


FOCUS ON

ACADEMIA Literature



LEM'S VISION



STANISŁAW LEM

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We talk to **Prof. Jerzy Jarzębski** from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and the Eastern Europe State University in Przemyśl about Stanisław Lem and the future he foresaw, his cautionary tales and whether he is still an author often misunderstood.

ACADEMIA: When did you first encounter Stanisław Lem's writing?

JERZY JARZĘBSKI: When I was six years old.

So in 1953?

Around then, yes. The *Przekrój* weekly was publishing "The Magellanic Cloud" in instalments. My mother took me to visit her friends in Warsaw. I was really bored, so I picked up the magazine from the table and started reading. I happened on an unfortunate point in the story, when astronauts from Earth encounter a satellite launched centuries earlier which accidentally fell out of orbit and got lost in the Solar System. When they board, they find preserved corpses of NATO soldiers and active nuclear warheads. It was unsettling and frightening, and it made me associate science fiction with horror. A few years later I went to the cinema to see "The First Spaceship on Venus" – a Polish/East German co-production based on Lem's novel "The Astronauts". That was also pretty scary for me as a child.

And Lem accompanied you ever since?

No – in fact I didn't read any of his books for many years. When I was getting my degree in Polish philology, I talked to a former school friend who was studying mathematics and computer science. He was fascinated by Lem, so I decided to catch up on his works.

This time I got off to a better start, because I picked up the fantastic collection "The Invasion from Aldebaran". The stand-out story for me was "Friend". Lem describes a future in which a computer decides to seize control over human civilization. It seemed amusing, because the computer which would now be the size of a laptop took up a vast space lit by old-fashioned lamps. It was an allegory; the story was really about a man who agreed to collaborate with a mechanical monster and betray humanity. He did it because was an outsider, a loner and a failure, and the computer made him feel powerful.

Why does this story stick in your mind in particular?

Because it shows that Lem's predictions weren't always infallible when it came to technology, but he never lost his humanist sensitivity to humankind's problems. In 2016, Agnieszka Gajewska published a book exploring and analyzing Lem's writings, concluding that much of the brutal imagery and mass murder in his books are a reflection of his memories of the Holocaust when he was growing up in Lwów. He tried to conceal this, in part because he didn't want people to remember that he was Jewish, but the memories never faded away.

Lem was a rather misanthropic philosopher. He and I clicked because I was probably the first scholar who regarded him as a mainstream author [to

Lem's great enthusiasm – ed.]. His works were never included in compendiums of the most important Polish literature of the 20th century. An example is the (otherwise outstanding) *Polish Literature 1976-1998* by my friends Przemysław Czapliński and Piotr Śliwiński, who instinctively decided that Lem didn't fit in with the other authors.

Even though he clearly did. In the 1980s, his "Fables for Robots" from 1964, reprinted with your foreword, was an important read for many people.

That's because each story carried a moral which revealed something of ourselves. The robots were awful – they incited wars, they were greedy and craved worthless values. In other words, they were very much like humans – especially politicians. Lem was merciless in some ways. Some of his final words, recalled in a recent documentary by Borys Lankosz, were a warning against the Kaczyński brothers. Essays and opinion pieces he wrote in his later life were dismissed as being too dark and pessimistic; they repeated the same warnings, yet humankind continued to survive. In hindsight, he had Cassandra's instinct and many of his cautions were justified; for example, he is credited with developing the concept of hybrid warfare.

He was also deeply concerned about the decline of morality in science. He lived in the days of communism; he met Soviet scientists many times, and it always heartened him because he saw them as willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of truth. And he was right in many cases; the nuclear physicist Andrei Sakharov, for example, was an opposition and human rights activist. These meetings left Lem with a belief that true academics are those who preserve the ethos of science. Sadly, he saw growing greed and selfishness in academic circles, with scientists increasingly engaging in plagiarism and publishing downright false results.

He was also aware that many incredibly important achievements and discoveries were made by pure accident. They were often dangerous, leaving him with a sense that scientists were like monkeys brandishing cutthroats, with imminent bloodshed. All this made him deeply unhappy. He first started writing in the 1940s and 1950s, under a shadow of the war and the Holocaust; yet the time was also filled with hope for a better, brighter future, because surely humankind had learned an important lesson. Lem was especially optimistic when it came to scientific breakthroughs and space exploration. He hoped we would conquer new worlds and bring them ethical and practical order... He later came to mock the idea of this order, especially when it came to ethics.

One of Lem's stories describes an attempt to create a utopian society filled with happy

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individuals, but the project fails. Does he explain why?

Well, because people are wicked and they default to their basest instincts. In “Observation on the Spot,” he suggests they should be left alone with their evil – or, more precisely, they should be placed in a reality which would prevent them from acting upon this evil. They could attempt it, but it wouldn’t work. I love one scene in particular: Ijon Tichy, visiting the planet, watches children playing in a sandpit. The smallest is picked on by the others, who try to torment him but can’t. They throw sand at him, but it never reaches his face; they try to hit him with a spade, but the toy falls apart instead. Eventually the bullies pick up their toys and go home snivelling, and the would-be victim stays behind playing. Lem’s story tells us that it is possible to create an environment which would not permit any physical harm to come to its inhabitants, but at a price: they remain trapped in their own minds with their ill-will and with no way of release. The older Lem got, the more pessimistic he became about humankind’s future.

“The Futurological Congress” from 1971 tackles terrorism.

The 2013 film adaptation of the book by the Israeli director Ari Folman is fascinating. Much of the story is changed, and to start with we don’t even realize the film is based on Lem’s prose – this only becomes apparent later. Lem creates a world which is phony, fake, populated with people drugged with hallucinogens making them believe that everything is great; that it’s warm even though it’s cold, that they are full even if they’re really hungry, that they are driving the finest cars even though they are really pushing rickety trolleys holding their meagre possessions. He depicts superficially amusing situations: the story’s protagonist – a delegate at the congress who is staying at a luxury hotel – always wakes up from his hallucinogenic dreams in the same sewer by the hotel, surrounded by rats.

It’s a grotesque world, and an apocalyptic one to boot.

Yet the picture Folman paints in “The Congress” is even worse. The protagonist is an actress who no longer gets film parts because she has a reputation of being difficult to work with. She lives in an airport hangar with her kids, and she is struggling to manage her son’s progressive illness. She’s desperate to help him, so she agrees to sell the rights to her digital image to a film studio.

Her body is digitally scanned and she loses all rights to her own likeness, while the studio can make films starring her computer-generated image. All this is done using state-of-the-art technologies. What really stood out for me that the impossible-looking

device shown in the film, bristling with reflectors, cameras and scanners, is not a prop but a real, existing machine.

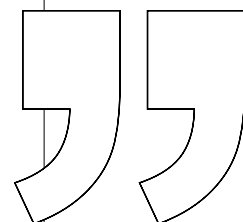
What other differences are there between the book and the film?

In Lem’s book, the entire population is deceived about their situation; he presents it as a kind of clemency granted by the authorities. Someone is in charge, even though it’s hard to define precisely who that is. An individual needs to be deliberately woken up from their stupor to find out what’s really going on; to learn that they are eating slop rather than caviar. Lem doesn’t present this as malicious; in his world, people are duped in order to let them have some joy in their lives. My favorite bit was that shops are filled with original paintings by Rembrandt, on sale to anyone interested. In the film, the false reality of the population benefits certain shadowy groups. The villain turns out to be the owner of the film studio; the protagonist tries to resist him, with little effect.

Do you expect a return of interest in Lem?

Return is the wrong word; it would be more accurate to describe it as a change, a shift. No interest in literature remains constant and limited to reading the same books over and over. If an author is to live

Lem stands a great chance of attracting renewed reader interest, because he was a true intellectual colossus.



on, they must be seen in new contexts. I think Lem is perfect, because he was a true intellectual colossus – an incredibly innovative thinker who paid no heed to popularly accepted wisdom and walked his own path. And his ideas frequently made no sense in his time.

Did he feel misunderstood?

In “A Perfect Vacuum” there is a fictional review of a fictional book by a fictional author who decides to find some forgotten monuments to human thought; concepts which didn’t work, which no one concerned themselves with because they seemed crazy. Yet in reality they were too advanced for the existing understanding of science. In his conclusion, he explains

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why certain discoveries made by humankind had been forgotten: it's because truly revolutionary inventions cannot be understood by contemporary or even future generations.

I think Lem saw himself as an intellectual who was misunderstood at the time, and then it was just too late. And I think he knew he wasn't truly recognized or appreciated – not because he was thought to be

” Lem's predictions weren't always infallible when it came to technology, but he never lost his humanist sensitivity to humankind's problems.

stupid or banal, but because people who tried to read him simply weren't up to the task. I recently read an online collective manifesto of disbelief in Lem's greatness. And I would like to say to the authors: forgive me, but aren't you being too simplistic in how you read Lem? Aren't you missing the philosophical depth of his works? It's as though you were reading Kant and demanding he understood contemporary physics and

biology, while entirely missing his incredible creative vision. I'm also interested in how Lem is perceived by scientists. They tend to see themselves as better informed, saying that sure, some of his ideas might have been interesting, but he never saw the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, so there are things he didn't know. That's the wrong way of looking at it – Lem wasn't great because he was always a step ahead of scientific discoveries, but because his message was universal; he could draw conclusions from inventions in one field and apply them to others.

Your son is now the age you were when you first started reading Lem. What would you start him off with?

Perhaps "Solaris"? For one thing it shows aliens as being nothing like the anthropomorphic images to be found elsewhere; here aliens are truly alien. But also because of the interaction between humans and the extraterrestrial ocean, which can be interpreted on many literary and psychological levels.

Another fascinating novel is "Fiasco", published in Poland in 1987, based on a short story Lem wrote back in the days of Stalinism. It explores the impossibility of an understanding between "brothers in mind" or "brothers in space". The greatest hurdle turns out to be not the physical distance between humans and aliens, but the differences – and the sheer vastness of those differences, which cannot even be perceived by humans. The fiasco comes when a hyper-realistic computer, bearing the ominous name GOD, is brought on a mission to contact extraterrestrials. It is the ultimate computer and an intellectual god, but since all elements of its rational thought were originally built by humans, they cannot be objective. When it becomes clear that the aliens don't want to communicate with humans and wish to be left alone, GOD resolves to force a confrontation and a victory, with disastrous consequences. On the flip side, the positive character is a monk with a far more humane approach, and he understands that the humans shouldn't persevere where they are not wanted. This makes him the most rational individual in the story.

I like this book because I am endlessly fascinated by Lem's explanation of why humans are so desperate to make contact with the aliens. The truth is that the mission was put forward at a huge expense, so the astronauts can't simply return to Earth and say, "So sorry, we found some aliens but they didn't want to talk so we just gave them a cheery wave and came home." It's completely out of the question – they aren't just representatives of humankind, but, first and foremost, of financial corporations. And they are paid for success, not failure.

INTERVIEW BY ANNA ZAWADZKA
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