



BOOK REVIEW:

Stanislaw Lem: Philosopher of the Future
*Lemography: Stanislaw Lem in the Eyes of
the World*

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Swirski, Peter. *Stanislaw Lem: Philosopher of the Future*. Liverpool UP, 2015.
ISBN 978-1789620542.

Swirski, Peter, and Waclaw M. Osadnik, editors. *Lemography: Stanislaw Lem
in the Eyes of the World*. Liverpool UP, 2014. ISBN 978-1789620535.

Most people probably know Stanislaw Lem (1921–2006) as the author of *Solaris* (1961) thanks to the 1972 film adaption by Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky, or perhaps even from the 2002 remake by American director Steven Soderbergh. For a long time, the English translation of *Solaris* was based on a 1966 French translation from the original Polish, but today, fortunately, *Solaris* and many of Lem's other novels, essays, criticism, and short-story collections have been translated directly into English, as well as approximately 40 other languages. Overall, his books have sold more than 40 million copies. No doubt, Stanislaw Lem must be considered one of the iconic names in the history of SF, but as with many writers from the Golden Age of SF – Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, for example – his oeuvre ranged widely between many different genres, fiction as well as non-fiction. In this review, I first discuss Peter Swirski's monograph *Stanislaw Lem: Philosopher of the Future*, an overall excellent introduction to Lem's career that includes a comprehensive biographical overview and critical interpretations of his novels and essays, before subsequently discussing the collection that Swirski and Waclaw M. Osadnik co-edited.

Adam Roberts has characterised Lem as probably the “greatest European writer of postwar SF” (260–61). However, as Roberts points out, few literary scholars have engaged in Lem’s oeuvre as systematically as Swirski has, since Lem’s work is very complex and spans a wide range of genres. As Swirski points out in his latest major work on Lem, named simply after its author, Lem’s body of writing included not only SF but also

poetry, fiction, metafiction, autobiography, drama, literary theory and criticism, popular science and futurology, anthropological and analytical philosophy, sociocultural analyses, book reviews, newspaper columns and magazine feuilletons, radio and television screenplays, film scripts, volumes of polemical writings, and – last but not least – truckfuls of letters, some garnished with fanciful sketches and drawings. (20)

In his monograph, Swirski gives a deeper understanding of Lem’s writings by situating his oeuvre in biographical, social, (geo)political, economic, scientific, and technological contexts, without reducing it to an epiphenomenon of those contexts (for example, by pointing to genre conventions). In his own view, Swirski believes that since literature is “never created in a perfect vacuum ... it often helps to understand the novelist and the context in which his works were created” (3). Along similar lines, Swirski argues that “literary criticism can hardly hope to render justice” to a “writer who preferred to be called the philosopher of the future”. Accordingly, where Lem

models nuclear-age strategic madness, literary critics discuss postmodern absurdity rather than game-theoretic rationality. Where he describes top-down engineering of de-aggression in *la bête humaine*, they dissect his style rather than his arguments. Where he speculates on cyberevolution and devolution, they turn for help to Bakhtin, not Darwin. Where he runs thought experiment about a statistical disproof of the epistemic bedrock epitomized by Occam’s razor, they retreat into intertextual taxonomy. (3, italics original.)

It is an open question about how thoroughly texts should be related to their historical contexts – or related to different contexts – since biographical critics always run the risk of “intentional fallacies” or of understanding a work solely through interviews or an author’s correspondence. Still, despite Swirski’s biographical and contextualist leanings, he nonetheless offers several convincing readings of Lem’s work. Lem’s horrible experiences of World War II, including occupations by the Nazis and then the Soviets, and everyday life in Poland as a satellite state to the USSR had, obviously, a deep impact on Lem’s works and world view. As Swirski writes:

Even though, as a writer, he has always maintained that he was by and large a realist, gradually he turned his back on characterization, story-line, and other canons of verisimilitude. The shift from the microscale of human atoms to the macroscale of the civilization, not to mention *the obsessive return to the subjects of chance*, survival by the skin of our teeth, and the inhumanity in humanity, were but some of the after-effects of the years of Nazism which, like Stalinism, barely differentiated between the murder of one and the butchery of millions. (15, emphasis added)

Swirski emphasises that there is a thread of misanthropy in some of Lem's novels and other writings.

A common theme in SF is, of course, encounters with other civilisations. Lem, however, did not believe that contact or cooperation with other civilisations is possible; he expressed this, for example, in the novel *Solaris*. In one of Lem's last email exchanges with Swirski, he writes that the "almost limitless diversity and distribution of evolutionary paths taken by different forms of life and civilizations" is the basic reason for this (39). I consider this an example of what Thomas Kuhn conceptualised as *incommensurability*. Although *Star Trek* would have it otherwise, there are no "universal translators" in Lem's universe since different civilisations would have different ontological and epistemological concepts impossible to translate. And even if Lem was a "philosopher, futurologist, and not least a science-savvy polemicist" (181), as Swirski claims, he also had a life-long "love affair with cybernetics and its multiplex progeny, from robotics to artificial intelligence to artificial emotion" (20). According to Swirski, however, Lem didn't believe that social engineering of any type could lead to universally happy societies, and he was critical of blueprints for revolutionary utopias. Nonetheless, Swirski continues, many of Lem's recurring themes remain important today: the role of artificial intelligence in our (future) societies, for instance, or the question of human exceptionalism, what constitutes a human being, or what a human being is when juxtaposed with technology.

All in all, although the short space allotted to a review makes it difficult to give a fair account of the richness of Swirski's monograph, *Stanislaw Lem* is an excellent critical introduction to Lem's oeuvre, casting light on several of the recurring themes in Lem's authorship, and a must-read for everyone interested in Golden Age SF as well as the intellectual, socio-political, and scientific contexts of Lem's writings. It should also appeal to readers who have admired his work for a long time. In this sense, the monograph is both an introduction to and a thorough exploration of Lem's oeuvre and intellectual legacy: a wonderful place for any scholar new to Lem to start.

Accordingly, Swirski's monograph also serves as a handy springboard for the more widely ranging essays in *Lemography: Stanislaw Lem in the Eyes of the World*. This edited collection by Swirski and Waclaw M. Osadnik comprises seven articles, and its introduction by Osadnik and Swirski ("Lem Redux: From Poland to the World") continues to contextualise Lem's oeuvre by pointing to the political conditions with which Eastern Bloc writers had to contend (particularly censorship) and adding further biographical points. Still, the introduction has two general aims. First, as the editors mention, it seeks to "introduce aspects of Lem's work hitherto underrepresented or even entirely unknown in the English speaking world" (14), and in Swirski's contribution to the volume, "The Unknown Lem", he introduces and analyses three previously untranslated novels important for understanding the development of Lem's literary universe: *Man From Mars* (1946), *The Astronauts* (1951), and *The Magellan Nebula* (1955). Second, although this is never explicitly stated by the editors, the introduction aims simply to support better interpretations of Lem's work. As such, *Lemography* offers a number of valuable new critical readings.

For instance, as Osadnik and Swirski write in their introduction, until 1989 all "Polish literature was nominally subject to state control" (4). Initiated in 1949, this state control demanded social realism in art but, despite a

loosening of censorship restrictions in 1956, there always remained a “plethora of censorial quibbles” (2) that affected what and how Lem could write. In Swirski’s chapter, he points out that since cybernetics was characterised as a false capitalist science in the Soviet Union, Lem tried to avoid this hurdle by coining the neologism “mechaneuristics” in *The Magellan Nebula* (1955). Additionally, Lem claimed to have written a “good Communist utopia” in *The Astronauts* (1951), often considered the first Polish SF novel, although this did not prevent Stalinist critics from attacking the novel for lacking a “sufficiently robust ideological infrastructure” (32–33).

One can easily get the impression that many of Lem’s works prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall must be read allegorically – that is, as critiques of communism and historical materialism, like some of the Strugatsky brothers’ work; for example, *Hard to be a God* (1964). And, of course, as Bo Pettersson points out in his chapter “The Hilarious and Serious Teachings of Lem’s Robot Fables: *The Cyberiad*”, a short-story collection like *The Cyberiad* can easily be read allegorically (112). However, Pettersson argues that there is more to Lem than just cleverly disguised critiques of the political system. Many novels and short stories discuss humanity’s place in a highly technological civilisation and our dependence on science. In some sense, then, Lem was anticipating post-humanist thought “many decades before the term *post-human* was coined” (Pettersson 97, emphasis original). Science, robots, and androids – and artificial intelligence – are used for discussing the increasingly blurred interface between humans and machines, technology, and technological systems.

This blurring interface is also a theme that concerned Lem more greatly as time passed and he began to foresee an almost unavoidable future for humanity, which led to him losing interest in SF during the 1970s. In another article, “Problems and Dilemmas: Lem’s *Golem XIV*”, Victor Yaznevich explains why SF ceased to interest Lem: it had a

tendency to degenerate either into pseudo-scientific fairy tales or into simplistic visions of civilizational nightmares – all the while failing to pursue the most important goal of culture, which is to attempt to figure out where the world is going, and to figure out whether we should resist or actively contribute to its civilizational march into the future. (141)

Golem XIV (1981) was a “book of meditations and prognoses about mankind’s ultimate destiny” (142), the protagonist of which is a supercomputer genius called Golem (General Operator, Long-range, Ethically Stabilized, Multi-modelling). The book once again brought up the post- or transhuman question, and this of course presents an even more present-day question: should our future include artificial intelligence only, or the coexistence of biological human minds with ‘nonhuman’ machine intelligence? Kenneth Krabbenhoft follows this same topic in “Lem, Cervantes, and Metafiction: *Peace on Earth* and *Fiasco*”, which shows how Lem’s final two novels return to themes such as the limits of human knowledge and moral reasoning in a highly developed technological civilisation.

Humankind’s destiny to either emerge as AI or to coexist with machine intelligence was a more urgent topic, in Lem’s view, than encountering or communicating with alien species in outer space. In “Embodiment Problems: Adapting *Solaris* to Film”, Nicholas Ruddick explores this topic by discussing

the three film adaptations of Lem's seminal classic novel *Solaris*: the 1968 version, Andrei Tarkovski's classic 1972 version, and Steven Soderbergh's 2002 version, often considered flawed in several ways. Ruddick highlights the pros and cons of each adaptation, as well as some of the themes investigated in *Solaris* – for example, “epistemological arrogance” in encounters with other life forms (71). Surprisingly, Ruddick does not consider Tarkovsky's version a masterpiece (in fact, Lem himself hated it!) but also believes that some of the scenes in Soderbergh's version, despite some other difficulties in the film, do a better job than Tarkovsky's adaptation. As Ruddick considers Lem's *Solaris* to be a truly great novel, he asserts that the work can inspire even more adaptations, and, despite the limitations of understanding *Solaris* only through its adaptations, Ruddick hopes that new adaptations will bring greater attention to Lem's novel.

In “Literature, Futurology, or Philosophy? *The Futurological Congress*”, Iris Vidmar and Peter Swirski provide a close reading the tricks Lem is playing with reality in *The Futurological Congress* (1971; trans. 1984). This is not an end in itself – or a postmodern playing with reality – but the means for Lem to criticise futurology and discuss contemporary issues of overpopulation and resource depletion. At stake here are issues of state or supra-state control, technocracy, and the development of surveillance technologies – issues that still linger today with the discussion of how to solve the climate crisis or the current global pandemic of COVID-19.

As with Swirski's monograph, it is impossible to give a fair account of the intellectual richness in these collected articles. All in all, this is an excellent edited collection that deepens our understanding of Lem's work and legacy, and it will hopefully spur further research into Lem's oeuvre. And even if there are *now* plenty of translations of Lem's works, one also hopes that more of his voluminous writings will find translation into English in the future.

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