



# A stereotype that deconstructs itself

## Representations of Danes and Denmark in Joanna Chmielewska's crime novels

Karolina Drozdowska (Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
(NTNU))

### Abstract

The research question this article tries to answer is: how was Scandinavia “invented” in Polish prose written when the Iron Curtain still physically divided Europe? The text discusses three novels written by Joanna Chmielewska (1932–2013) and published in 1969 (*Krokodyl z Kraju Karoliny* [The Crocodile from Caroline's Country]), 1973 (*Lesio*) and 1974 (*Wszystko czerwone* [All in Red]). Chmielewska, a vastly popular Polish crime novelist, especially known for the creation of the so-called “ironic crime” sub-genre, often introduced depictions of Denmark and the country's inhabitants in her novels and used them to demonstrate amusing contrasts between them and her Polish protagonists and their reality in Poland. My goal is to show that while Westerners constructed and exoticized the East, Easterners did the very same thing to the West, only using different values and criteria in order to distinguish between “us” and “them”. We should therefore perhaps start talking about “inventing Europe” or “inventing Europes” – where the West invents the East and the East invents the West, and xenostereotypes introduce and reinforce autostereotypes. Those stereotypes can sometimes become so extreme that they are no longer sustainable and “collapse” under their own weight.

**Keywords:** Exoticizing, Post-Colonial Theory, Literary Geography, Crime Literature



## 1. THE PERFORMATIVE GEOGRAPHY OF POLAND AND SCANDINAVIA

### 1.1 HOW TO CONSTRUCT A MAP – TWO THEORETICAL APPROACHES

“Where is Poland located?”<sup>1</sup> – this question opens Przemysław Czapliński’s book *Poruszona mapa [The Moved Map]* from 2016 and has, the author remarks, gained new actuality in the face of the Russian annexation of Crimea. Now, six years later, it has gained an even more ominous relevance. The researcher answers his own question by saying that “Poland is not located where it was used to be” (2016:6),<sup>2</sup> as the imagined map is a project under permanent reconstruction and the country has “moved out” from its place as a member of Central Europe or the EU, and that this movement is leading Poland “in an unknown direction” and occurring “for an unknown reason” (ibid.).<sup>3</sup> This imagined map, states Czapliński, undergoes a perpetual process of redefinition and is dynamic rather than being static.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis seems to somewhat contradict the premises of Larry Wolff’s book *Inventing Eastern Europe* from 1994. In explaining how the West imagines the East, Wolff starts with the assumption that the map and borders are rather fixed and immobile, and that they have not changed considerably in the course of the last centuries. He starts by recalling Churchill’s famous speech from 1946, and the line about the “iron curtain that has descended across the Continent” (Wolff 1994:1), dividing Europe into two separate spaces, functioning as two binary oppositions. The lands on the Eastern side of the iron curtain were enshrouded in its shadow; the West was able or even permitted to look away, “for who could see through an iron curtain and discern the shapes evolved in the shadow?” (ibid.). This did not change significantly after the fall of the curtain (symbolised by the Berlin Wall) in 1989. The maps were adjusted, but “their structures were deeply rooted and powerfully compelling”, argues Wolff. “The iron curtain is gone, yet the shadow persists”, because the West’s idea of Eastern Europe is much older than the Cold War and can be dated back to the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment era (ibid.:3). This was when the West invented the East as its “complimentary other half”, defined by means of opposition, with the East being what the West was not (ibid.:5). According to Wolff, this mechanism is similar to the way the Occident described the Orient, a process described earlier by Edward Said (1978): “One might describe the invention of Eastern Europe as an intellectual project of demi-Orientalization” (Wolff 1994:7). The Eastern side of the iron curtain thus becomes an ambiguous and somewhat paradoxical space between inclusion and exclusion; it is, but, at the same time is not, Europe (ibid.).

Czapliński takes a different standpoint, both when it comes to the dynamics of the “invention process” and to the status of the imagined map. He tries to answer the question of how different spaces are constructed in Polish literature at the turn of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Instead of the “East-West” opposition, he works with the concept of two axes: one of them connecting the West and the East, and the other, the North and the South. He analyzes how each of those directions is “imagined” in Polish literature, and, at the same time, introduces the concept of PERFORMATIVE GEOGRAPHY. He assumes that contrasting and comparing cultures with each other has a certain driving force:

---

<sup>1</sup> Pol. orig.: “Gdzie leży Polska?”

<sup>2</sup> Pol. orig.: “Polska nie leży tam, gdzie dotąd leżała.”

<sup>3</sup> Pol. orig.: “[...] a ruch ten odbywa się w niewiadomym kierunku i w niewiadomym celu.”

<sup>4</sup> The construction of European imagined maps is an issue that many other researchers have taken up in the recent years. Maria Mälksoo, for example, works with the idea of “European mnemonic map”, examining the collective memory of Europe (see, e.g., Mälksoo 2009).

The map that is constructed as a result of this activity has a performative character. Not only does it recreate a space, it is also a process of creation. This process includes only the space the narrative is able to suggest and progresses as the story becomes more precise. The performative map is a map under construction. (Czapliński 2016:11)<sup>5</sup>

Although somewhat different, Wolff's and Czapliński's approaches do not seem to contradict or exclude each other. On the contrary, their two books can be read as a kind of intellectual dialogue and discussion, two views on an imagined geography that exist as each other's supplements and updates. Both constitute the theoretical framework for the following text.

## 1.2 SCANDINAVIA CONSTRUCTING POLAND AND POLAND CONSTRUCTING SCANDINAVIA

The year 2004, when Poland – among nine other countries – joined the European Union, can be pinpointed as the beginning of growing economic and cultural exchange with Scandinavian countries, which resulted in a proportionally growing interest in Scandinavia and Scandinavians in Poland, as well as the other way round. This, in turn, influenced the manner in which Scandinavians and Poles depicted each other in literature, film, art and the mass media. A number of studies have been published on this topic during the last decade, among them articles concentrating on the depiction of Scandinavia in the Polish press and vice versa. Such studies often use the concept of a FRAME, that is, a focus point serving as a means of creating categories for further analysis. When we talk about constructing Scandinavia in the Polish media, some of the frames are the welfare state, innovativeness, modernity, equal rights and feminism (Musiał & Chacińska 2013). When constructing the media image of Poland, researchers in Scandinavia tend to use such frames as freedom and progress (Musiał & Bartnik-Świątek 2016).

Accordingly, a number of studies published in recent years have focused on the image of Poland in particular, and Eastern Europe in general, in modern film (Mrozewicz 2018) and literature – in both a modern (Schab 2018b; Drozdowska 2021) and a more historical (Schab 2018a) context. Many of the conclusions that were drawn in these studies seem to confirm Larry Wolff's hypothesis: The way "the East" (here meaning Poland, Russia, Lithuania) is imagined by "the West" (here meaning most of all Denmark and Norway) is still deeply stereotypical, often somewhat exoticized, and constructed upon binary oppositions between "us" and "them". Generally, Eastern Europe is depicted as a sphere characterised by backwardness, poverty and irrationality, as opposed to the modern, wealthy and rational "West". In crime fiction, inhabitants of "East" are depicted nearly exclusively as perpetrators of criminal acts.

Czapliński (2016) devotes an entire chapter of his book to the "Northern direction", and tries to answer the question of how the image of Scandinavia has been constructed on the Polish literary performative map in the last thirty years. He starts his analysis with a hypothesis that Poland's newly found interest in the "Northern axis" results from a disillusionment in recent years with the West (ibid.:321). In modern Polish literary representations, Scandinavia is associated with freedom, prosperity and equality, but also with certain challenges: the crisis of the welfare state, where modernity has gone "too far": "Too far in terms of accepting refugees, as their excessive numbers deprive native people of their right to self-determination; too far in terms of child protection, as a simple spanking leads

---

<sup>5</sup> Pol. orig.: "Powstająca w wyniku tej aktywności mapa ma charakter performatywny: nie tyle odtwarza jakąś przestrzeń, ile jest procesem jej wytwarzania. Proces ów obejmuje tylko taką przestrzeń, jaką narracja zdoła zaproponować, i postępuje wraz z precyzowaniem opowieści. Performatywna mapa jest mapą w toku."

to parents losing custody of their children” (Czapliński 2020:162). The status of this image is ambiguous and oscillates between fascination and contestation, admiration and scepticism or even fear.

This is how the North has been imagined in Polish literature of the last thirty years, in texts written after the fall of the iron curtain and the redefinition of the map it led to. This article proposes an analysis of a different material and a different time frame. The choice of this frame will, hopefully, contribute to shedding some light on how the division between the East and the West was imagined before the fall of the Iron Curtain, and thus contribute to the discussion started by Larry Wolff in his book. The aim of this text is to answer the question of how images of Danes and Denmark are constructed in three crime novels by the famous Polish author Joanna Chmielewska (1932–2013). The books, written over the span of five years and published between 1969 and 1974, all use Scandinavia and/or Scandinavians as either important motifs and tropes or – as a place of action. Proposing five different categories, or frames, for the analysis, I will try to prove that the representations of Danes and Denmark are built in accordance with Larry Wolff’s binary opposition paradigm and thus, that the East invented the West the same way the West invented the East. At the same time, I will argue that the images constructed in this manner collapse under their own weight, contributing to the deconstruction of the stereotypes they themselves constitute, and thus – eventually leading to a redefining of the map and the movement of the two geographical territories closer towards each other, in spite of the iron curtain still dividing Europe at the time the novels were published.

## 2. THE AUTHOR, “IRONIC CRIME” AND THE DANISH ADVENTURE

Joanna Chmielewska (birth name Irena Barbara Kuhn) was a very prolific writer. She had her literary debut in 1964 and, since then, published 47 crime novels (the last one was published in 2013, the year of her death), 11 children’s books, 5 self-help books and 7 volumes of autobiography. According to UNESCO’s Index Translatorium, her works have been translated into several languages, first and foremost Russian, but also Czech, Lithuanian, Latvian, Bulgarian, Estonian, Spanish (one title), German (one title) and Swedish (one title).

According to an article published after her death (Money.pl 2013), Chmielewska sold over 6 million copies of her books in Poland, where she still has an active fandom, with privately owned web pages devoted to her life and work, including news, character lists and photo materials (Wordpress.com). Although the author is relatively unknown in Western Europe (only three of her books were translated into Western European languages, none into English), her popularity on the Eastern side of the former iron curtain is enormous. Chmielewska was particularly successful in the Soviet Union, where her books sold over 8 million copies and where she was named “the most read foreign author” (Money.pl 2013).

It was also in the Soviet Union that the term describing Chmielewska’s crime novels, “ironic crime”, was coined. This sub-genre, sometimes also called “anticrime” (Gazdecka 2016) is a novel with a set of characteristic traits. The main character is often female, not a professional crime solver, and often gets involved in the story by accident. The narrative style is humorous, with the protagonist often commenting on other characters and the surroundings. The events are often very improbable, grotesque and spectacular, but all ends well – the mystery gets solved and the criminal is caught and punished (Golnau 2017). Chmielewska herself liked the term “ironic crime”. The crime mysteries in her books were generally merely a pretext for showing off her sense of humor (Newsweek.pl 2013). She inspired a number of female writers publishing in Russian who started exploring the sub-genre themselves, among others Daria Doncowa (Domogalla 2008; Żak 2016).

The protagonist in Chmielewska's books is often Joanna, the author's alter ego. Joanna, like Chmielewska herself, is an architect working in one of Warsaw's architectural offices, with a particular talent for getting herself into trouble. In the course of solving crimes, Joanna often receives help and support from her colleagues, also based on real people from the author's professional life. Perhaps one of the most prominent "supporting characters" in Chmielewska's novels is Alicja, Joanna's former colleague and friend who lives in Denmark.

When examining the author's biography (which is an easy task considering the fact that we have seven volumes of her autobiography – more than enough sources – to work with), one can conclude that Alicja was indeed a real person and that she indeed moved to Denmark at some point in her life. Chmielewska visited her there regularly and even lived and worked in Copenhagen for a period of time (this period is best described in volume three of the autobiography, originally published in 1994). It is possible to recreate the author's Danish experience from her novels and personal accounts and even embark on "Chmielewska's tour of Copenhagen" (Matyszczyk 2016). One can therefore state that the literary constructions of Denmark and Danes in her novels are based on personal experience, at least to some extent, as Chmielewska only lived in Denmark for a limited time. The country and its inhabitants constitute a trope or a motif in a number of Chmielewska's books. However, only three of them were chosen for this analysis: *Krokodyl z Kraju Karoliny* [*The Crocodile from Caroline's Country*] (1969), *Lesio* (1973) and *Wszystko czerwone* [*All in Red*] (1974). The books, written during the course of five years, give a consistent picture of how Denmark and Danes were invented, imagined and constructed by the author in the 1960s and 1970s. Chmielewska's more recent books with a Danish motif, published after 1989 (for example, *Kocie worki* [*Cats' Sacks*] from 2004 or *Byczki w pomidorach* [*Bulls in Tomatoes*] from 2010) were chosen to be left out of this analysis. The reason for this material selection is that the more recent books are rather unoriginal, using the same motifs as *Wszystko czerwone* (same characters, same setting) and seem to be a collection of "recycled" ideas, repeating a lot of what had already been said in the 1974-novel, at least in terms of the topic this article concentrates upon.<sup>6</sup>

Two of the discussed novels, *The Crocodile from Caroline's Country* and *All in Red* are typical "Joanna-novels", with a criminal riddle and the same chaotic architect trying to solve them. The former novel is set both in Poland (Warsaw) and Denmark (Copenhagen). Joanna's best friend, Alicja, suddenly goes missing and the protagonist has to embark on a journey to Denmark in order to find her (and, somehow, along the way, gets mixed up in a drug smuggling scandal). *All in Red* is based entirely in Denmark, in the small town of Allerød, located just outside Copenhagen. Joanna comes from Poland to visit Alicja and spend "a peaceful and boring holiday" at her friend's house. During the first evening of her stay, a garden party is organized, with both Poles and Danes attending. One of the guests is murdered and Joanna tries to solve the mystery together with her host, her Polish friend Zosia, and her son Paweł, as well as the Danish police, led by the eccentric Mr. Muldgaard. *Lesio*, on the other hand, is quite different from the two other novels, as the story does not revolve around a criminal mystery per se. Joanna is also absent from the plot. *Lesio* takes place at an architectural office in Warsaw and tells the story of a young, romantic and melancholic architect named Leszek (called Lesio by his friends and family) and his colleagues (all based on Chmielewska's actual coworkers). Lesio's artistic soul often gets him into trouble and this fact is the main source of comedy in the novel. The Danish motif is introduced at a quite late stage in the story, in part three of the book, entitled

---

<sup>6</sup> It would be interesting, however, to take a look at if (and potentially why) the image of Danes and Denmark presented in Chmielewska's novels did not change after the fall of the Iron Curtain. This issue might constitute a topic of a separate paper or study.

“Droga do chwały” (“The Road to Glory”). A new architect is employed in Lesio’s office as a result of a bizarre international exchange: he is Danish, his name is Björn [sic!] and he has no understanding of the Polish language, customs or the communist reality. This, of course, becomes a source of numerous amusing situations and jokes.

The premises of the three analyzed texts are thus quite varied, with different settings (Poland, Denmark and Poland/Denmark) and characters (both Poles and Danes operating in their own as well as each other’s countries). In the following analysis, I will use five categories or narrative frames in order to answer the question of which mechanisms are applied when creating the images of Danes and Denmark in Chmielewska’s novels from 1969, 1973 and 1974.

### 3. IMAGINING DENMARK AND DANES

#### 3.1 GEOGRAPHICAL AMBIGUITY

The first aspect that should be noted before we begin mapping the representations created by Chmielewska is that Europe’s performative map looked quite different in the 1960s and 1970s compared to today. The iron curtain was not merely a shadow or a theoretical concept (as suggested by Wolff in his book from 1994), but an almost physical barrier, marked symbolically by the Berlin Wall. This barrier, a border between the West and the East, between capitalism and communism, between democracy and so-called “people’s democracy” was the main axis along with these binary images and representations would be built. After all, this was the entire concept of the Cold War: the people from the “other side” of the iron curtain were who they were because they “were not us”.

At the same time, these two territories represented two different Europes, and it was not at all easy for an inhabitant of one of those dominions to infiltrate the other. Travelling from the East to the West required a lot of patience and resilience in confronting the state bureaucracies in both communist Poland and capitalist Denmark, which demanded numerous documents from travellers from the Eastern bloc. Denmark, even though it seems to be located in close proximity to Poland on the physical map, became a country “far away”.

When Joanna embarks on her journey to Copenhagen in order to save Alicja in *The Crocodile from Caroline’s Country*, she is confronted by many difficulties even before she leaves Warsaw:

I found out at the Passport Office that, if I try hard enough, I might even be able to travel without an invitation. I filed an appropriate application, attached a confirmation of legally owned foreign currency and filled out a visa form at the Danish embassy. All I had to do now was to wait patiently. (Chmielewska 1997a:55f.)<sup>7</sup>

The map and the entire concept of geography thus becomes rather relative. In Chmielewska’s books, Denmark is an ambiguous space, at the same time both close and far, familiar and exotic, known and unknown. In the same novel, Joanna and Alicja give Polish names to different locations in Copenhagen, according to places in Warsaw they remind them of:

---

<sup>7</sup> Pol. orig.: “W Biurze Paszportowym dowiedziałam się, że jak się bardzo uprę, to może wyjadę bez zaproszenia. Złożyłam stosowne podanie, dołączyłam zaświadczenie o legalnie posiadanych dewizach i wypełniłam prośbę o wizę w duńskiej ambasadzie. Pozostawało mi już tylko cierpliwie czekać.”

“There’s this large pedestrian site in Copenhagen, with only shops, no car traffic”, I explained. “It’s called Stroget [sic!], but reminded us of parts of our Chmielna street, between Bracka and Nowy Świat. It’s the same, only a bit bigger, wider, longer and, how to put it... supplied with a lot more expensive products. We always called it ‘Chmielna’”. (ibid.:106)<sup>8</sup>

The “Caroline’s Country” in the title is Charlottenburg, a joke translation made by Joanna. Accordingly “All in Red” is a joke translation of the name Allerød (Chmielewska 1996:9). This linguistic mechanism of “taming the foreign map” is a good example of the ambiguity of Danish space in the Polish eyes.

### 3.2 FRAME NUMBER 1 – EXOTIC CUSTOMS

When Joanna finally makes it to Copenhagen, she starts noticing how different everyday life is from the one she is used to. First of all, Danes are not that social and tend to keep to themselves. They generally do not engage in closer contacts with acquaintances, not to mention strangers. The protagonist notices, with some surprise, that people travel differently than in Poland: “Three cars drove past me, not one of them was a taxi, and the concept of hitch hiking is unknown in Denmark” (Chmielewska 1997a:214).<sup>9</sup> At the same time, they do not tend to visit each other at home and access to buildings is rather limited: “The gate got closed at eight, the staircase at eleven, there were no doorbells. In proper Danish homes, one does not have unexpected guests at later hours, and if someone does have an expected guest, they wait for them outside, in the street” (ibid.:200).<sup>10</sup>

This establishes completely different premises for criminal activity compared to Poland, where it is completely normal to get into a stranger’s car or visit someone in the evening. But does this mean that committing a crime is more difficult in Denmark? Not necessarily. Danes, it turns out in Chmielewska’s novels, like to keep to a fixed schedule and that makes it easier for a criminal to predict the victim’s steps. When Joanna tries to figure out how the murderer got the keys to Alicja’s house in *All in Red*, she concludes that this might have happened while her friend was at work: “[...] someone could have stolen her key [...] and then take it back to her office and put it in her bag at three o’clock, when all of Denmark drinks coffee” (Chmielewska 1996:56).<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, as a capitalist country Denmark has a lot of modern goods and technologies unknown to the average Polish citizen. This technological advancement creates new possibilities for exciting plot developments. In *The Crocodile from Caroline’s Country*, Joanna discovers that her apartment has been bugged:

---

<sup>8</sup> Pol. orig.: “– Jest w Kopenhadze taki pieszy ciąg, wyłącznie ze sklepami, bez ruchu samochodowego – wyjaśniłam. – Nazywa się Stroget, ale nam się skojarzył z odcinkiem naszej Chmielnej między Bracką a Nowym Światem. Całkiem to samo, tyle że nieco większe, szersze, dłuższe i jak by tu powiedzieć... zaopatrzone w droższe towary. Prawie zawsze mówiliśmy o tym ‘Chmielna’.”

<sup>9</sup> Pol. orig.: “Obok mnie przejechały może ze trzy samochody, z których żaden nie był taksówką, a instytucja łebków jest w Danii nie znana.”

<sup>10</sup> Pol. orig.: “Brama była zamykana o ósmej, klatka schodowa o jedenastej, a żadnych dzwonek nie było. W porządnym duńskim domu nie przewiduje się o takich porach nieprzewidzianych gości, a jeśli ktoś ma przewidzianego gościa, to czeka na niego przed bramą, na ulicy.”

<sup>11</sup> Pol. orig.: “[...] ktoś mógł nawet ukraść go jej, [...] a potem podrzucić do biura o trzeciej po południu, kiedy cała Dania pije kawę.”

Under a door frame that had been taken down, there was a trace of a radio installation leading nowhere. In my opinion, this was proof of connections with Copenhagen, where all taxi drivers have microphones in their cars that are used to communicate with their headquarters or something like that. (Chmielewska 1997a:124)<sup>12</sup>

In this case, the exoticness of Danish customs functions as a sort of a catalyst for the plot's development. It provides new premises for the mystery, new hypotheses for the protagonist to work with, and even new technologies she can use as clues in order to solve the crime.

### 3.3 FRAME NUMBER 2 – IMPOSSIBLE LANGUAGE

The Danish language is a permanent source of confusion and comedy in Chmielewska's novels. It is virtually impossible to understand and sounds very strange to the Polish ear. The barrier between Poles and Danes thus becomes even more prominent: communication is extremely difficult, especially because Danes seldom speak any other language. When they do, it comes as a surprise to the Polish characters: “It's outstanding that a Dane speaks French this well [...]. My experience so far has taught me to not use French in Denmark, as the Danish accent made something very strange out of this language” (ibid.:225).<sup>13</sup>

Much of the comical effect in the three discussed novels comes from cases of Danes trying to speak Polish (and usually failing miserably). One of the main sources of comedy in *All in Red* is the head of the Danish investigation, Mr. Muldgaard, who:

had some Polish ancestors, and therefore had a command of Polish. There was a hope that he would be able to communicate with us. The language he acquired seemed quite original, sometimes it sounded almost biblical and broke widely accepted rules of grammar, but still, it was possible to understand him. (Chmielewska 1996:21)<sup>14</sup>

The Danish policeman and his very bizarre, archaic and ungrammatical version of Polish causes much confusion, even more so because Mr. Muldgaard has a problem understanding his Polish conversation partners and their strange, chaotic behavior. However, he treats them with a kind of polite interest or even fascination.

The same comical effect is achieved when Björn tries to learn Polish in *Lesio*. Initially, the Dane does not speak any language apart from Danish, and tries to use his native tongue in order to communicate with his colleagues. This, in turn, does not sound like a language to them at all: “The foreigner answered with a scroop combined with the sound of choking, a rasp and a hiccup. The tone of those sounds was very approbative” (Chmielewska 1997b:213).<sup>15</sup> Even his name is impossible to pronounce for Björn's Polish colleagues, who call him “Bobek” (“Pellet”) instead. Eventually, the Dane learns some Polish, and it is possible to communicate with him, in more or less the same way and with the same effect as with Mr. Muldgaard in *All in Red*.

---

<sup>12</sup> Pol. orig.: “Pod zdemontowaną futryną drzwiową znajdował się ślad po instalacji radiowej, prowadzącej donikąd. Moim zdaniem świadczył o powiązaniach z Kopenhagą, gdzie wszyscy taksówkarze mają w samochodach mikrofony, przez które porozumiewają się bez wysiłku ze swoją dyspozytornią czy czymś w tym rodzaju.”

<sup>13</sup> Pol. orig.: “– To zdumiewające, żeby Duńczyk tak opanował francuski język [...]. Moje dotychczasowe doświadczenia kazały mi starannie unikać w Danii rozmów w tym języku, duński akcent bowiem czyni z francuskim coś nader dziwnego.”

<sup>14</sup> Pol. orig.: “posiadał w rodzinie jakichś polskich przodków, w związku z czym władał polskim językiem. Istniała nadzieja, że zdoła się z nami jakoś porozumieć. Opanowany przezeń język wydawał się dość oryginalny, zdradzał niekiedy naleciałości jakby biblijne i stał w niejkiej sprzeczności z przyjętą w Polsce powszechnie gramatyką, niemniej jednak dawało się go zrozumieć.”

<sup>15</sup> Pol. orig.: “Cudzoziemiec odpowiedział hurgotem, połączonym z dławieniem się, zgrzytem i czkawką. Ton dźwięków był pełen aprobaty.”



A permanent source of confusion in the book is the Danish phrase “ja tak”, which in Danish means “yes, thank you”, while the same words can be understood as the Polish phrase “me, yes”. Björn’s Polish colleagues try to figure out what he means by that. At one point, one of them suggests: “He tries to individualize himself. [...] He has heard about communism and his head got mixed up. He thinks everything is owned collectively over here and wants to be perceived as an individual” (Chmielewska 1997b:214).<sup>16</sup> One could thus conclude that the shadow of the iron curtain, even if through a comical filter, still falls on the narration.

### 3.4 FRAME NUMBER 3 – UNUSUAL LOOKS

The language barrier makes it easier to exoticize Danish characters. Lesio, at one point, even calls Björn “a savage, but at least one with good taste” (ibid.:213).<sup>17</sup> Such exoticization is made even easier by the fact that Danes in Chmielewska’s books tend to have a certain appearance. These stereotypical descriptions are based on the notion that they are rather uninteresting looking or just plain ugly. When it comes to men, the Danish population seems to have two male types. One of them can be described with the words “a very slim, very tall, very plain and very Scandinavian person” (Chmielewska 1996:20)<sup>18</sup> (for example Mr. Muldgaard); the other one: “A bearded young fellow with a mild look in his blue eyes” (Chmielewska 1997b:210)<sup>19</sup> (for example Björn). The women, on the other hand, are simply unattractive. Their description, from a modern perspective, might seem somewhat shocking. One female character, for example, is described as someone “with the face of a horse and the body shape of a cow” (Chmielewska 1996:131).<sup>20</sup>

At one point in *All in Red*, Joanna visits an art museum in Copenhagen: “I wasn’t able to look at the faces of all the Scandinavian royals in the paintings, even though they were quite bizarre. The looks of the ladies made the frigidity of the gentlemen fully understandable” (ibid.:151).<sup>21</sup> The way the Danes’ appearance is described serves a certain purpose: to present or stress the fact that Danes lack temperament and are therefore not able to commit crimes of passion. When it is suggested that the murderer might be Roj, the Danish husband of a beautiful Polish character, Ewa, one of the other characters exclaims: ““Oh for the love of God, give it a break.’ Zosia got impatient. ‘Where are we?! In Spain?! Sicily...?! This is Scandinavia, who kills their wives here?!’” (ibid.:196) and is met with a grim comment that ““Danish wives seldomly resemble Ewa...” (ibid.).<sup>22</sup> The image of “Danish ugliness” seems to be built in contrast to “Polish beauty”, while at the same time functioning as a kind of explanation: the lack of good looks means no passion, and no passion equals no crime.

---

<sup>16</sup> Pol. orig.: “Wyróżnić się stara. [...] Słyszał o komunizmie i pomieszało mu się w głowie. Myśli, że u nas wszystko wspólne i sam chce uchodzić za jednostkę.”

<sup>17</sup> Pol. orig.: “Dziki, bo dziki, ale ma dobry gust.”

<sup>18</sup> Pol. orig.: “bardzo szczupły, bardzo wysoki, bardzo bezbarwny i bardzo skandynawski.”

<sup>19</sup> Pol. orig.: “brodaty młodzieniec o łagodnym wejrzeniu niebieskich oczu.”

<sup>20</sup> Pol. orig.: “Z twarzy podobna była do konia, z figury zaś do krowy.”

<sup>21</sup> Pol. orig.: “Nie byłam już w stanie patrzeć na wyobrażone na malowidłach oblicza wszystkich skandynawskich panujących, aczkolwiek były to oblicza doprawdy kuriozalne. Na widok urody dam można było w pełni zrozumieć osławioną oziębłość dżentelmenów...”

<sup>22</sup> Pol. orig.: “– O rany boskie, dajcie spokój! – zniecierpliwiła się Zosia. – W końcu gdzie my jesteśmy?! W Hiszpanii, na Sycylii...?! Tu jest Skandynawia, kto tu morduje żony?! – Duńskie żony są na ogół mało podobne do Ewy...”

### 3.5 FRAME NUMBER 4 – THE DANISH TEMPERAMENT OR COMPLETE LACK THEREOF

One of the most prominent contrasts between the Danish and Polish characters in the discussed books is the fact that Danes never get stressed, nervous or upset, while Poles react very emotionally to almost everything. When the Danish characters do show some emotion, it is immediately described as unusual or “un-Danish”, for example: ““What do you want?”, he cried out with a definitely non-Scandinavian temperament” (Chmielewska 1997a:180);<sup>23</sup> “Roj, on the other end of the line, had a very un-Danish meltdown” (Chmielewska 1996:205).<sup>24</sup> Even something as drastic as a murder attempt is met with – at best – mild surprise and some distaste: “Everyone was of an opinion that the Polish temperament is one thing, but an attempt to kill the auntie should be considered a slight exaggeration” (ibid.:126).<sup>25</sup> This, of course, is presented side by side with the general Polish tendency towards panic and hysteria.

““Anyway, I would never have thought that a Dane can fall in love to this extent”, remarks Alicja (ibid.:64).<sup>26</sup> The Danes seem to be too calm and peaceful – or perhaps too phlegmatic and boring – to display or even feel deep emotions. Instead, they demonstrate tact and restraint. For example, they are never nosy: “Danes are an interestingly incurious nation that doesn’t have the habit of asking inappropriate questions” (Chmielewska 1997a:163)<sup>27</sup> and generally do not care when someone makes a huge noise in the building they live in: “God only knows how come we didn’t attract common attention. Maybe it was a result of Dane’s surprising tact and restraint. It’s strange how little they interfere with each other” (ibid.:187).<sup>28</sup> At one point in *All in Red*, Alicja is afraid that the food in her house might have been poisoned and doesn’t want to harm her late husband’s Danish cousin. Joanna finds a quick solution: ““Just give him the pate and the salads. [...] We cannot put him in danger. They are tactful and take whatever they are given”” (Chmielewska 1996:156).<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, Danes never lie; being dishonest is just not part of their culture: “Danes are a dreadfully honest nation” (Chmielewska 1997a:164),<sup>30</sup> concludes the protagonist. They would thus never hide information from the police. And, since they don’t have the emotional disposition to commit crimes, they have absolutely no experience with complicated cases such as murders, and feel helpless when confronted with them. This is when the emotional and cunning Poles can fully come into play.

### 3.6 FRAME NUMBER 5 – DANISH INNOCENCE

In Chmielewska’s novels, Denmark is a country where one does not commit crimes. This leads to the fact that the natives are extremely trusting, even somewhat naive. It is unthinkable for them that they might become victims of someone’s wrongdoing. This, of course, is completely different from the Polish experience. The characters notice this huge difference

<sup>23</sup> Pol. orig.: “– Czego pani chce?! – wykrzykiwał z temperamentem zgoła nie skandynawskim.”

<sup>24</sup> Pol. orig.: “Roj po drugiej stronie przewodu dostał szału, zupełnie nie duńskiego.”

<sup>25</sup> Pol. orig.: “Wszyscy byli zdania, że polski temperament polskim temperamentem, ale zamach na ciocię stanowi już jednak pewną przesadę.”

<sup>26</sup> Pol. orig.: “– Nigdy bym, swoją drogą, nie przypuszczała, że Duńczyk może się do tego stopnia zakochać.”

<sup>27</sup> Pol. orig.: “Duńczycy to jest jakiś dziwnie mało ciekawy naród, który nie ma zwyczaju zadawać nietaktownych pytań.”

<sup>28</sup> Pol. orig.: “Bóg jeden raczy wiedzieć, jakim sposobem nie wzbudziliśmy powszechnego zainteresowania. Możliwe, że było to wynikiem zdumiewającego taktu i powściągliwości Duńczyków, którzy się do siebie nawzajem dziwnie mało wtrącają.”

<sup>29</sup> Pol. orig.: “– Podtykać mu tylko pasztet i sałatki. [...] Nie możemy go narażać. Oni są taktowni i biorą, co im się daje.”

<sup>30</sup> Pol. orig.: “Duńczycy to upiornie uczciwy naród.”

and comment on it regularly. In *The Crocodile from Caroline's Country*, when questioning a witness about the yacht on which they sailed to Denmark, Joanna finds out that the entire crew disembarked the vessel to go into town, apart from one person, who stayed on board. This seems odd to her: “‘Why?’, I asked, surprised. ‘You know people don’t steal in Denmark?’” (ibid.:133).<sup>31</sup> The mere thought of Danes committing such a minor crime as thievery seems absurd to Joanna. When a Danish character is suspected of having stolen something, she reacts quite emotionally:

“But not Gunnar!”, I moaned in horror. “What are you saying, you don’t know Danes and you don’t know Gunnar! He would die at the mere thought of thievery! They are in general insanely honest over there, they may have perhaps only heard about thieves and still don’t believe those stories! Impossible!” (Ibid.:241)<sup>32</sup>

In *All in Red*, Alicja is visited by her late husband’s Danish auntie, who does not show up for breakfast in the morning. The hostess gets worried and suggests she might go around the house and look into the window of the auntie’s room to see if she is fine. Joanna however, as a guest coming from Poland, has some reservations that haven’t crossed Alicja’s mind: “‘She might have been traumatized by a previous experience with a burglar and will get heart palpitations.’ ‘No one here has previous experiences with burglars’, mumbled Alicja” (Chmielewska 1996:120).<sup>33</sup>

The cultural gap between Poland and Denmark opens a space for cultural misunderstandings that, in turn, can function as catalysts of the narrative. In *Lesio*, Björn loses a suitcase with important documents at a Polish train station. He leaves it unattended in the waiting hall to have a beer. Upon his return, he notices the suitcase missing and cannot comprehend what has happened: “Stealing a briefcase containing documents nobody really needed seemed completely nonsensical to him and his astonishment grew” (Chmielewska 1997b:252).<sup>34</sup> Quite symmetrically, the Polish characters maintain their Polish caution even when they are in Denmark. At one point in *All in Red*, it is suggested that Zosia might have left a window in Alicja’s house open, making it easier for the murderer to get in. She is almost offended by this suggestion: “‘Absolutely impossible!’, protested Zosia. ‘I closed them myself. I come from Poland, so I do not leave windows open in a one storey house’” (Chmielewska 1996:55).<sup>35</sup>

It is the chaotic Poles who destroy “Danish innocence” and break all the rules. When a murder is committed in a society unaccustomed to the idea of criminality, the locals become quite helpless. It is then that the self-proclaimed detectives from across the Baltic come into play. They are sly, cunning and used to thinking outside the box, as this ability is crucial for survival in the communist system, which constitutes an absurdity in itself. The Danish order is thereby deconstructed. For, if a murder is committed, is there any point in observing all the other rules? In *All in Red*, Joanna decides to make a phone call to the authorities late at night. Alicja, with her hybrid identity (Polish, but having lived in Denmark for a longer period) tries to protest, but Joanna explains that the damage has already been done: “‘No one calls at this hour. It’s after one o’clock.’ ‘Why do you care? And does one commit crimes in Denmark?’

<sup>31</sup> Pol. orig.: “– Po co? – zdziwiłam się. – Przecież w Danii nie kradną!”

<sup>32</sup> Pol. orig.: “– Ależ nie Gunnar! – jęknęłam ze zgrozą. – Co ty mówisz. Nie znasz Duńczyków i nie znasz Gunnara! On by umarł na samą myśl o kradzieży! Oni tam są w ogóle obłądnie uczciwi, o złodziejstwach to najwyżej może czasem słyszeli, a i to też wiary nie dają! Niemożliwe!”

<sup>33</sup> Pol. orig.: “– Ona może mieć uraz na tle włamywaczy i dostanie palpacji serca. – Tu nie mają urazów na tle włamywaczy – mruknęła Alicja.”

<sup>34</sup> Pol. orig.: “Kradzież teczki, w której znajdowały się wyłącznie urzędowe, nikomu niepotrzebne dokumenty, wydała mu się całkowicie pozbawiona sensu i zdziwienie jego wzrosło.”

<sup>35</sup> Pol. orig.: “– Wykluczone! – zaprotestowała Zosia. – Sama zamykałam. Ja jestem z Polski, w parterowym domu otwartych okien nie zostawiam.”

If people murder each other in your house, then you have the right call them at whatever time you want!” (ibid.:140).<sup>36</sup> There is no point in keeping to the convenances if the entire system of law and order has collapsed.

#### 4. CONCLUSION – STEREOTYPES AS MIRROR IMAGES

One may conclude that the images of Denmark and Danes in the novels discussed are deeply stereotypical and biased. Denmark is presented as a boring, yet rigorous country governed by a set of rules and convenances everyone observes. Danes in Chmielewska's books are plain, mostly unattractive and naive; they do not show emotion, and on the whole, do not speak any other language besides their own, which can only be described as absurdly difficult. This image might strike one as grossly exaggerated and unjust. However, one should remember that the representations of Danes and Denmark in the discussed novels are based on xenostereotypes (stereotypes about “the other”), constructed as binary oppositions to autostereotypes (stereotypes about oneself). Chmielewska constructs Denmark and Danes as mirror images of Poland and Poles. Denmark is boring and rigorous because it is not Poland – a chaotic and illogical space, where rules are incomprehensible or not followed, where more or less nothing seems to make sense. At the same time, Poland is not presented as a space of personal or individual freedom – the rules are disobeyed in an effort to “work around” the limitations imposed by the political system. Danes are written the way they are in order to contrast with Poles, who are irrational, emotional to the level of hysteria, and unable to comply with any regulations or rules. The narrator of the novels is perfectly aware of the fact that, while she ridicules the Danes, she herself is perceived by them as a person coming from the “Wild East”, and thus a potential danger: “We are treated sceptically in the West one way or another, and now what will people think? Letting a person from a communist country into your home is just like letting in a criminal!” (Chmielewska 1997a:112).<sup>37</sup> When trying to communicate with Mr. Muldgaard in *All in Red*, Joanna asks herself: “How could she explain this to a man who thinks logically and in Danish terms?” (Chmielewska 1996:183).<sup>38</sup> It seems that she is perfectly aware of the fact that she herself does not think logically, as her “Polishness” is defined by its illogicality, for various cultural, historical and political reasons.

While poking fun at Danes, the author simultaneously pokes fun at Poles, as well. This, in addition to the fact that the Danish representations are exaggerated to an extent where they cannot be taken entirely seriously, leads to a situation where the stereotype itself unravels as being deeply ironic and thus “collapses upon itself”, undergoing a process of auto-deconstruction and becoming disarmed. This constitutes part of a sort of a literary stand-up comedy performance, where the comedian tells jokes about members of the public, but, at the same time, ridicules themselves. What is really funny in Chmielewska's “Danish novels” is not only Denmark and Danes themselves, but also the Polish construction and (lack of) understanding of them. Paradoxically, the performative map created by Chmielewska brings the two described spaces closer together through her use of extreme oppositions with a sort of a built-in intellectual self-destruct mechanism.

At the same time, the stereotypes function as triggers and catalysts for the crime plot: Danes in Poland and Poles in Denmark are the ones who initiate the events. At the same time, one can observe that what makes the crime plot interesting in the “Danish novels” is the chaos

---

<sup>36</sup> Pol. orig.: “– W Danii o tej porze się nie dzwoni. Jest po pierwszej. – No to co cię to obchodzi? A zbrodnie się w Danii popełnia? Skoro w twoim domu się mordują, to ty masz prawo dzwonić o każdej porze!”

<sup>37</sup> Pol. orig.: “Już i tak jesteśmy na zachodzie traktowani nieufnie, teraz wyjdzie na to, że wpuścić do domu osobę z komunistycznego kraju, to znaczy wpuścić przestępcę!”

<sup>38</sup> Pol. orig.: “Jakim sposobem można byłoby temu logicznie i po duńsku myślącemu człowiekowi wytłumaczyć [...]”

entering such peaceful and idyllic surroundings. And this is not at all distant from the idea behind the entire sub-genre of Nordic Noir, extremely popular in the last decade (Solum 2016). One could even draw the daring conclusion that Chmielewska quite unintentionally became the precursor of two literary sub-genres, besides that of ironic crime fiction.

## REFERENCES

### PRIMARY SOURCES

- Chmielewska, J. (1996 [1974]). *Wszystko czerwone*. Warszawa: Vers.  
Chmielewska, J. (1997a [1969]). *Krokodyl z Kraju Karoliny*. Warszawa: Vers.  
Chmielewska, J. (1997b [1973]). *Lesio*. Warszawa: Vers.

### SECONDARY SOURCES

- Chmielewska, J. (1993–2008). *Autobiografia* (vol. 1–7). Warszawa: Vers.  
Chmielewska, J. (2004). *Kocie worki*. Warszawa: Kobra.  
Chmielewska, J. (2010). *Byczki w pomidorach*. Warszawa: Klin.  
Chmielewska, J. (2013). *Życie (nie)całkiem spokojne*. Warszawa: Klin.  
Czapliński, P. (2016). *Poruszona mapa. Wyobrażenia geograficzno-kulturowa polskiej literatury przełomu XX i XXI wieku*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.  
Czapliński, P. (2020). Literature and geography. Translated by Marcin Tereszewski. *Porównania* 2(27), 143–166. DOI: 10.14746/por.2020.2.8.  
Domogalla, A. (2008). Rosyjska powieść kryminalna XX–XXI wieku: (wokół przemian gatunkowych). *Rusycystyczne Studia Literaturoznawcze* 20, 71–83.  
Drozdowska, K. (2021). The Others from across the sea – Eastern Europe and Eastern Europeans in modern Norwegian literature. *Archiwum Emigracji* 28(2020), 292–305. DOI: 10.12775/AE.2020.020.  
Gazdecka, E. (2016). Czy Joanna Chmielewska pisała kryminały? *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, Seria Scripta Humana* 5, 279–286.  
Golnau, M. (2017). Pół żartem, pół serio – czyli kryminał ironiczny w Polsce i w Rosji. *Tutoring Gedanensis* 2(1), 106–110.  
Index Translatorium (undated). *Joanna Chmielewska*. Retrieved from <https://www.unesco.org/xtrans/bsresult.aspx?lg=0&a=Chmielewska&fr=0/> (accessed 1 April 2022).  
Matyszczak, M. (2016). Kopenhaga tropem Joanny Chmielewskiej. *Kawiarenka kryminalna.pl*. Retrieved from <https://www.kawiarenkakryminalna.pl/podroze/739-kopenhaga-tropem-joanny-chmielewskiej/> (accessed 1 April 2022).  
Mälksoo, M. (2009). The memory politics of becoming European: The East European subalterns and the collective memory of Europe. *European Journal of International Relations* 15(4), 653–680. DOI: 10.1177/1354066109345049.  
Money.pl (2013). Nie żyje Joanna Chmielewska. Retrieved from [https://www.money.pl/archiwum/wiadomosci\\_agencyjne/iar/artukul/nie;zyje;joanna;chmielewska,186,0,1396666.html](https://www.money.pl/archiwum/wiadomosci_agencyjne/iar/artukul/nie;zyje;joanna;chmielewska,186,0,1396666.html) (accessed 3 April 2022).  
Mrozewicz, A. E. (2018). *Beyond Eastern Noir*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.  
Musiał, K. & Bartnik-Świątek, D. (2016). Rozmrażanie Wschodu. Najnowszy duński dyskurs o Polsce. In: T. Zarycki (ed.), *Polska jako peryferie* (pp. 254–267). Warszawa: Scholar.  
Musiał, K. & Chacińska, M. (2013). Constructing a Nordic community in the Polish press – Past and present. In: J. Harvard & P. Stadius (eds.), *Communicating the North. Media structures and images in the making of the Nordic region* (pp. 289–318). Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.  
Newsweek.pl (2013). Joanna Chmielewska nie żyje. Retrieved from <https://www.newsweek.pl/kultura/joanna-chmielewska-nie-zyje-newsweekpl/ftx64hj> (accessed 03 April 2022).  
Said, E. D. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Random House.  
Schab, S. I. (2018a). *Palimpsest polski. Reprezentacje Polski i Polaków w duńskich relacjach podróżniczych*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM.  
Schab, S. I. (2018b). Wschodnie tropy zbrodni. O Polsce we współczesnej duńskiej powieści kryminalnej. In: M. Sibińska & H. Dymel-Trzebiatowska (eds.), *Dialogi o kulturze, kultura dialogu* (pp. 251–260). Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu.

- Solum O. (2016). Populærkulturell suksess og velferdssamfunnets mørke bakside. In: E. Oxfeldt (ed.), *Skandinaviske fortellinger om skyld og privilegier i en globaliseringstid* (pp. 133–150). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Wolff, L. (1994). *Inventing Eastern Europe: The map of civilization on the mind of the Enlightenment*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Wordpress.com (undated). Joanna Chmielewska – Im dalej w las, tym większy kryminał. Retrieved from <https://joannachmielewska.wordpress.com/> (accessed 1 April 2022).
- Żak, E. (2016). Rola powieści kryminalnej we współczesnej rosyjskiej kulturze masowej. *Kultura Słowian. Rocznik Komisji Kultury Słowian PAU XII*, 113–131. DOI: 10.4467/25439561KSR.16.007.6460.

### Karolina Drozdowska

Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)  
Institutt for språk og litteratur  
Postboks 8900  
7491 Trondheim  
Norway

*karolina.drozdowska@ntnu.no*