

# Laying a False Trail, Shaking Off Pursuit. Notes on the Margin of Forewords to Stanisław Lem's Novels

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## **The imagination of the long 1960s.**

In the popular science documentary *Przed podróżą* [trans. Before a journey] (1960) by Maria Kwiatkowska the eye of the camera pans towards the glass window of the Orbis travel agency. A painted inscription reads: “We don’t sell tickets into space yet”. An off-screen narrator’s voice adds: “Neither Intourist, nor Pan American sell them either. Engineer Walczewski talks about the first Polish rocket, RM1, meteorological for now. Poland is not and is not expected to be a space power, but something is also

being done in this area” [*Przed podróżą* 00:01:00-22]. The film was made a year before the first human flight into space, three years after the launch of Sputnik, the first satellite. And although there were no prospects of monopolising the interplanetary market, a lot was done to ensure that the Polish contribution (of course, adding to the Soviet’s) to the development of the space industry was noted, both on the pages of history, and in Kwiatkowska’s film produced by Documentary and Feature Film Studios (WFDiF). Hence, we see the wind tunnel of the Warsaw University of Technology, a staging of the rocket launch in the Błędownska Desert and the ubiquitous models of meteorological heads resembling missiles.

Almost 60 years on, no human foot has stood on another planet, and no Polish space rocket has ever been constructed, despite the development of technology and apparatus for space missions. The fever of galactic expansion and faith in the possibilities of technology have become part of the collective imagination of society since the second half of the 20th century, which saw the creation of a “technocultural paradigm” [Jelevska 9]. The first widely reproduced photos of the Earth seen from space became a turning point in the organisation of imagination and reinventing the world<sup>1</sup>. Photograph number one, view from the Moon, was taken by the crew of the Apollo 11 mission in 1969. The second picture, even more suggestive, because it presented

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<sup>1</sup> However, these were not the first pictures of Earth. In 1946, a K-25 camera was placed in a V2 rocket, a weapon brought by German scientists to the United States. These photos were to document what was happening to the rocket, so that it could be calibrated more precisely in order to more accurately aim at targets to be bombed [Jelevska 52].

the Earth as a whole, suspended in endless space, was taken in 1972 by a crew member of the Apollo 17 mission, Harrison Hagan “Jack” Schmitt. It was this image of the globe, later called Blue Marble, that was later to grace the covers of newspapers around the world and also became the most reproduced photograph in history [Mirzoeff 17-18]. In the field of imagination a lot changed, and more was to change. Space and technological progress have entered the pool of important problems for everyday (and for art). From projects for futuristic cities, through fashion shows and graphic school, to film [Kordjak-Piotrowska and Welbel]. In addition to dreams of cosmic conquests, there were also existential fears and questions about the boundaries between human and non-human, especially in literature, and in particular in the novels of Stanisław Lem. In the long 1960s there was no literature more relevant to reality and more socially sanctioned than that of the author of *Solaris*.

### **Science fiction and literary traditions**

While science-fiction literature during Stalinism was condemned as a work of imperialism, its role became invaluable to the authorities during the Cold War’s machinations and the struggle to capture the social imagination. The propaganda of technological development and the military-industrial complex was coupled with increasingly bold projects of the cities of the future. A utopia of homeostasis, and thus a perfectly balanced environment, supported the solutions proposed by technical thought. Literature played a significant role by instilling ready-made images and ideas in the social imagination, and thus making a seemingly innocent and insignificant shift — marking the human-machine re-

lationship – which, as a consequence, triggered thinking about human beings in the category of networks of relationships, dependence on other actors and game elements, which contemporary research in the field of posthumanism gladly took up. The end of the Gomułka era allowed science fiction to become subversive. The irony towards huge plans and scepticism towards the key category of progress went hand in hand with political doubt and the realities of everyday life [Kordjak-Piotrowska and Welbel 48-56].

A simple attempt to rank and classify texts within a somewhat vaguely defined science fiction ends in failure, or at least defies attempts at clear categorisation. The matter is serious, because the phrase “genre prose”, especially in the colloquial approach, clearly brings negative connotations. These are associated with the schematic structure of the text, and thus a relative limitation of creativity at a time when the ambitions of science-fiction literature (or rather – the ambitions of its creators) often met with the ambitions of a political novel, such as a barometer of abuse of symbolic power, or of a moral and psychological novel. These works thus provided a snapshot of the life of a given community – its fears, dreams and longings. So what do researchers recommend? As usual, broadening the perspective: “This phenomenon [science fiction] today is neither purely literature, nor a genre of a novel, nor a writing technique, nor a sociological phenomenon – but everything to some extent” [Oramus 8]. Therefore, by highlighting the paradox of science fiction as a genre that began to disappear in its “literary” form and simultaneously infiltrated visual media and thereby gained popularity, Dominika Oramus proposes

considering the genre in the postmodern tradition, with all the consequences that this entails. As part of this way of thinking about science fiction literature, it would occupy a particularly privileged position [9]. An important reference point for the researcher is Jean Baudrillard's conviction about the uniqueness of science fiction as a genre that provides contemporary culture scholars with the necessary language to describe our rapidly changing reality. In an essay entitled *Simulacra and Science Fiction*, discussed by Oramus in her work, Baudrillard creates a useful typology of the genre, where the shots of fantastic worlds are divided into: utopian ones (separate worlds based on a critique of the world around us) and those with the origin in "classic science fiction from its golden age, falling in the second half of the twentieth century. In this case, the fantastic vision is created by extrapolating and imagining the expansion of the order existing today" [12], and, most importantly, beyond the escapism of two previous "science fiction of simulacra times" that create fairy-tale realities[12]. The third kind, which according to Baudrillard, is the only one that is able to describe today's everyday life, would be based on blurring the border between what is fictional and what is socially considered true; what is a thing and what constitutes only its projection: "A certain type of science fiction is able to show, thanks to its poetics, the world of models and illusions that cannot be verified to discover the hidden truth about the world – because projection and staging the facts is the only truth. Baudrillard mentions here the novel by Philip K. Dick entitled *The simulacra* in which Americans re-enact the Civil War and seek the confirmation of their national identity" [Oramus 12-13].

Finding the roots of science fiction, deciding whether it was constituted in the twentieth century, or whether the first manifestations of this way of writing about the world should be seen in earlier centuries, has remained an open question in the dispute about the boundaries and definitions of the genre. In his work devoted to the development of science fiction, Antoni Smuszkiewicz traces the path of its development “from the eighteenth-century utopian novel to modern science fiction” [*Zaczarowana gra* (trans. *The Enchanted Game*) 18], marking, however, the heterogeneity and initial dependence of those texts. So, we are talking rather about “the growth of science-fiction motifs”, which Smuszkiewicz illustrates with the motive of distant travel, one of the first present in science fiction texts, but also occurring in fairy tales and enlightenment philosophical tales [20]. In the field of setting boundaries, beginnings and development of science fiction, as well as mapping the work of individual writers within this area, one genre determinant is particularly important. At first glance it is nothing more banal than the requirement to respect the probability principle in employing fantastic technological solutions or scientific hypotheses. This issue is important because, in the case of Stanisław Lem it is important to be faithful not so much to the appearances of science, as to the cognitive method sanctioned by science. This method leaves the author limited room – by internal logic – to implement technological solutions in writing about biology or evolution [16-17]. In a few words: nothing can be written about science and technology without knowledge and insight into the current state of research.

### **Thus spoke Lem**

Speaking of Lem's strong social sanctioning and tracking of science's development pathways, science fiction novels are equally interesting when confronted with another tradition, the origins of which are also anchored in Enlightenment: that of the realistic novel, or the realism connoted by it, as a way of shaping the presented reality. As Lem himself pointed out, "fantastic literature is essentially a kind of branch of realism. Even if [...] it is not realism in the proper sense of the word, it testifies to its era and expresses very real content contrary to the intentions of its creators" [*Stanisław Lem* 33]. Although the author spoke succinctly and clearly, according to warnings from academia (but if you think about it, also common sense) he cannot be believed definitively and utterly.

Sometimes Lem's novel is preceded by a characteristic preface, which is neither the publisher's note nor the author's word. Its action takes place in the United States (or similarly shaped territory), often to show how the (Cold) war industry works, and the realities, although distant by several decades, are in line with the then state research on cybernetics, physics or life sciences. We know that due to his education, interests, but also compliance with the aforementioned scientific method, Lem was up to date with publications from these fields, and also read the classic works of Norbert Wiener, which is even expressed in the preface to *Golem XIV*: "On the other hand, in the works of the two American "fathers" of cybernetics, N. Wiener and J. Neumann, the concept arose of a system which could program itself" [*Golem* 9]. Interestingly, the names of real scientists

play a special role – their authority confirms and legitimises the argument of Professor Irving T. Creve, who in 2027 agreed to write a preface to the novel for the scientific publisher Indiana University Press, published in 2047, about which we find out from a quasi-title page. As might be easily guessed, Professor Creve never existed – or, to be more precise – has not been born yet (or he exists, but it is quite possible that he has not obtained the title of professor yet). Lem’s skill of navigating and feigning the realistic narrative is particularly clear here. The foreword by Professor Creve mixes elements of futurological literary fiction with historical facts about military operations and the post-war arms race. Predictions about the future introduced through the back door are related to the technological solutions of the 1950s and 1960s – they are somehow their logical consequence, a vision based on strictly defined premises – and also on the issue of artificial intelligence, which preoccupies scientists to this day. So we read first about matters known to us (or which are also provable and confirmable), about ENIAC, a device built at the end of World War II that started the computerisation era and was used by military services, and we learn later that with the increase in demand for digital mass-production machines in the 1950s, they were introduced by IBM. However, when a reader who is not confident enough with their knowledge of the beginnings of computer networks loses their vigilance, Professor Creve continues to tell his tale about the next decades, and thus the reader finds themselves almost a decade before the modern reader. It turned out (maybe it will turn out) that by 2027 RAND Corporation will have provided the Pentagon with “a method of predicting occurrences in the interna-

tional politico-military arena, a method relying on the formulation of so-called “scenarios of events”, and in two years from now GOLEM VI will conduct global manoeuvres of the Atlantic Pact as the commander-in-chief, because it has already exceeded the abilities of the average General with its number of logical elements. The third race between East and West has become (will become?) a fact, after two historical ones – a nuclear- and missile-race, and in 2023 there were disturbing and sensational incidents that, fortunately, will not be made public “due to the secrecy of the work”: “While serving as Chief of the General Staff during the Patagonian crisis, GOLEM XII refused to co-operate with General T. Oliver after carrying out a routine evaluation of that worthy officer’s intelligence quotient. The matter resulted in an inquiry, during which GOLEM XII gravely insulted three members of a special Senate commission. The affair was successfully hushed up, and after several more clashes GOLEM XII paid for them by being completely dismantled”<sup>2</sup>.

Another version of the supercomputer, GOLEM XIV, which is also the epitome of human fear of machine rebellion, is more than just a fantastic variation of artificial intelligence research. In a text under the telling title *Monster of Massachusetts*, Stanisław Bereś notes that the brilliant computer that gives a lecture on the intricacies of the process of evolution and technology with superiority is the mask of Stanisław Lem himself (as evidenced by, for example, entering the writer’s name in the name of the machine) and a summary of his knowledge in 1981: “The idea is intellec-

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2 Quotes and paraphrases come from a synthetic summary of the history of military technology “authored” by I.T. Creve, see [Golem].

tually desperate, because introducing a philosopher a thousand times smarter than a human to the reader, entering his “skin” and filling him with knowledge higher than what the world’s best scientists possess, is an impossible task. And yet such a work was created” [18-19]. Not only was it created, but it also became a clever narrative tool that allowed Lem to express views that he would not have to explain with complex arguments. Although the Golem-Lem diagnosis is based on scientific findings, their further course is not, and does not have to be scientifically verifiable, as long as it is in accordance with logic [18]. Thus, with the help of the literary character, behind which the author hides, the novel becomes “essay-ified” and the border separating fiction from the writer’s beliefs is weakened. Lectures by the brilliant computer are not only predictions of the future, but above all they express Lem’s attitude to the surrounding reality and its changes.

And what happens when Lem’s preface is treated strictly genealogically and narratively? In addition to the issue of “essayisation”, on the one hand, it may turn out that they also meet the conditions and assumptions of a mature realistic novel. On the other hand, in this type of text, first-person narrative is less common than third-person narrative, and when it does appear, it takes on characteristic forms, for example of an “objectified diary” [Martuszevska 57]. As Anna Martuszevska [56-66] observes, the novel of mature realism at its peak almost exclusively uses first-person narrative. What about the determinants? A large time difference is the most characteristic – the preface prepared by Creve in *Golem XIV* is also as far from the events he talks about – especially in the part of reconstructing the history

of the progress of military technology – as the preface, in the form of a memory added at the end of life by mathematics professor Piotr E. Hogarth – an account of his own life, scientific achievements and a peculiar discovery in outer space in *His Master's Voice*. The events presented in both cases are already closed and finished, and their task is to introduce them to the reader and embed them in the realities of the world, specify the framework and sketch the background. And although the first-person narrator, especially in a positivist novel, was at the same time a fierce moraliser, in the case of the novel of mature realism, the matters are more complicated. Above all, what becomes important is the tension between the subject and the theme. The narrator stands out in the foreground of the story – the way they experience events becomes as important as the events they talk about. That is why Hogarth's autobiographical arguments in *His Master's Voice* are accompanied by a constant question about the boundaries of professional ethics and the moral dilemmas in the face of the possibility of developing a potential weapon of mass destruction.

Compositional function is also important – it is the character of the narrator who becomes the nodal point, a character who connects various elements of the plot. In *The Star Diaries* and *His Master's Voice* the preface remains closely related to the “editor's note”, in which the situation of finding the posthumous manuscript is specified (*His Master's Voice*) or the rules for issuing editions of Ijon Tichy's writings (*The Star Diaries*) are presented. Both bring to mind associations with the convention of found papers, popular in the history of the development of the realistic novel.

Or maybe the issue of prefaces to Lem's works, and some of his texts is directed towards an experimental novel? If so, then following Raymond Federman [215-224], issues regarding the desire to contract Lem's prose in a given genre would become completely irrelevant due to the change of the reference system. Readability, defined as something suitable for reading, would be the basic criterion. What would be particularly useful here would be *Roland Barthes' typology*, quoted by Federman, which divides texts into those focused on pleasure in the act of reception: resulting from culture and not breaking with it; as well as those that are somewhat experimental, i.e. they violate the relationship with language and contest the foundations on which culture is based, provoke questions and encourage criticism of the current reality. This distinction is not innocent at all. What is considered "readable" is often identified with the non-literary world, thus blurring the concepts of fiction or fact. The statement that you cannot escape realism is key. And this is because language itself is reality, while the task of the novel is not to represent, but to "present" reality – embellishing, selecting and amplifying selected topics, problems and issues. For these reasons, Lem remains a realist. His writing translates the fears and anxieties of the era into literary material. So what if this translation does not remain faithful? What is faithfulness in translation anyway?

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