crises in Poland in Film and Literature around 1968’, *Central European Cultures* 1.1 (2021): 75-92; available at <https://doi.org/10.47075/CEC.2021-1.04> [accessed 30 September].

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1-27.

status quo, ever so slightly shakes the ground of the subject in construction. The fleeting manifestations that linger in the corporeal memory of past gestures, the tickling of a subtle touch, or the echo of a vibrant buzzing are presence in absence, the mourning of an unknown past and future that are entangled in the pain of abjection. This pain does not allow to forget, crawling out of the dark corner when human subjects least expect it.

The Rem(a)inders of Annihilation

An account of such buried but nonetheless burning memory of violence surfaces in Wiktor Woroszyński's short story *White Worms* (*Białe robaki*, 1970). Woroszyński delivers a devil's tale written in a traditional style reminiscent of the Sarmatian (Polish gentry's) *gawęda*, a genre of folk literature modelled on oral tales.²⁷ It features a classic tale structure that is, however, shattered towards the end by intermingling the space-time of the tale with an account of battles of WW2. The text was first published in the illustrated magazine *You and I* (*Ty i Ja*), a lifestyle and proto-consumerist magazine. This adds to the odd character of stylistic multi-layeredness of the story and suggests a leisurely reading alongside a historico-political interpretation of the German devils intruding into the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian borderlands.

The narrator's greatest enemy, the devil Wurm, shows weak, almost featureless looks stemming probably from his wormish composition. 'His white, spread fingers were wriggling like worms closer and closer to the [Major's] proud and beautiful face [...] I watched in despair at the tangling of the devil's fingers, until suddenly they rolled up and fell down together with the arms.'²⁸ Wurm's fingers appear as both terrifying and powerless, their wriggling whiteness threatening to stain the Polish Major's face with their improper, impotent force. Wurm is the most poisonous and fearsome of all the devils in the story. His prying for eyes instead of souls appears to the narrator as a most terrifying feature; as a denaturalised devilish lust, a sort of 'modern' desire that exceeds the natural order of the Slavic traditional (magical) world. Yet the local magic still prevails over the foreign devils' spells. Wurm, in order to obtain what he could not steal by magic, then intervenes into the tale with the metallic force of Nazi tanks doubled by magic force.

Wurm's deeds prove harmful not only to the human inhabitants of the borderlands. His presence also poisons the rural environment, produces denaturalised worms²⁹ unearthed in the fields, worms

that the birds didn't want to touch, after all like ordinary worms, only longer and thinner than in other summers, and as coiled as the vile. The crows circled low over the upturned clods, but every one of them determinedly squatting down and bringing its beak into position would instantly jerk it up in panic without touching the worm and soar upwards in a flutter of wings.³⁰

²⁷ See Justyna Jaworska, 'Lekka, łatwa, przyjemna? Literatura w magazynie "Ty i Ja"', in *(Nie)ciekawa epoka? Literatura i PRL* (Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2008), 191.

²⁸ Wiktor Woroszyński, 'Białe robaki', in *Diabli wiedzą co... Wiersze i opowiadania pisarzy polskich: Antologia*, ed. Maria Błaszczuk and Barbara Olszańska (Warszawa: Iskry, 1972), 328 f.

²⁹ Worms (*robaki*) in Polish is a non-definitive word for all sorts of worm-like beings, ranging from earthworms to grubs, maggots, or tapeworms, including sometimes also – especially unwanted – insects like cockroaches, moths, or bacteria, viruses.

³⁰ Woroszyński, 'Białe robaki', 318-19.

The birds appear to develop an understanding of the ongoing harmful processes, saving themselves from contact with the foreign power. The human locals however still nurture hopes for normality by ignoring the strange worms that foreshadow and illustrate the inescapability of pain, torture and annihilation brought by WW2. The threat of violence already nests not only in the powerful army of Nazi Germany or in its ruthless representatives, but pervades the very soil the local farmers stand on and work with. The body of Wurm apparently composed of worms, and the earth infiltrated by the unhealthy worms become almost interchangeable, like one invasive matter taking on various forms. It signals the decomposition of the subject that falls apart into a swarming multitude, and so the German devil brings the imagination of postmodernity into the world of the borderlands.³¹ The conflation of the German army with the revolutionary political power of the multitude is a rather disturbing image: the assembled plurality as a political agent transforms into an annihilating power.

The lands and traditions of the past feature in Woroszyński's tale as decomposing, impossible to retrieve and save. The thoroughly decaying environment, a world that is already dead while still alive, reminds of an infected wound eaten away at by maggots, a decomposition mirrored in the dissolution of the traditional story arc at the end of the tale. Woroszyński does not sport the reparative and reviving remembrance Polish post-war literary imagination often features in regard to the borderlands that vanished from the Polish map after WW2.³² The author places the maggoty decomposition at the heart of his tale that *thoroughly* spoils any idyllic picture of the past and reconciliation with the present. His worms are marked by repulsion and anxiety, by negative affects of wartime that unbalance the relation between humans and their local nature, make enemies of worms and men, trigger the mechanisms of the immunisations of the 20th century.³³

While in Woroszyński's *White worms*, worms materialise the evil threatening to invade men, and the intermingling of worms and human form is perceived as a deadly agency, in Marian Pankowski's drama *Cockchafers* (*Chrabąszcze*, 1970), insects and humans are brought closer together. Though both writers destabilise the borders between insects and humans in their remembrance of WW2, the effect is quite different: in *Cockchafers* the overlap of humans and insects takes place in their shared creaturely vulnerability.

The fragility of the chafers, their being at humans' mercy, emerges in the retrospective account of the homelands given by a Polish journalist to an émigrée stage designer in her chic Paris apartment. The journalist emphasizes the lushness of May in the Małopolska region: 'The pre-schoolers are sitting and learning to count... on cockchafers! [...] Three... here three... you have three... three you've got... hold on, they're escaping! He-he-he... And the youth is flirting by these chafers. Ah... these

³¹ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life*, Repr. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, 11th ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

³² See Olga Linkiewicz, 'Bearers of Local Stories: Memories of the Eastern Borderlands and the Grand Narratives of the Polish Kresy', in *Imaginations and Configurations of Polish Society: From the Middle Ages through the Twentieth Century*, ed. Yvonne Kleinmann et al. (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2017), 335-8.

³³ Woroszyński's vision is thus defensive and contrary to Donna Haraway's positively marked imagination of the future 'Children of Compost' that 'came to see their shared kind as humus, rather than as human or nonhuman.' Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 140.

times.’³⁴ The children use the beetles for their mathematical and social education. The abundance of cockchafers signals a wholesome, idyllic state of a world that lies at the disposal of the local human population – similar to Woroszyński’s ‘ordinary’ worms providing for the fertility of the native soil.

However, this idyllic image, too, is shortly torn. The absence of ‘those who left... and were to us... brothers’³⁵ haunts the mollified picture of the past. The journalist sought out Mrs Karp in Paris to gain her support for the erection of a monument ‘for the victims of the ghetto’.³⁶ His reason for choosing Karp is that ‘[o]ut of the four thousand eight hundred and fifteen of your sisters and brothers... of the Great Community of Polish Jewry in our town – one person remained alive: professor-stage designer Róża Karp.’³⁷ The journalist is positively excited not only about Karp’s miraculous survival, but mainly about the ethnic Polish survivors’ generous readiness to offer ‘bountiful’ remembrance of the Jewish ‘sisters and brothers’ that turned into ashes. Karp, who comes to perceive herself as a ‘jar of ashes’, is most astonished at this eager commitment to remembrance, commenting that ‘I haven’t heard anything of this. I rather thought, that... because the newspapers...’³⁸ The messages coming from Poland in the years 1967-70 were rather paradoxical, manifesting anti-Semitic resentments and the downplaying of the numbers of Jewish victims in the Nazi camps parallel to a Polish self-aggrandisement as righteous among the nations.³⁹ Pankowski’s contemporary reacting to the nationalistic atmosphere in Poland and his explicit and contentious discussion of the Holocaust in *Cockchafers* was possible only because, as émigré writer, he published in London.

Despite her conflicting emotions, Karp starts to tell the journalist of her war-time plight, where the chafers return: ‘You mentioned the cockchafers... Each of us was so loaded... with rags, teapots, reserves and various umbrellas that (*she gets up and imitates the gait*) we were bruising against each other, like insects... like cockchafers in the schoolkid’s jar...’.⁴⁰ The idyllic image of the lush spring clashes with the horrific scenery of the Jewish townspeople assembling for the transport to a concentration camp without their (conscious) knowing. Both cockchafers and Jewish Poles cram on the ground, observed with a somewhat indifferent interest by ethnic Poles. Both chafers and Jews serve their mercantile practices – the ones used for counting exercises, the others rooked in their haste to get some food on the way. Moreover, the image of cockchafer grubs harming the roots of planted foods, or of masses of grown beetles harming crops, easily slips over onto the group of Jewish town dwellers whose departure many of their Polish neighbours do not look at with great regret. The scene of deportation becomes the image of just another market day, enriched, however, by the spectacle of the

³⁴ Marian Pankowski, ‘Chrabąszcze’, in *Polski dramat emigracyjny 1939-1969: Antologia*, ed. Dobrochna Ratajczakowa (Poznań: Lektor, 1993), 864.

³⁵ Pankowski, 865.

³⁶ Pankowski, 865.

³⁷ Pankowski, 865.

³⁸ Pankowski, 865.

³⁹ See Agata Chałupnik, “‘Niech się pan nie wyteatrze!’” O “Chrabąszczach” Mariana Pankowskiego’, *Pamiętnik Literacki*, 2 (2016): 137-8; available at <https://doi.org/10.18318/pl.2016.2.8> [accessed 30 September 2021]; Jarosz, ‘Marzec w prasie’, 117-19; Jacek Leociak, ‘Instrumentalizacja Zagłady w dyskursie marcowym’, *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 228.4 (2008): 447-58; Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 62-88.

⁴⁰ Pankowski, ‘Chrabąszcze’, 868.

burdened Jewish victims stumbling about. The conflation of beetles with the departing Jews inflicts a carnivalesque alienation, conjuring up imaginations of cockchafers with suitcases and teapots. This carnivalisation⁴¹ of the insects upturns the initial effect of the parallelism of humans with beetles – the idea that they can be – and are – killed without second thought,⁴² instead installing a process of becoming-human of the cockchafers. However, both directions firmly integrate the Jews-cockchafers into narratives of control and observation, as objects of a biopower that (re)constructs the borders of the ‘human life’.⁴³

In a similar vein, Karp later refers to the bullets aimed at but missing her as hitting the grass “like pregnant fireflies”⁴⁴ – their actual deadliness for others is transformed into an awe-inspiring phenomenon of nature’s cycles clashing with the disturbing idea of pregnant suicide bombers. Again, the narration drifts into the fantastical and carnivalesque that installs the escape of young Róża Karp from the death train as a grotesque fairy tale;⁴⁵ something beyond the possible order. Yet the firefly-bullets also raise the question of remains, of whatever is able to escape certain annihilation. Róża Karp, the survivor, the living jar of ashes in her luxuriously fitted apartment, sticks to matter instead of memories. She sees herself rather in the standing of non-human things or beings, small fragments of nature like the ‘wings of cockchafers spat out by sparrows on the path in a park in May.’⁴⁶

Kaleidoscopic Perspectives

Pankowski is a writer who increasingly applies bits and parts into his narratives, disintegrating and shifting the understanding these parts usually carry, dis-discerning their function in the world and the text. For example, in *The Blue Carnation* (*Granatowy goździk*, 1972), the narrator (mis)takes a human couple with a lantern in the forest for a ‘belated firefly’; but when realising the error in cognition the narrator does not even bother to re-adjust the species tag: ‘it turns out that the bug is not alone. That Ursula sits by him on the fragrant mosses.’⁴⁷ Pankowski’s textual handling re-codes things in a queer, almost campy way,⁴⁸ especially in one of his best-known novels, *Rudolf* (1980). In this text, the protagonists invent a kaleidoscopic practice of their shared inner vision when switching from one memory to another: the ‘mechanical

⁴¹ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965).

⁴² See Cora Diamond, ‘Experimenting on Animals: A Problem in Ethics’, in *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 336-65; Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, 23-51.

⁴³ See Colleen Glenney Boggs, ‘Species States: Animal Control in Phil Klay’s “Redeployment”’, in *Control Culture: Foucault and Deleuze after Discipline*, ed. Frida Beckman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 167-8; Campbell, *Improper Life*, 17; Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, 83-5.

⁴⁴ Pankowski, ‘Chrabąszcze’, 870.

⁴⁵ Similarly, the theatre critic Jan Kott is unable to frame his salvations from the Holocaust in any other way than a ‘chaplinsque grotesque’ or ‘absurd farce’, especially in view of the certain doom and death of millions of others. Jan Kott, *Przyczynek do biografii* (Londyn: Aneks, 1990), 113.

⁴⁶ Pankowski, ‘Chrabąszcze’, 891-2.

⁴⁷ Marian Pankowski, *Granatowy goździk* (Londyn: Oficyna Poetów i Malarzy, 1972), 82.

⁴⁸ See also Jack J. B. Hutchens, *Queer Transgressions in Twentieth-Century Polish Fiction: Gender, Nation, Politics* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 75-94.

change of thoughts by shaking the head.’⁴⁹ With the motion of the head, memories, ideas and images topple over each other and arrange themselves again in a coincidental way, appearing as *real*, material things that temporarily rest in the specific body parts responsible for perception like eyes or ears. With the interlinking of matter, corporeality and memory, Pankowski dissolves the distinction between mind and body without conceptualising the body as a self-identical materialisation of past experience. His approach is fracturing truth claims, pluralising the way to look at and conceive the world. Pankowski’s point of view often veers from the narrator or main protagonist, sticking to things or clinging to animals that just happened to cross the humans’ path. Thus, his narration becomes kaleidoscopic as well, unexpectedly shaken to fragments and reorganised in a different way.

But, as we touched the homeland – so much glumness came blown from somewhere that the words jammed in the head and none of them ran towards the mouth. The wasp, unpunished for the moment, gusted about both the over-jam areas, his and mine, stunned by the impunity. It was completely mesmerised when it saw the two men exchange a handshake and head over to the bar.⁵⁰

It is precisely in the instant when emotions prevent the words to flow out and to cognitively shape the situation, the words stuck like marbles in a narrow passage, that the wasp takes over the point of narration. As soon as language ebbs, the environmental noise floods in;⁵¹ and the confused meaning of the stuck words is no longer prevalent to the myriad meanings of the surroundings. However, the wasp’s perception in *The blue carnation* still clings to the two émigré Poles that have just met:

It still saw the two heads, one grey, the other with a stubble haircut, already salt-and-pepper [‘sparrowy’] at the temples. Without thinking, it sat down on the Englishman’s uneaten slice and dipped its head into the peach-crust. And in the bar – the grey head nodding to something. The salt-and-pepper one without movement. Suddenly the grey one does not even stir, but the dark one begins to perorate something. Oh – now the hand of the grey head in the air. A sign. And already a restaurateur. And three heads. And two again. And the wasp has already eaten. But it still looks towards the Poles.⁵²

The wasp’s ‘account’, marked by present tense, serves two ends. It oscillates between ‘a distinctive and credible nonhuman point of view’,⁵³ between what a human reader would expect from the perception of a wasp – detached heads that move or freeze, abstracted from their togetherness with the rest of the body – and a conceptual grasp of the situation that evidently trickles into its ‘narration’ in human terms: ideas like nodding, perorating, the hand raised as a sign. Pankowski fills the ‘gaze that is vacant to the extent of being bottomless, at the same time innocent and cruel perhaps, perhaps sensitive and impassive, good and bad, uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable, abyssal and secret’,⁵⁴ as Derrida characterises his cat’s gaze, with the imagination of his

⁴⁹ Marian Pankowski, *Rudolf* (Londyn: Oficyna Poetów i Malarzy, 1980), 53.

⁵⁰ Pankowski, *Granatowy goździk*, 17.

⁵¹ See Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies (I)* (London: Continuum, 2008), 120.

⁵² Pankowski, *Granatowy goździk*, 17.

⁵³ William H. MaGee, ‘The Animal Story: A Challenge in Technique’, *The Dalhousie Review* 44.2 (1964): 158.

⁵⁴ Derrida, ‘The Animal’, 381.

human figures. Pankowski does not pretend to fully dip the narration into the wasp's perceptive range. The text neither claims to know the features of waspian worlds, nor abandons the humans whose encounter he recounts. Yet first of all, it constructs the 'gaze' as such that 'still looks towards the two Poles.' A waspian gaze is less evident to humans than being faced by a cat; and even in the latter case, we are finally unsure if the cat sees us as one figure, as the coherent beings ('two Poles') that we see in ourselves or in the personae in literature.

Indeed, Pankowski presents something like a desmological reaching out, a platform of interconnection where he installs the possibility of the wasp's interest in human life, a mutual but unsteady exchange of gazes. Pankowski thus throws out an anchor to the imagined vantage point of the wasp – a vantage point he creates as still readable to the human reader – in order to span up the space *between*. He faces the risky and ultimately destined to fail exploration of the wasp's perspective, the 'violence or stupidity'⁵⁵ of both over- and underinterpreting the animal's perception and understanding by pretending to *know* the wasp's vision and interest, and at the same time acknowledging to *invent* it through the narration. Thus, Pankowski's narration simultaneously presents a truth claim of otherness and confesses its prevailing interest in the human self, by which it creates a paradoxical reading of the other through the self and of the self through the other.

Compared to the textual possibilities of literature, cinematography at the same time offers greater freedom to introduce and show animal realities and is more limited to explore these realities. It seems that the images of animals present in film are less distorted by human ideas about animals; the illusion of the objective camera suggests the presentation of animals as they are. But of course, apart from the appearance of specially trained animals in film, we know that cinematographic material and its composition is not innocent either, but is similarly traversed by human intents and strategies as writing. The fly in *The Cruise* however is of a slightly different standing than the average animal in so-called animal films. Its presence remains on the margins of conscious filming and viewing, as the fly shifts into the frame as a black spot on a pillar but reveals its aliveness in sudden disappearance and reappearance. In its unintended and subconsciously disturbing punctuating of the filmic space,⁵⁶ the fly-ness is utterly disconnected from the assembly of humans in the room; yet it perfectly reveals the character of the gathering.

The interaction between humans and the wasp as depicted in *The Blue Carnation* is more conscious on the level of both the protagonists and the narration. The appearance of the wasp evokes in one figure a whole thread of cultural and personal experience and reflections on the human-wasp-coexistence. The wasp's doings are used by the protagonist to drive away 'heavy thoughts'⁵⁷ and to establish contact with the man sitting next to him. Moreover, without the intermediation of the narrator, the wasp could not occur in the writing, on its own behalf like the fly in *The Cruise* – it has to be textually intended. While literature shows restrictions in terms of casual appearance of animals, it also offers greater formal freedom in exploring the animal's supposed features: unlike in film, we are able to glimpse at a possible worldview of the wasp

⁵⁵ Derrida, 387.

⁵⁶ See also Barthes's concept of the *punctum*, Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Classics, 2020), 32-71.

⁵⁷ Pankowski, *Granatowy goździk*, 14.

itself, at its processing of the surroundings. The narrator suggests the wasp's interest in the two humans; but at the same time, it becomes evident that the wasp figures mainly as an *other* kaleidoscope through which we look at the human interaction. Wasp and humans create a common plane of interaction and attention, directed at each other but pulling towards the humans. Such relationality is only potentially present in *The Cruise*, where the humans are unaware of the fly, the common plane thus centring in the very background on the fly's potential awareness of the humans. The human control over the insect is thus more intense in writing, while cinematography seems more susceptible to the infestation of micro disturbances.

To Master the Noise

The topic of control is central to the appearance of insects in mid-socialist Polish literature. The confrontation of humans and insects features as the struggle of a derelict human order against an abjected world that disposes of an obscure power of knowledge and life linked to its intimacy with the environment. Such a struggle of understanding, where human knowledge is humbled by the practices of insects, is key to sci-fi writer and philosopher Stanisław Lem's novel *The Master's Voice* (*Głos Pana*, 1968), where American scientists try to decode a supposedly alien message that remains utterly inscrutable. They manage to isolate strips of an encoded structure in the message that leads them to produce a curious, instable material of unknown-before properties, without, however, apparent functionality. Though having managed to transform some parts of the supposed message into matter, the scientists are at a loss. The material seems to have something like an agency and a mysterious – to the stunned scientists – will or agenda, and yet, it is not an alien living being but a redesign of terrestrial materials implemented by the scientists. The material reveals the uncanniness of the earthly matter that all of a sudden follows alien rules, rules contradicting the scientific protocols of physics. This emerging 'flip side' of terrestrial matter becomes a creature, a mysterious beingness emerging from the blind collaboration of alien and human intelligences.

Some scientists call the material 'Master of the Flies' (*Pan Much*) due to its mysterious effect on flies: 'the flies first became motionless, then spread their wings and the next second they were swirling around the flask in black crazed balls – I thought I heard their venomous buzzing. He brought the container a little closer to the lid still – the flies were banging about more and more violently.'⁵⁸ The flies' reaction to the creature-matter questions the human-installed hierarchy between humans and flies: do flies understand what humans are unable to grasp? The flies seem to further the human understanding of the alien material, serving as one of the very few hints about the characteristics of the material; but at the same time the scientists are unable to integrate this scrap of information ('the flies react') into their empty file about the matter.

[A]s far as this indeed peculiar effect with flies was concerned, nobody had the faintest idea of its mechanism, especially since only a few Hymenoptera showed it apart from flies. Spiders, beetles and many other insects the biologists patiently carried into this abyss did not react at all to the presence of the substance heated by the reactions going on inside it. There was talk of waves, rays; at least none of telepathy. Flies whose abdominal nodes were pharmacologically paralysed did not manifest the effect. But that was a rather trivial

⁵⁸ Stanisław Lem, *Głos Pana* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1968), 176.

finding. The unfortunate flies were drugged, amputated one by one whatever possible, their legs and wings immobilised alternately, but in the end, the only finding was that a thick layer of dielectric shielded the impact effectively. Thus, it was physical, not ‘miraculous’.⁵⁹

The processes going on before the scientists’ eyes are beyond their understanding; all they know to do is to apply their probed techniques of animal testing.⁶⁰ This is why the flies now become the ‘unfortunate’ objects of experimentation, cutting up, drugging and every other conceivable means that the human scientists could think up in order to elicit the secret of the alien matter. The anxiousness about the impenetrable alienness of the extra-terrestrial code and material is transposed onto the flies: How can they *know* the material if the humans don’t?⁶¹ The flies’ status of being is destabilised: they turn out just as alien to us as their apparent ‘master’. Thus, the flies suddenly abandon ‘this’ side of terrestrial knowledge and physics, oscillating now between earthliness and alienness, between their positivist categorisation in the human catalogue of beings and their uncanny agency as subjects and intruders, threatening and promising otherness alike.

An alien code that until the novel’s end could just as well be a coincidental rhythmisation of the noise of the universe, the incessant drumming of molecules and rays, and the flies: the possibility of knowing the other is decidedly questioned by Lem’s narrator; a desmological understanding caged by human narrow-mindedness. To ‘follow’⁶² the insects could mean to ‘reveal the multiplicities, the noise, the flows of information that have made up our world from the start.’⁶³ Such a textual politics of affirmation, however, seems to be possible in mid-socialist Poland only negatively: as the literary disclosure of a solipsistic humanism’s violence.⁶⁴

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⁵⁹ Lem, 176–77.

⁶⁰ Derrida, ‘The Animal’, 394; Diamond, ‘Experimenting on Animals’.

⁶¹ See Paweł Majewski, *Between an Animal and a Machine: Stanisław Lem’s Technological Utopia*, trans. Olga Kaczmarek (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018), 90.

⁶² Derrida, ‘The Animal’, 371-2.

⁶³ Dolphijn, ‘Introduction’, 7.

⁶⁴ See Majewski, *Between an Animal*, 90.

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Gâzâială: politica literară caleidoscopică a insectelor

Rezumat

Acest articol analizează apariția insectelor în literatura poloneză în perioada socialistă de mijloc, abordând dintr-o perspectivă postumanistă prezența abundentă a muștelor, a viespilor, a gândacilor și a viermilor în textele literare atât ca motiv literar, cât și ca strategie estetică. Articolul investighează modul în care utilizarea insectelor în și prin text modulează punctul de vedere al indivizilor umani și perspectiva asupra acestora și cum aceste modulări pot fi regăsite în realitatea socială din perioada socialismului din anii 1960 și 1970.