Andrzej Stasiuk and the Myth of the Literary Gastarbajter

In his REEEC and EU Center co-sponsored Noontime Scholars Lecture, “Andrzej Stasiuk and the Myth of the Literary Gastarbajter,” Professor George Gasyna extrapolated on the particularities of post-communist marginality in the prose of the Polish novelist Andrzej Stasiuk. Stasiuk is a popular Polish author, journalist, and critic, whose most acclaimed works include *Biały kruk* (1995) and *Opowieści galicyjskie* (1995). Stasiuk’s subject matter often takes the form of Central and Eastern European travel literature, which invokes the mythologies of Eastern and Western European history. Perhaps for this reason, Stasiuk has been able to win notoriety and acclaim outside of Poland. He is also a personal favorite of mine; I find his prose enthralling and, at times, difficult both in form and subject matter.

The topic of the November 12 lecture was Stasiuk’s novel *Dojczland* (2007), which is set along the trajectory of the persona’s travels through Germany. In his view, Professor Gasyna suggested that Stasiuk uses his subject position as a platform to explore the other’s defense of marginality or subalternity. In this sense, the migrant worker-subject rejects assimilation and re-territorializes his host nation, a concept that was the crux of Professor Gasyna’s argument. It also raised many compelling questions: Is the Polish migrant in the same position as an African migrant? How does the subaltern re-territorialize?

During the lecture, Professor Gasyna provided a detailed background and close analysis of the novel in the context of Stasiuk’s larger collection of works. He characterized *Dojczland* as a pseudo-autobiography set along Stasiuk’s journey from the periphery to the metropolis. For centuries, Germany has served as a popular short-term migration destination for Poles, as well as Southern and Eastern Europeans seeking work. Professor Gasyna suggested that the Witold Gombrowicz’s *Dzienniki* (1969) served as a model, paradigm, and precursor for Polish travel works depicting the journey from the young Europe to the old Europe.

The term Dojczland is a Polonized version of the German word Deutschland, and according to Professor Gasyna, this provides evidence of the tension between the Polish migrant and the host nation. The journey to Germany becomes even more socio-culturally loaded as Stasiuk continues to engage in the practice of cathartic post-memory, specifically related to the Second World War. While that theme is relevant, there are other examples, which engage with the subject of re-territorialization without converging at Germany’s history, like Turkish-German director Fatih Akın’s *Gegen die Wand* (2004). Fatih Akın’s film, set in both Berlin and Istanbul, explores and complicates the issues of hybrid identity, gender, and cultural heritage without absconding the present.

Professor Gasyna noted the ironic disengagement of Stasiuk’s prose as the cult persona travels through the German countryside. According to him, the work revels in inverting the polarities of East and West, with Poland located in a liminal space of the misfit. He suggested that Stasiuk’s discourse of loneliness, *internal dialogue*, and post-colonial historicity lacks embodiment. He also asked if Stasiuk’s subject position is too preoccupied with nostalgia and sites of exclusion to facilitate an encounter between the other and modern Germany.
Professor Gasyna noted that Stasiuk’s journey is a little different from that of a normal gastarbajter (guest worker) in Germany because his journey takes him on a conference and reading circuit – since his work is in the cultural arena. At the same time, Professor Gasyna indicated that Stasiuk sees himself as literary gastarbajter and suggested that Stasiuk can conceive of empathetic interactions only with other migrants or immigrants to Germany. I wonder if it is possible to have empathy at all in Stasiuk’s imaginary Dojczland?

Professor Gasyna observed that Stasiuk’s discourse only hints at contiguity, and rejects both the gift of hospitality and the possibility of hybridity in the German cultural space. That is, Stasiuk does not consider the black, Turkish, and Central European Germans as Germans. Rather than imagine the possibility of assimilation or incorporation into the German cultural space, Dojczland is a space that remains closed and inhuman for migrants and others. According to Professor Gasyna, Stasiuk’s persona becomes engrossed in the details and particularities of German cultural stereotypes, many of which are entrenched in the memory of Germany’s Nazi past. During his talk, he concluded with a discussion of the mechanisms of performativity, the imaginary, desire, prejudice, and reterritorialization, while he questioned if Stasiuk’s use of ossified stereotypes leads him to privilege nostalgia and cathartic post-memory over new self-knowledge.

Katerina Lakhmitko is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research interests include the late and post-communist culture, literature and film. Post-structuralist and semiotic theory, as well as close analysis of social mechanisms, inform her methodology.