



**BRYGIDA GASZTOLD**

**TO THE LIMITS OF EXPERIENCE**

**JERZY KOSINSKI'S LITERARY  
QUEST FOR SELF - IDENTITY**

Brygida Gasztold

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for Self-Identity

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## Introduction

Jerzy Kosinski is one of the very few acclaimed American writers of Polish origin who achieved success writing in the second language. His rise to fame was as unexpected and rapid, as the successive stages of his private life: a typical example of a "from rags to riches" story. In Kosinski's case, the story of a poor immigrant who became the husband of a tycoon widow. Following a stereotypical pattern of the American Dream, Kosinski did a number of odd jobs to earn his living, taught himself English, improved his education, married a millionaires and embarked on a successful literary career which was topped by numerous awards and honors. Furthermore, his first efforts in cinema, a successful minor part of Zinowiew in *The Reds* and an Academy Award-winning film *Being There*, for which he wrote a screenplay, secured his place in the American art world.

In the early nineteen-eighties, his whole literary accomplishment was challenged by accusations concerning Kosinski's ethics of authorship, his role as a writer and his personal truthfulness. Geoffrey Stokes and Eliot Fremont-Smith, two journalists from the *Village Voice* in an article entitled "The Tainted Words of Jerzy Kosinski" (22<sup>nd</sup> June, 1982) attempted to expose evidence of fraud and ghost writing in his compositional process. Tom Teicholz noticed the irony of the whole story: "On the one hand Kosinski had been 'telling lies' for many years challenging people to determine whether they were true or not (it was clear he cared little); on the other, Kosinski's desire for control was so great, that it was impossible to believe that any book of his print contained a word that he

had not worried over himself."<sup>1</sup> So traumatic must have been this experience that Kosinski never really recovered from its consequences.

After several years of the creative block, he published his last novel *The Hermit of 69th Street* (1988), which was supposed to be his artistic answer to all of the allegations. Unfortunately, the novel met with a cold critical reception and did not restore his sinking literary reputation. Paul R. Lilly's conclusion partially explains Kosinski's predicament: "that writers' words can be turned against them, that book writing is double-edged, that the printed word can sometimes compose a cage for the writer."<sup>2</sup> Lilly makes use of the "cage" metaphor for understanding Kosinski's novels and illuminating his aesthetics: a cage may take shape of the Soviet Union, of communism, Fascism or any other totalitarian system, of repressive institutions of the modern world, of mass consumption and communication, of disappearance of family and social ties, of deceptive notions of freedom and conformity, and language. Kosinski, trapped and overpowered in the cage he himself had built and living up to the bizarre image which already became his trade mark, took his own life in 1991.

Although nowadays Jerzy Kosinski's works will not be found in many anthologies, his novels, if not as widely read, are still analyzed by students of literature. The confusion which accompanied their publication was caused by their explicit sexual imagery, an excessive amount of violence and cruelty, by disturbing characters, and the unclear relationship between Kosinski - the author - and his fictional alter egos. Contemporary reading public is not so baffled because literary standards have changed and past themes have lost much relevance to modern concerns. The novels, however, still carry a large amount of anxiety and tension. Kosinski's novels answered to major cultural changes in the 1960's America: the sexual revolution and the Iron Curtain. He further mixed these events with a strong autobiographical component and themes from popular spy literature conventions. His unfulfilled heroes are victims of the consequences of a new emphasis on personal fulfillment and self-

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Teicholz ed., *Conversations With Jerzy Kosinski* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993) 12.

<sup>2</sup> Paul R. Lilly, Jr., *Words In Search of Victims. The Achievement of Jerzy Kosinski* (Kent: The Kent State Univ. Press, 1988) 1.

realization, and of the relaxation of old moral standards and the lack of new ones. The thrust of the 1960's was to search for the absolute self by spiritual and meditational means manifesting itself as a kind of a religious, particularly Buddhist, revival. *The Painted Bird* (1965) was to settle accounts with Kosinski's holocaust childhood, *Steps* (1968) and *The Devil Tree* (1973) describe a modern man's fruitless quest in search of his identity, *Cockpit* (1975) and *Blind Date* (1977) introduce two super agents, Tarden and Levanter, who in the tangle of adventures, amidst the lovers and the depraved, penetrate the lives of others and exercise their own moral judgment. Finally *Passion Play* (1979) combines two dangerous games: polo and love in a compelling struggle for domination and power. Thomas S. Gladsky claims that:

the primary tension in Kosinski's novels lies in the conflicting impulses of his protagonists to reject their pasts even as they teasingly reconstruct them, implying all the while that there is more to them than their creator allows and that, with their central European connections, they in fact belong to a diverse and rich cultural tradition. More specifically, the protagonist in a Kosinski novel is a distinctly central European self whose identity, attitudes, and point of view originate and are shaped by the culture of Central Europe, the specter of the Holocaust, and the political mind-set of the Cold War.<sup>3</sup>

Jerzy Kosinski's oeuvre is a vital record of the changes which the American novel underwent in the 1960's. Such writers as Thomas Pynchon (1937-), William Burroughs (1914-1997), John Barth (1930-), Donald Barthelme (1931-1989), Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007), to mention just a few, share some of his characteristic features, although one can hardly talk about one group united by the artistic credo. John Barth, in his famous essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), analyses new narrative conventions which aim at describing the world in a better way

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas S.Gladsky, "The Documentary Mode in Jerzy Kosinski's 'The Hermit of 69th Street'", Critique Studies In Contemporary Fiction 4 (1999): 379.

than the outdated realism could. The innovative writers were aware of a complex structure of the world composed of an infinite number of forms of reality and meaning which escape a unified and logical description. Any attempt at ordering or arranging the pieces distorts the vision, as there is no final idea to be reached. Ambiguity and fragmentation become the desired aesthetic. Themes of power and violence introduce a cynical and amoral point of view. Rejection of realism results in parody, black comedy, irony and other rhetorical figures which enlarge or reduce reality. Game and chance become governing principles for the characters who transgress the limits in a delusive exercise of self-definition. Eugene Goodheart argues that "exalting of passion over intellect, body over mind, the perverse over the normal, the spontaneous over the habitual, the risks of violence and disaster over the security of our ordinary modes of existence"<sup>4</sup> highlight the sense of randomness and the character's preoccupation with self-doubt about his private destiny. One can easily find traces of such ethics in Kosinski's novels which, nevertheless, possess their own distinctive features among which the incorporation of the author's own biography into the narrative seems most important.

The title of my monograph is *"To the Limits of Experience. Jerzy Kosinski's Literary Quest for Self-Identity"*. My purpose is to re-read Kosinski's major novels, identify the characteristic features of Kosinskian style and address the phenomenon of self-creation – a trade mark by which his novels are well recognized. Thus, the first two chapters are devoted respectively to the issues of self-identity and sexuality. In his fictional reality Kosinski skillfully demonstrates the loss of the web of social structure and individual commitment, a loss which is unavoidable for those who manufacture a false identity in an attempt to substantiate some trivial needs. The dialectic underlying Kosinski's fictional world is a separation of a solitary self from any form of social life. His protagonists deliberately make their identities obscure, or link themselves to their jobs, activities or products. For Kosinski, social relationships are based on the corruption brought on by power which, together with the

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene Goodheart, "Four Decades of Contemporary American Fiction". The New Pelican Guide to English Literature. American Literature. Ed. Boris Ford (London: Penguin Books, 1988) 623.



ideological falsity of universal values, show the inability of modern life to authenticate itself without simultaneously revealing the "authentic" as merely reflexive and self-constructed.

The third chapter "Are Kosinski's Novels Autobiographical? The Problem of Self-Creation" deals with problems connected with artistic composition and the role of the artist in the process. Probably Kosinski's most important literary contribution is his innovation in the realm of narrative technique; the deliberate inclusion of the author's life into the creative process. The question Kosinski's readers most frequently ask is how much truth about his own life is there in his novels. Kosinski was the master of confusion as to when he was telling the truth, and when he was merely fantasizing. Kosinski public persona, invented and perfected during public and private meetings and interviews, to a greater or lesser degree, bore resemblance to his fictitious characters. On the other hand, it is possible that it was his protagonists who were modeled upon his persona. Any attempt, and there were quite a few<sup>5</sup>, to sift fact from fiction failed, causing only more puzzlement; life and art became the two sides of the same coin.

In my opinion, a postmodern methodology enables the deepest insight into the Kosinski's texts, hence the choice of my approach. Agnieszka Salska and Marek Jedliński described Jerzy Kosinski as the "quintessential postmodern figure transcending boundaries of ethnicity and nationality, crossing divides between high and popular culture, joining writing to acting and to creativity in film and photography."<sup>6</sup> The recurrent features of his novels are characterized by no ordered pattern: exile, marginalization, rejection of realism, nameless protagonists, linguistic dislocation, traumatic silencing, the lack of higher authority or the accepted set of values, no permanent attachment either to other char-

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<sup>5</sup> Joanna Siedlecka, *Czarny Ptasiór* (Gdańsk-Warszawa: Marabut/CIS, 1994).

James Parker Sloan, *Jerzy Kosiński. Biografia*, trans. Ewa Kuklik-Bielińska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Da Capo, 1996).

Marian Błażejczyk, "Pstry Ptak". *Ład* 17 (1988): 12-13.

Norman Lavers, *Jerzy Kosiński* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982).

Elżbieta Morawiec, "O sprawiedliwej nienawiści i malowanych ptakach" *Arka* 50 (1994): 189.

<sup>6</sup> Agnieszka Salska, and Marek Jedliński eds., *Jerzy Kosinski. Man and Work at the Crossroads of Cultures* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1997) 6.

acters or to the world, camouflage and disguise. The character's attempts to define the essence of his being unmask a disjointed and dissimulative world in which people seem to be outsiders. Sexual behavior is stripped of its social frame of reference and reveals its primal core: the craving for power and domination. Insatiable desire for erotic variety demonstrates that desire can have no fixed home and remains restless.

None of the perspectives presented in Kosinski's novels predominates or leads to a unified vision of the world. Grzegorz Krajewski notices that

[t]he subject becomes lost in incoherence of the world, it loses autonomy residing 'between' its temporary embodiments. The subject's central position vanishes under the pressure of liberated multiculturalism which does not confer privileges on anyone, yet at the same time does not exclude anyone from social games.<sup>7</sup>

The protagonists extend the boundaries both inside and outside the conventional expectations. According to James Park Sloan "[t]he clear message is to de-emphasize ordinary ways of contexting human behavior and anchoring human identity — to insist that the more important definitions of self are more primal."<sup>8</sup> Kosinski's readers are ultimately forced to interpret his fiction in terms of their own language because, inevitably, they become aware of the terms of a new discourse which challenges the nature of the values they bring to the reading. Kosinski intentionally demystifies the syntax of everyday language to force the reader to an awareness of its limits. I fully agree with Agnieszka Salska and Marek Jedliński who, in the foreword to a collection of papers published after the conference dedicated to Jerzy Kosinski wrote that

Jerzy Kosinski's cross-cultural biography and his work, so very aware of the growing power of

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<sup>7</sup> Grzegorz Krajewski, "Alienation and Ways to Neutralize It" in *Jerzy Kosinski. Man and Work at the Crossroads of Cultures*. Ed. A.Salska and M.Jedliński. (Łódź: Wyd. Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1997) 44.

<sup>8</sup> James Park Sloan, "Layers of the Self". Salska and Jedliński 15.

popular culture and of media other than language, fascinate today because they seem to epitomize aspirations and temptations of the postmodern artist. The paradoxes of the postmodern condition converge in Kosinski's life and work with paradigmatic sharpness of contours filled in by his inimitable blend of experimental poignancy and play.<sup>9</sup>

My secondary approach, which I employ to discuss the disturbing effects of Kosinski's prose is reader-oriented. Different ways of reading enable the reader to actualize what would otherwise remain only potentially meaningful:

[t]he meaning of the text is never self-formulated; the reader must act upon the textual material in order to produce meaning. Wolfgang Iser argues that literary texts always contain 'blanks' which only the reader can fill. [...] A problem for theory centres on the question of whether or not the text itself triggers the reader's act of interpretation, or whether the reader's own interpretative strategies impose solutions upon the problems thrown up by the text.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, I argue that Kosinski's texts are especially prone to reader's intrusion and invite the reader's collaboration in the production of meaning. At the same time, they contain textual features which pre-determine how the reader will respond. Mental discomfort, which is the response to Kosinski's novels shared by a great number of readers, has its roots both in the text and in the deep layers of the readers' own minds. The interplay between the two and the careful choice of images determine the disturbing nature of the experience in the fictional world in which all generally accepted norms are suspended or challenged. Unsettling and threatening, involving and fascinating, Kosinski's novels

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<sup>9</sup> Salska, and Jedliński, *Jerzy Kosinski* 5.

<sup>10</sup> Raman Selden, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989) 116.

seem to cast a spell on their readers, haunting them long after the actual book was put aside. I believe that the reader-oriented explicative strategy helps one to unveil the powers which are at work in Kosinski's novels, and which make them unforgettable to read.

Among the many accusations evoked by Kosinski's novels some are more and some are less justified: that the characters are flat; that there is lack of dramatic progression or depth of treatment; that the novels lack in loftiness and profundity; they derive their popularity from public's prurient desire for continuous arousal; that the subject matter of death and sex are the easiest merchandise for a bad writer and that the further Kosinski reaches for curiosities, moral conundrums, and simple abominations, the leaner his work becomes. This may all be true. But I would argue that the real value of Kosinski's fictions lies in the fact that he takes risks with unconventional modes of narrative and characterization, probing the potency of his artistic power. His insights into the Cold War captive mind, the examination and ongoing dialogue with the deracinated self deserve, beyond doubt, literary appreciation.

What, however, in the perspective adopted here constitutes his distinctive value is the sublimation of Kosinski's own personal history in his novels. Kosinski's fiction depicts the struggle to define his essential "selfhood" in terms other than those laid down by the collective forces. The author's whole life and art were shaped by two of the most cataclysmic movements of the modern world: Communism and Nazism. The author's engagement in the creative process both helped him to gradually accommodate the past and enabled him to come closer to the identity of his being. Thus, his personal life became intricately connected with his art: they both strove to find their best realizations, and both were overwhelmed by the desire to act. Jerome Klinkowitz claims that Kosinski's novels' relevance as autobiography or their indebtedness to factual sources "are less important than the imaginative effectiveness of the work, since Kosinski sees the best fiction as autobiographical and experimental not of the author, but of the reader."<sup>11</sup> Jerzy Kosinski redefined the concept of autobiography and restated the characteristics of the modern self, thus demonstrating to his readers the unlimited power of human imagination.

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<sup>11</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions. The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974) 101.

And it is the reader whose final judgment should be taken into account because Kosinski's novels leave an indelible impression on the reader's mind in the way that only great works of art do.

## CHAPTER I:

### The Structure of Kosinski's Heroes

My discussion of the nature of Kosinski protagonist is based on the heroes of: *Steps* (1968), *The Devil Tree* (1973), *Cockpit* (1975), *Blind Date* (1977), and *Passion Play* (1979). The choice was determined not only on the diversified rendition of the characters presented in these works, but also the existence of a set of characteristics representative of what has come to be known as a "Kosinski hero." According to Norman Lavers a "Kosinski hero" is somebody who is:

from an outside society, critical of, yet somehow in the confidence of, highly placed officialdom, free of restraint, a free agent, able to act on his own, in a situation where everyone else is restrained. He is a lone agent on no one's side, the observer from outside, the individual where individuality is forbidden, privileged with freedom, yet because of his freedom condemned to be alone.<sup>1</sup>

Whalen, Levanter, Tarden, Fabian and other unnamed characters match this description.

Kosinski's fictional reality is dominated by a single subject who is the male principal character in the story, whereas all minor characters are reduced to objects of cognition. Tarden serves in a "one man army,"

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Lavers, *Jerzy Kosinski* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982) 19.

Levanter reflects on himself as "a one-man theatre". Thus, Kosinski's concept of subject is determined by the concentration in and upon the subject itself. "All experiences are internalized and condensed in the protagonist's personality. Therefore his [the protagonist's] transformations are possible, whereas the concept itself does not evolve"<sup>2</sup>. Kosinski's protagonists are located somewhere between the boundaries of the socially acceptable and marginalized aspects of life:

Kosinski posits a sense of self which bears a distant kinship to the self depicted in the art and psychology of the Indian subcontinent, a thing of uncertain boundaries into and out of which ideas, actions, and physical substances flow with no clearly definable line of demarcation between self and world [...] The Kosinskian protagonist continuously asks the most basic questions about the nature of the "I": does it exist, and, if so, what is its nature, and where, or in what ontological plan, is it located.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of these questions cannot be overlooked, because for the protagonists the constitution of the self is contemporaneous with the constitution of meaning. In an interview with Patricia Griffin, Kosinski shifts the concept of self from the text to the reader:

The role of the protagonist is to trigger the sense of Self in the reader. Hence they cannot be overpowering. For one thing, they exist only indirectly; they exist through the reader's perception [...] they borrow a self from the reader to bring them to life. They have no existence outside of the printed page other than in the reader's mind, clearly. It is the reader who,

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<sup>2</sup> James Park Sloan, "Layers of the Self". Salska and Jedliński 36.

<sup>3</sup> Sloan, *Layers* 12.

ultimately, dominates the protagonist. Not the other way round.<sup>4</sup>

Kosinski's protagonists inhabit a world devoid of meaningful human relations which, together with the cultural and religious dimensions, help to develop and enrich a human life. On the one hand, the protagonists desire total freedom and long for soul mates; while on the other, they abhor any invasion into their privacy. Such conflicting demands which can neither be supplied nor ignored, lead then straight to emotional paucity. In order to fill the vacuum, the protagonists look for substitutes which would give some meaning to their lives. These strategies involve: exploring the sexual drive, escapism, a nomadic lifestyle, testing socially conditioned behavior, applying a phallogocentric vision of the world, craving for power and authority, relying on chance and game as the decisive forces in life, regarding revenge as a key element in ethics, and believing in contingent existence. As Kasperki claims, Kosinski's protagonist "is viewed horizontally [...] in the immanence of his own life, whose fundamental experience is a feeling of incongruity and discontinuity, which can only be satisfied in the hedonistic, punctual present [...] desire and satisfaction have become the ultimate criteria of his actions"<sup>5</sup>.

The emotional groping towards self-discovery, which lie at the core of Kosinski's protagonist's life, seem to provide no satisfying conclusions. When man's humanness is put to the test in a world where suffering and pain are the order of the day, it is no wonder that the vision of life becomes dizzying and confusing. Estrangement from society induces self-awareness, but at the same time, it deprives one of support and approval. There is a danger of falling victim to personal fears in the course of enlarging the borders of what is bearable. While testing the extremes of behavior and endurance, mocking the existing ethical codes and socially sanctioned modes of behavior, the protagonist hopes to find some replacement for the devalued sense. Only the final imagery of nature or floating water brings comfort and hope to the deracinated and

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Griffin, "Conversation with Kosinski". Teicholz 135.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Kasperski, "On the Poetics of Jerzy Kosinski's Novels". Salska and Jedlinski 65.



impervious self. It is in nature that man should search for balance and assurance; self-consciousness also derives from nature.

The set of theoretical positions under the common heading of "post-structuralism" has, at its core, a self-reflexive discourse which is aware of the tentativeness and ambiguity of texts and their meanings. One of the post-structural assumptions is the rejection of totalizing and foundational concepts, which signify stable representations of a world of fact which is isomorphic with human thought. Post-structuralism posits a concept of protagonist, the leading character or hero, who suggest an independent reality which exists beneath or beyond language and ideology. It was Descartes' contention that personal identity consists in the continued existence of a unique mind which separates man from the world and thus creates a new relationship between subject and object. Man was regarded as separate and intact, his mind as the only true realm of meaning and value; his rights were inalienable and his nature was rooted in a universal and transhistorical essence<sup>6</sup>. Post-structuralism contests the view of man as developed by Enlightenment and the idealist philosophy. Metaphysical Being was challenged by the belief that a character is a fiction created by our imagination, because in fact, it is merely a series of concurring perceptions. A number of concepts have been invented to encompass this variety: soul, self, substance, character or essence.<sup>7</sup> The post-structural view holds that, as there is no fundamental "truth" or reality in the universe, no absolutes, no eternity beneath the shifting sands of history. Neither is there a subject whose nature or essence can be penetrated. Instead, characters are discursively and culturally structured, created in interaction and constituted through language.<sup>8</sup>

Such characteristics seem to best describe the Kosinski protagonist who fails to deliver a finite set of attributes indicative of

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<sup>6</sup> For a historical study of the concept of a subject see: Erazm Kuźma, *Język jako podmiot współczesnej literatury w Z problemów podmiotowości w literaturze polskiej XX wieku*, ed. Mirosław Lalak (Szczecin: Rozprawy i Studia Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, CCXII, 1993) 138.

<sup>7</sup> David Hume, *Traktat o naturze ludzkiej*, trans. Czesław Znamierowski (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1963) 325-341.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen, "Psychology's Construction of Identity", *Psychology Today* Mar.-Apr.2001:60.

a distinctive quality. Instead, change and diversity become a quality in itself. The more varied the configuration of the self, the easier it is to adapt to the changing context. But the danger is that the point of identification or reference is missing. The rejection of a holistic approach, in which humanness is unchangeable in its essence and favoring a world view in which neither language nor discourse are transparent but structure our sense of meaning and being, brings about a different philosophical and ideological understanding of the nature of a character.

Since all texts are marked by a surplus of meaning which is located in the polysemous nature of both language and rhetoric, so the Kosinski's texts referred to here exhibit the traits of a mediated reality. Rejecting the traditional aesthetic and phenomenalist assumption that language is a "transparent" medium which hands over experience, one might argue that protagonists are created through their cultural meanings and practices, and occupy various culturally-based sites of meaning, each of which evokes a different configuration of the self. A close examination of those sites will hopefully expand our comprehension of Kosinski's fictional characters, without assuming total control and management over their meaning.

A choice of the post-structural methodology in analyzing the characters entails the structuralist groundwork for post-structural thought regarding the concept of meaning. Structuralism assumes that intrinsic meaning pre-exists its realization; it is already in the text waiting to be deciphered. It follows that intrinsic meaning presupposes the existence of a certain pattern or structure which may govern and regulate the production of meaning. In a way, the text becomes a copy of the order which grounds the coherence of the text. Therefore, the analysis of the text is actually a copy of a copy—a simulacrum, to use Baudrillard's term,<sup>9</sup> and the text functions as an intermediary between the reader and the structure of rationality:

[s]tructuralism presupposes the traditional and metaphysical notion of harmony and unity;

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchmann (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983) 53-68.

a work is only a work, i.e. only has meaning as an entity, only insofar as it is a whole. This notion negates the reality of the material conditions of production or reception, it makes the meaning itself unitary, it makes criticism commentary, a pointing out of the essential truth which is embodied not in but through the work.<sup>10</sup>

Post-structuralism is rooted in the belief that we live in a linguistic universe. Unlike structuralism, post-structuralism holds that no cultural construction of meaning will privilege some meanings and deprive others. By looking at the suppression of some experiences, the silences and discontinuities which ideology tries to smooth over, we are able to deconstruct the cultural meanings. Let me invoke Derrida's thought, that "all meaning is textual and intertextual: there is no 'outside of the text'. Everything we can know is constructed through signs, governed by the rules of discourse for that area of knowledge, and related to other texts through filiation, allusion and repetition. Every text exists only in relation to other texts; meaning circulates in economies of discourse."<sup>11</sup> In consequence, what we may know about reality and how we acquire this knowledge is textual i.e. constructed through discourse. In Foucault's terms,<sup>12</sup> discourse is discontinuous and multiple. Chance, being responsible for its appearance and disappearance, constitutes its underlying principle which allows only temporary representation of the "truth".

However figurative the approach towards a character seems to be, there is no literature without a person. Although in *The Poetics* Aristotle claims that plot i.e. the sequence of incidents, is the most important, in fact it is the character and his story what readers are looking for. For Aristotle, a character is that which reveals a moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man avoids and what he chooses, but it is the incident and the plot which are the end of a tragedy, and the end is the

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<sup>10</sup> John Lye, "Some Post-Structural Assumptions", 02/12/99 <[http:// www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4f70/poststruct.html](http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4f70/poststruct.html)> 4.

<sup>11</sup> Lye, "Some" 3.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *Archeologia wiedzy*, trans. A. Siemek. (Warszawa: PiW, 1977).

most important thing of all. Whether it is a first person narration (as in *Cockpit* and *Steps*), third person (as in *Blind Date* and *Passion Play*), or mixed (as in *The Devil Tree*), all the novels tell stories at the center of which there is a leading storyteller. Diegesis dominates mimesis and this foregrounds the concept of a protagonist. The world presented through the eyes of Tarden, Whalen, Fabian or Levanter seems fragmented and lacks coherence, but nevertheless reflects the character's ontological status. The limited extent to which the characters are able to experience their reality suggests their epistemological impotence; they are disjunctive characters in a disjunctive reality. The protagonists emerge through the experience of negativity; the abundance of evil makes them both weak and strong because it enables auto affirmation. A discussion of Kosinski's protagonists entails not so much a discussion of their place in the fictional reality (which seems to play a secondary role), but the role of other characters who serve as mirrors in which the main protagonist may discern his changing multiple selves: each reflecting image gone in the twinkling of an eye, allowing yet another pose. Such an identity, constructed at the intersection of the historical, linguistic and contextual meanings, however difficult to grasp, diverts the reader's attention from the obvious and comprehensible to the marginal. And the marginalized is what makes the Kosinski's protagonists unique.

Among the interpretations of the characters which the novels seem to encourage is one proposing the *id* to be the underlying drive of the textual self. The character is subjected to an ongoing struggle between the *id* and the *ego*, each trying to take over his consciousness. According to Freud,<sup>13</sup> the mind consists of three parts: the *ego*, which is an executive part comprising all the functions needed to direct a person in his behavior, the *id*, which is mostly unconscious and contains the instincts with all that was repressed, and the *superego*, the conscious element which contains values and prohibitions, and which sets the guidelines for the *ego* and punishes it through the imposition of guilt feelings. Disturbing wishes, otherwise well guarded by the *superego*, may slip into the *ego* from the *id*. Psychologically painful experiences from the childhood may distort the *ego*, or the delicate balance might be

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<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1916-1917), Standard Edition XV-XVI; Penguin Freud Library I (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953-1973).

upset by an injury or some traumatic experience. The result is an intrapsychic conflict, often manifested in nightmares or aberrant behavior.

In Kosinski's fiction, the unnamed boy from *The Painted Bird* may serve as a common childhood - reference to all later characters. Following Freud, we could trace back the formation of the abnormal mentality, i.e. the inability to communicate or maintain long-lasting relationships, to the character's formative years. The agonizing experiences of the boy's youth could, in part, explain the future ineptness of adult protagonists. The lack of positive role models and guidance cast the innocent boy into a whirlpool of irrational forces, which he could neither control nor comprehend. Like a blind man, he must examine the environment and learn by trial and error. It is the feeling of failure which makes him extremely wary of others, and also deprives him of full participation in the social structure. The boy is trying to find an organizing principle which could give some sense and meaning to his suffering. In contrast, the grown up characters constitute the principle themselves; they are the lawmakers and the executioners. Although the character's transition from a weak and vulnerable child-sufferer to an almighty and unscrupulous adult might be regarded as the character's triumph over reality, neither of the strategies provides a sufficient degree of mental balance guaranteeing self-fulfillment.

According to Adler's<sup>14</sup> individualized psychology, every neurosis can be understood as an attempt to free oneself from the feeling of inferiority, which usually arises in the family circle, only to gain a feeling of superiority resembling fantasy in its high-set goal of godliness. Yet, this feeling is most often repressed by the communal standards of logic and usually stays in the unconscious. Jonathan James Whalen, of whose background we are well informed, is such a character:

His father's ruthless rise to corporate power, which had made him a stranger to his son, and his mother's drug-assisted slide into suicide, which had made her childishly dependent upon the same only child, have left him with little more than

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<sup>14</sup> Calvin S.Hall, and Gardner Lindzey, *Teoria osobowości*, trans. Joanna Kowalczevska and Józef Radzicki. (Warszawa: PWN, 2001).

paper money, and the inordinate power that money commands in America's organizational heart. Lacking purpose, and not capable of embracing traditional ethical systems based upon dead imperatives, i.e. pioneer challenges, religious prerequisites and sociological mobility, Jonathan can only test the extremes of behavior, such as opiates, sexual perversions, encounter sessions and, eventually, logically, murder itself, hoping against hope to find in violence some substitute for absent meanings.<sup>15</sup>

Both parents failed as far as conscious parenthood is concerned. Fully immersed in their own affairs, they neither helped nor encouraged Jonathan who, throughout his adult life, tried to rid himself of his inferiority complex.

Both the small boy from *The Painted Bird* and later adult characters have no family. Not only are their parents and relatives missing; they themselves are devoid of familial feelings. Whether it is their very absence or merely the destructive quality of the offspring's experience, the protagonists try to compensate for their inferiority by elevating themselves to a god-like position. Hence, Tarden's obsession with hide-away places, with false identities and with manipulating other people's lives. The whole story of his control over Veronica, her efforts to meet the demands of a wealthy businessman, and the promise to obey Tarden no matter what the circumstances, clearly shows his plan:

Because I liked her, I said, and because I had selected her for a certain role in my life, I was willing to help her, if she followed my advice. I knew of a man she could marry. He was rich and tolerable. In return, she would make herself unconditionally available to me sexually, whenever I needed her. She would have to be prepared for, and always accept, any number of additional partners that I might provide myself or

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<sup>15</sup> Edward Butscher, "Jerzy Kosinski", *Carleton Miscellanea* 4.5 (1973-74): 131-33.

procure through her. Her emotions were of no interest to me, but her availability was imperative.<sup>16</sup>

Tarden, on the one hand, elevates the woman to a life of luxury, but on the other hand, wants to remain in charge of her destiny, securing the right to change it according to his arbitrary will. The first act, in which Tarden helps the woman to improve her standard of living and secure her future, is simultaneously denied by the second, which makes the woman an insignificant pawn in Tarden's repulsive game.

Similarly, Levanter - when plotting and executing the killing of a hotel clerk - is sure of his victory. There is not even a hint of hesitation or uncertainty in his act, as if he was guided by the invisible hand of justice. The merciless revenge finds full justification in his eyes:

He thought about the public consequences of his personal deed. Both the authorities and the media would demand a direct connection between the crime committed and the reason for it. They would keep looking for a plot, and to look for a plot in this killing would be as useless as grooming a bronze horse; no one would be able to untangle the web of circumstances and motives that had led to the clerk's death.<sup>17</sup>

Levanter judges others according to his own moral standards and, what is more, claims the right to govern other people's lives. His nefarious conduct meets no challenge either from his own conscience or from the society. It is the permissive world he lives in that enables to adopt such an approach. Levanter only explores the limits which are set by the oppressive society.

It was only Fabian who lost a little of the usual self-confidence characteristic for Kosinski's other protagonists as he reluctantly realizes Vanessa's right to emotional independence. Fabian becomes aware of the fact that it is time he abandoned his claim to this young woman's destiny.

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<sup>16</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *Cockpit* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976) 185.

<sup>17</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *Passion Play* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980) 302.

He acknowledged the nature of his despair: confronted by the reality of her feelings for him, he could no longer sustain the image of himself as the heir to her time, the witness and sole chronicler of her history as a woman, the image of the two of them as the reef that divisive time, healing one wound and inflicting another, could not wear down. To give her the right to confront her life on her own, he had to unfasten the chain that bound her to him.<sup>18</sup>

Fabian's initial interest in young Vanessa's life finally resulted in his withdrawal. Maybe it was his aging which made him stop pursuing her, or the realization of his own weaknesses and faults which stripped him of his power and placed back among ordinary fellow beings. Not only is he unsure about his decisions but he also starts having doubts about his motives. Because Fabian, unlike the other protagonists whose superiority makes them less human, exhibits imperfect human nature, he appears to be the most accessible of all Kosinski's leading characters.

Standard Freudian psychoanalytical theory states that all human beings are born with instinctual drives that are constantly active, even though a person is not conscious of being thus driven. Two drives, one for sexual pleasure, called the libido (Eros), and the other for aggression and death (Thanatos), motivate and propel most behavior. The amount of time and energy devoted to sexual satisfaction and violence by Kosinski's characters lends support to this view. The two instincts organize and prevail over any other activities subordinate to them, and in fact, there is hardly anything else which stirs the characters' emotions. The protagonist's life consists mainly of sexual pleasure and the struggle to stay independent:

Violence and vengeance, sex and death, power and submission are the essential human ties within the godless and human less macrocosm of *Steps*. The neutrally human male is a vagrant, going from place to place, accidentally meeting

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<sup>18</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 238.



women, having accidental affairs, and doing away with accidentally chosen victims. He acts like some kind of destructive, fallen angel, if one can conceive of any motivation. Most of the time, however, he is presented as totally impersonal, a thing acting upon a thing.<sup>19</sup>

Sexual activities, which have nothing to do with procreation, are temporary and shallow. As long as they provide the ersatz of fulfillment and joy, nothing of a deeper nature is expected of them. The sexual drive transgresses being and the marginal comes into sight. Such an excess of dehumanized sex demands true love in a world where human needs are not met, and no balance is maintained.

Although the sexual drive cannot be self-satisfied, and the characters need other people to interact with, there is no real and meaningful communication which might lead to a stable relationship. Yet, the characters do not seem to be seeking one, either. Every attempt to invade their personal freedom is met with a vicious revenge, often culminating in the death of the other person. As Prendowska says:

[the] Kosinski protagonist performs the spasms and moans of lovemaking and dying, some kind of *dance macabre*, a desperate effort of shouting out motion, instead of creating emotion. He can never accept death as a necessary pact with nature, an exchange for the gift of life. That is why his deaths are never beautiful: they are not the ordered deaths of the hunted or the hunters, but chilly executions performed by psychopaths for whom only violence can restore their suppleness and vitality. The love acts are, accordingly, not relationships based on attraction, but the perversions of those who became intimidated about love by rape...<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Krystyna Prendowska, "Jerzy Kosinski: A Literature of Contortions", The Journal of Narrative Technique 1(1978): 17.

<sup>20</sup> Prendowska, "Jerzy Kosinski" 18.

The characters' behavior oscillates between the two extremes as though there was nothing in-between. Killing others, for whatever reasons, poses no threat to their integrity and one can hardly tell the victims from the ones inflicting punishment:

By reversing vices and virtues, by becoming a murderous imitation of an all-powerful God, by pursuing evil instead of evil pursuing him, Tarden seems to embrace the other Lucifers of modern literature, the "Caligulas" who want to achieve responsibility for the anarchy of existence. But Kosinski's fallen angel is not paying for his knowledge from the tree of evil; the assumptions of absurdity are thus strained. Does he at least learn anything in the process of his evil commitment? He does not. Shifting from one moral stand to another, Tarden perpetuates good and evil alike.<sup>21</sup>

Loneliness is another feature common to all of Kosinski's protagonists. One may point out a number of immanent and transcendent factors leading one to such a conclusion: the lack of understanding between the protagonist and the outside world, the broken human relationships, the unresolved ontological questions, the alienation resulting from unjust social relations, or the realization of one's own little worth and importance.<sup>22</sup> Existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, or Marcel indicate that a human being is not only internally torn apart but also completely at a loss in the face of the world. His existence, on which he has no influence, is contingent and absurd. Unable to relate to other beings, he must live next to them in the conflicting world. Heidegger stresses the tragic solitude in which a man is constantly faced with contradictory choices over which he finally loses control. Thus, having lost his individuality and uniqueness he is forced to an anonymous existence in a conformist world. His life is accompanied

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<sup>21</sup> Prendowska, "Jerzy Kosinski" 22.

<sup>22</sup> See Janusz Gajda, *Samotność i kultura* (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Związków Zawodowych, 1987) 9-42.

by constant fear and uncertainty, fuelled by the belief that nothing lasts forever. Sartre, in turn, highlights the tragic freedom which compels man to make choices between the moral norms in force, and the unique exemplary cases. Thus, freedom becomes a burden rather than a blessing. People are unable to understand each other fully, because everyone tries to dominate and bring others under his or her control. The least comprehensible phenomenon is our death, and although we are being prepared for it throughout our lives, the final moment is full of irrational fear. And this is exactly the moment when we deeply realize our solitude. Marcel, who represents theistic existentialism, connects loneliness with the idea of possession. People want to own more and more, and at the same time, protect what they have already got. This leads them to become enslaved by the world of material objects, and cut off from the world of thought. The choice is between "to be" and "to have". According to Marcel, love for other people and religion can help to establish genuine human relations, and combat loneliness.<sup>23</sup>

This context of existentialist philosophy is relevant here because each of Kosinski's leading characters is a demonstration of a particular variety of solipsism - the extreme form of scepticism which denies the possibility of any knowledge other than the knowledge of one's own existence. They hold that no other perception except their own is reliable. Their rootless ness confirms the fact that each human being is alone, and only the brightest recognize their solitude and re-enforce it. In view of the fact that Kosinski often claimed that his protagonists are "versions" of himself, it may be illuminating to bring to attention what he has said about himself. When asked about his place in the world he said:

I don't have a private address, I don't have a place where I live; I hardly have any belongings. I don't relate myself - I don't exist by connecting myself to anything as concrete as that. Rather, I exist by cutting myself off. [...] I define myself in relation to my own inner life. [...] And, indirectly, to the

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<sup>23</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Być i mieć*. Trans. Piotr Lubicz (Warszawa: PAX, 1986), 26-34.

community which is manifested, implicit already,  
in my life and in the language I use.<sup>24</sup>

The characters do not despair or try to overcome loneliness at all costs. The lack of family and other social bonds is turned into an advantage which allows for an unconstrained behavior. In Kosinski's view, the individual is always placed before the family:

I don't think there is such a thing as families.  
A family is a group of individuals, and each one  
of them carries his own or her own life. Our  
families belong to us, not we to our families. [...]  
[The individual] is the only carrier of life I know.  
And of death. When the individual dies, the  
family doesn't die with him. The tribe doesn't die  
with him. He or she definitely does die, though.<sup>25</sup>

Loners need not worry about others and are less vulnerable because they cannot be hurt, even indirectly. Sometimes it is in fear of the loved ones, not of oneself, that people reflect and resign from risky endeavors. In Kosinski's world, his heroes exist beyond the recognized social bonds, such as family, friendship, neighbors, professional colleagues. It is because of the care for others that they deprive themselves of any loving attachment. If this is true, then, their loneliness may be seen as a protest against society, civilization and the existing status quo. As a consequence, they withdraw into an inner world where others cannot reach. Contacts with other people are replaced by auto reflection, or illusory and temporary liaisons. Individual freedom should correspond to the social norms of behavior. To retain autonomy within the existing pattern means to observe both and still maintain the balance. "Because the absolute self exists only in relationship with others," man inevitably gets entangled into the web of social relations which dwarf his own uniqueness<sup>26</sup>. By remaining outside such bonds, the characters avoid being cast into the common mould.

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<sup>24</sup> Griffin, *Conversation* 139.

<sup>25</sup> Griffin, *Conversation* 140.

<sup>26</sup> Lisa Grunwald, "Jerzy Kosinski: Tapping into His Vision of Truth". Teicholz 107.

Yet, some aspects of the protagonists' behavior may suggest that they do undertake some ultimately futile attempts to overcome loneliness. Numerous and brief sexual exploits allow for only short moments of togetherness, as if people would suffocate if they were exposed to each other for a longer period of time. Parting, in this case, means the end of the relationship which had hardly begun. Thus room for another attempt is prepared. Recalcitrant lovers escape from reality into the world of natural instincts and libidinous drives. The persistence with which the protagonists go in pursuit of new erotic adventures might suggest a need for human contacts, even very shallow and trivial, for the lack of others.

If direct human contact is missing, then the protagonists resort to voyeurism. That explains why the characters constantly mix with crowds of people found in bars, busy streets, night clubs, blocks of flats, offices, hotel lounges, camps and parties. On the one hand, they are cautious to retain their undisturbed privacy; while on the other hand, they long for the company of others. It appears that they cannot live without other people whom they could manipulate. Their aim seems to be to use others to their own advantage and on their own terms. Total solitude would deprive them of their means without which their lives would lose sense, as they do not live for themselves but, like parasites, off others.

Revenge, which is so common in Kosinski's novels, is meant to put the distorted reality back into order, which, nonetheless, not necessarily accords with the general principles of legal and moral justice. Tarden tricks the totalitarian state because:

[t]he state was a vicious enemy. Whether I escaped abroad or committed suicide, it would punish those who had known of my plans. What had begun as my personal challenge to the State would end with the destruction of innocent people, and I had no more right to destroy them than the State did.<sup>27</sup>

In another incident, Tarden witnesses the brutality of a pimp towards his prostitutes then plots revenge planting drugs in the pimp's car

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<sup>27</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 17.

and calling the police. "The pimp panicked, jumped behind the wheel, started the motor and hit the gas. The car swung out sharply. The police opened fire and the car veered up over the curb, plunging straight into the wall."<sup>28</sup> The pimp's brutality is avenged and the abused girls are free. Levanter executes the Deputy Minister, the founder of the special police forces which tortured and killed all accused of "anti-Court" activities. The whole operation was carried out in the name of "thousands of teachers, university professors, writers, artists, and enlightened clergy, who were sentenced without trial to spend years in PERSAUD prisons, penal colonies, and work camps."<sup>29</sup> Another time he rescues the inexperienced skier from a fatal injury:

[t]his young lady will walk all the way down, and you will carry her skis. I'll be around to make sure that nothing happens to her. If she is hurt, I have taken enough photographs to have all three of you arrested and charged by the authorities in ValPina.

"And in whose name are you doing this?"

"snapped one man.

"Simple humanity will do for the moment,"

Levanter replied.<sup>30</sup>

Levanter's threats of revenge on the irresponsible skiers are veiled by his seemingly kindness and decency towards the poor girl. This noble deed makes him feel worthy and good, in a way nullifying his other acts of bloody revenge. The readers, who value their own justice, fully sympathize with Levanter and wish for the happy ending. This passage shows that Levanter does not discriminate between the acts of his revenge: whether it is an important political issue or a little private affair,

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<sup>28</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 206.

<sup>29</sup> Kosinski, *Blind Date* 37.

<sup>30</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *Blind Date* (New York: Bantam Books, 1978) 30.

he is still intent on revenge. Yet, this temporary act of kindness when juxtaposed with Levanter's other activities only highlights his merciless and cruel character.

Kosinski's characters resort to revenge as their defensive weapon against the system. Kosinski says that he sees revenge as "the last vestige of the eminently threatened self [...] as a positive force - the victim's final dignity."<sup>31</sup> By inflicting punishment on the wrongdoers, the protagonists do not only identify with the poor and the oppressed, but also elevate themselves to a privileged position in the society. Again, they transgress their loneliness and, in their own understanding, act on the behalf of the society. Even if they do not see themselves as part of a social group, they identify the group's needs and act accordingly. Totally disregarding the moral issue and the consequences of their brutal actions, the protagonists act as self – appointed instruments of justice in the society which fails to administer law according to the prescribed and socially accepted principles.

Kosinski's character is an outsider, i.e. a person who perceives the world as a mixture of chaos and illusion.<sup>32</sup> The world is presented strictly through the protagonist's eyes. The intended egotism governs cognition and presupposes a type of contact with the Other. An outsider reifies whatever he wants to experience by assuming control over the object. Because cognition precedes ethics, the world is held in contempt. An outsider exhibits typically childlike behavior where everything must be tried and experienced: hence the involvement in the whole variety of unusual and marginal episodes. Unrestrained curiosity is placed above the concepts of good and evil. Moral values, like goodness and justice, are institutionalized so that their identification is easier. Goodness comes into being when something good is actually done to a person. But in order to achieve it, the person must be regarded as the subject, not the object of the cognitive process. Kosinski's heroes never attempt to engage in a moral dispute upon the motifs of their behavior, nor do they muse on the nature of their existence. Their perception of the world does not allow identification or empathy. That is why good or evil is decided merely on a subjective basis, often in opposition to existing social norms. An

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<sup>31</sup> Barbara Leaming, "Penthouse Interview". Teicholz 202.

<sup>32</sup> Colin Wilson, *Outsider*, trans. Maria Traczewska (Poznań: Rebis, 1992) 12-53.

outsider finds himself in an unfavorable position because his condition results not so much in others regarding him as such, but because of his own perception of himself as an outsider.

Whatever the reasons, the protagonist's isolation is not constructive. A thoughtful human being uses solitude to examine his own soul, to come back to his own roots, to discover himself. Conscious loneliness cuts one off from the world of make-believe in order to create or discover one's own code of conduct: in order to understand the outside one must look inside first. The moments of undisturbed solitude are precious in the world full of cacophonous sounds which give prominence to the simple, the easy and the pleasant, at the same time, muffle all doubts. In the case of Kosinski's protagonists, there is no self-assessment or self-reflection:

Instead of burying himself alive in neurosis, instead of committing a crime against himself - "a crime" of introspection or self analysis, Kosinski's protagonist assumes the kingly glory of a criminal. Penetrating the interior from the outside, the hero/narrator merely acts. (Meursault in Camus' *Stranger* also saw himself only to the extent to which others saw him acting). The irony of this technique is that the "I" narrator, who has been traditionally employed in introspective and speculative texts for the purpose of self revelation, does not reveal himself to the reader. Thus pointing out the fallacy of introspection, Kosinski demonstrates man's unfathomable, disintegrated nature.<sup>33</sup>

In an interview, Kosinski admits that: "[a]ll [his] fictional characters are seekers and questers, preoccupied with self-definition."<sup>34</sup> They are nomads, wandering solitarily from one place to the next. There is no place which they can call home, to which they can come back, of which

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<sup>33</sup> Leaming, "Penthouse Interview". Teicholz 200.

<sup>34</sup> Prendowska, *Jerzy Kosinski* 16.



they dream. This transitoriness is accentuated by the choice of lodging: hotel rooms, random apartments, or the like:

Fabian [who] kept himself a nomad of the highway, shunning the communities of vans where so many other owners of motor homes gathered to exchange tall tales of engine trouble, of sewage vaporizers, of water tanks. Like a Bedouin's tent, his Van Home went with him, and he with it, across whatever shifting landscape or mutable desert he might choose or chance upon, a place in which to bivouac or pitch camp when an unexpected oasis detained him, a companion when he bore down on the receding horizon, his thirst for what it promised never appeased, his voyage without destination.<sup>35</sup>

There is nothing to keep him in one place; no family, no friends, no identification with a social, professional or a religious group. His existence, without beginning or end, seems to be suspended in a void. Nobody knows where he comes from, and nobody knows where he is heading. As there are few references to the protagonist's past, except for the escape story told by Tarden and the scarce comments on J.J. Whalen's childhood, no conclusions can be drawn from their past mistakes to secure a better future. Their lives consist in the here and now.

The road taken is accidental, not carefully planned. Similarly, time is not presented as a solid line, but rather as a broken one. Fragmented narration suggests discontinuity, impermanence and transitoriness. Kosinski claims that organization is not in the nature of our memory and "[a] plot, a sense of destiny, is provided for us by family, tradition; by society, by a political party, or by our own indoctrinated imagination. The plot is given by outsiders - parents, for example - who insist on destiny of some sort."<sup>36</sup> The novel's plot is built upon the collection of loosely connected episodes glued together by the leading character, rather than chronology. A particular episode does not

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<sup>35</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 5.

<sup>36</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz, "Jerzy Kosinski: An Interview". Teicholz 52.

result from the previous one, nor does it have any immediate bearing on the next one.

Zygmunt Bauman compares the postmodern world to a TV soap opera; both present a similar string of events each of which may constitute a self-contained whole.<sup>37</sup> In this way the past and the future lose their importance, giving way to the present moment. Human relations are based on (not always) mutual interests. As long as at least one party gains pleasure, the relationship continues. Such a liaison is not formed with a view of spending the whole life together "till death do us part", which characterizes the romantic concept of love. Being together does not appear tempting to Kosinski's protagonists as nothing seems to be able to capture their attention for long. A quiet, monotonous life, which to many is the synonym of happiness, is the opposite from what they really want: diversity and change. Some internal urge prompts them to move on in search of the unfamiliar, new and uncommon. Value depends on the degree of difference from the usual, hence the interest in the marginal.

As the plot, which is an aspect of a character's unfolding or, from a reader's point of view, construction has no distinctive beginning or end, Kosinski's novels end inconclusively. The open form, in which the final destination of characters remains unstated, it draws attention to particular events and the aim becomes the journey itself. The characters' lives are made up of adventures and simply telling stories about them, however few conclusions they may engender. There is no need to explore the fictional reality which is the backdrop against which the plot and the characters reveal themselves in depth, no need to engage in local life, and no need to get to know other characters, as the protagonist's "being" is only temporary and he will never come back. Kosinski's fictional world seems to have no influence on the characters; the hero does not change, although he tries to gather as much experience as possible. Throughout the entire time he stays aloof, an indifferent observer unable to empathize with what he encounters.

On the one hand, the nomadic quality of the protagonists is analogous in character to other examples in American "road fiction", like

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<sup>37</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Dwa szkice o moralności ponowoczesnej* (Poznań: Instytut Kultury, 1993).

*Huckleberry Finn* (1885), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), or *The Catcher in the Rye* (1945), but the function seems to be somewhat different. Huck Finn, George, and Caulfield Holden mature in the process of amassing experience. They come to know better the world and themselves, and finally they realize what truly important in life is. In the course of the respective novels they are faced with important decisions which help shape their personality. Therefore, the literary journey has its equivalent in the characters' minds. Kosinski's characters, on the other hand, appear unable to benefit from the variety of experience offered them by the fictional world. This incapacity not only leaves the protagonists helpless in the presence of life, but also impairs their chances to be happy. As a result, they are emotionally and socially impotent, a quality which also seem to characterize post-modern society.

However detached a Kosinski character tries to stay, it is the society which conditions his self. Most of his vital energy is spent on the struggle between the demands made on him by the individual and the social aspects of human existence. The two poles demarcate the sphere of action within which the protagonist operates. The constant tension between the two extremes and the failure to find a balance characterizes a Kosinski hero. One may observe a twofold approach: individual freedom appears to be the most important in life, and any attempt to curtail it is understood as a direct threat towards his whole being.

Jerzy Kosinski once confessed, "[t]here is nothing I fear more than not being able to be myself."<sup>38</sup> The embodiment of the author's idea is Tarden who experienced life under a totalitarian system, where only the collective matters. His brave escape to the United States, the symbol of freedom and democracy, is a powerful statement against any oppressive regime. Yet, finding himself in a free country, Tarden cannot rid himself of his past habits. His distrust towards the state is manifested in many different ways: acquiring false identities to avoid being recognized, changing places, manipulating facts and people, being alert to any danger and staying in control, whatever it may involve. All other leading characters of Kosinski's novels are also careful not to engage themselves in any kind of social relationships. Having abandoned their own tradition, they willfully reject the possibility of adopting a new one.

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<sup>38</sup> Grunwald, "Tapping Into His Vision of Truth". Teicholz 106.

They cherish their freedom and independence even if it means solitude and loneliness.

The very same society, however, becomes an indispensable element in the protagonist's performance. He needs other people to manipulate, to act for or against, to serve as a common point of reference. Only through others can he show his skill and wit, in most cases doing harm to them or disregarding feelings and emotions other than his own. He interacts with others only if it is on his own terms; getting to know as much as he can about other characters, and allowing others to learn about himself as little as possible. Distrustful of personal contact, he tries to get to know the person's milieu and habits first. He wants to know where he lives, where he works, what he likes to eat, what clothes he likes to wear, his medical record, and contacts. In order to do so, the protagonist watches every move of the person, talks to the people who know him, reads his mail, and bugs his place of residence. The hero relies more on his own instinct and judgment, and generates his own opinion without actually talking to the object of his investigation, as if any direct conversation with another person would fail to reveal enough. Speech binds both the speaker and the person spoken to, so that to avoid being cheated by words, the protagonists refrain from unplanned personal contacts. Additional knowledge boosts the character's chances of success, and constant suspicion diminishes the risk of being caught by surprise. In this respect, Kosinski's fictional world is a close parallel to Kafka's dark and irrational universe. A man trapped in a world of dissolving meaning must take any measures to secure his well-being: hence the cool manipulation of others, at the core of which is the protagonist's excuse for being alive. Devoid of company, the hero would lose the means to explore and control the world, because he is unable to do so on his own.

The protagonist's freedom is expressed by the amount of control he is able to exercise over other characters. Tarden goes to see the doctor only after checking his credentials in a medical directory. He carries with himself all the medical data and diagnostic summaries required in case of emergency. He keeps his valuables in many different, easily accessible places, for example, in public lavatories. He uses the latest intelligence equipment to know what he is not supposed to know:

I opened your closets and checked the proportion  
of evening dresses to sports clothes, noting their

quality and condition. I examined your underwear and the heels and soles of your shoes. Then I flipped through some of the letters I found on your desk, read a few, and glanced over your checkbook, telephone and hotel bills and airline ticket receipts. In the bathroom, I surveyed your cosmetics and studied the vials of pills in your medicine cabinet. I wrote down the name of each doctor on the label, the prescription date and indicated dosage, then took a sample from every bottle.<sup>39</sup>

When found in a new place, he gathers information by talking to bartenders, shop-assistants, wardens, waitresses, hotel staff, asking a lot of questions while answering very few. During the preliminary hearing for the potential intelligence agents, he proves to be unusually calm and composed. On being told that the interview will not be held on that day, which means getting dressed and undressed for the third time, his fellow candidates "went on swearing and gesturing. Others, exhausted and listless, merely followed instructions and continued dressing. Still others began to nod with delayed comprehension."<sup>40</sup> By staying imperturbable, he achieved one of the highest scores in the examination and was gladly accepted. In another incident Tarden remembers how he used to roll an old bicycle wheel in front of him, guiding it with a stick.

"Walking through the city now, I am inspired by the same sense of vaulting. Whom shall I draw out of the anonymous crowd of faces surrounding me? I can enter their worlds unobserved and unchecked. Each person is a wheel to follow, and at any moment my manner, my language, my being, like the stick I used as a boy, will drive the wheel where I urge it to go."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 1.

<sup>40</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 60.

<sup>41</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 163.

His behavior is that of an experienced spy, as he reveals about himself only what he really wants to reveal. He is a decision maker who does not listen to other people's advice, who believes that he possess a godlike power to change and influence the lives of other people. For him being in control equals staying alive, because any disruption endangers his basic life principle.

One of the most characteristic features of Kosinski's protagonists is the phallogocentric discourse used in all novels. Except for the boy from *The Painted Bird*, all the leading characters are mature and experienced males. They are always physically fit, very sporty, handsome, wear no glasses or other visible signs of body weaknesses, dress in a fashionable way, drive a sports car, stay in the best hotels and dine in fashionable restaurants. Meeting important people, such as politicians, scientists or actors, they become important themselves. Undoubtedly a part of the jet set, they are characters of independent means, mostly freelance professionals who are not burdened by a nine-to-five job or an inquisitive boss. Kosinski explains why his characters are free from a need for money:

For those of my generation of like circumstances, life is not based on a cumulative notion, but rather a notion of condensing experiences and relating it to the present. Money is a common artifact and so can't be difficult to obtain. My message has always been: be creative. Extract enough freedom to work as you wish and from work extract enough money to be free.<sup>42</sup>

If they practice a sport, it will be polo or skiing; if they have a profession, it will be an intelligence agent or a photographer; if their parents are mentioned, they will be tycoons. Free to come and go as they please, they do not enter into lasting relationships and hence their family ties are nonexistent in their worlds. Without spouses or children, they are not faced with moral dilemmas, because obligation and responsibility acquire meaning solely in relation to themselves.

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<sup>42</sup> Tom Teicholz, "My Books Are Weapons, A Blind Date with Jerzy Kosinski". Teicholz 144.

This image of a perfect male without blemish is disturbed only in the case of Fabian, whose life, nevertheless, revolves around the pastime of the rich - polo. The hero of *Passion Play* can afford only a second-hand motor home, buys cheap ponies instead of thoroughbreds, and suffers from a shortage of money. Not only does he notice in himself the visible signs of aging, but is also subject to recurrent health problems:

At the wheel of his Van Home, Fabian tracked in the mirror above the dashboard - the mirror no longer ready to be bribed by vanity - the changes nature had worked in his face. With probing fingers, he worried the beady transparent eruptions around his nose and in the wrinkles of his forehead. Miniscule globules of fat, faintly visible threads of sallow grease jetted out from their wells, spiraling, reluctant to leave.<sup>43</sup>

But even then his craving for scrutiny evoked only one question: "What if now, because of time and loss, he might attract no one?"<sup>44</sup> Fabian seems to measure his own worth by the amount of allure he emanates. That is why he needs others to reflect and confirm his value. Once his attractiveness diminishes, he is afraid that he will lose grip on his life.

The protagonists' contacts with women are characterized by a typically macho sexual appetite. Women are treated as instrumentals mere-ly helping to define their masculine virility. Looking at Kosinski's female characters, which lack depth and introspection, one might repeat after Aristotle that "the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities." The apparent attempts to bridge the gap between the two sexes are futile and end in monologues rather than in meaningful dialogues in which the usual clichés of masculine and feminine stereotyping are brought into play. A conversation between Whalen and Karen clearly shows how distant they are from each other:

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<sup>43</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 13.

<sup>44</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 13.

I see her as someone who has been hurt in exactly the same way I have been hurt, but if I try to reach her on that level, she may think that I'm attempting to analyze her in order to smash her defenses. She would be wrong: I'm not playing analyst. Her distrust of others is much stronger than mine and I know how difficult it is to penetrate because I know the measure of my own distrust.<sup>45</sup>

Nor does an anonymous couple from *Steps* manage to get any closer:

But you want me for what I am, apart from you, don't you? I don't know you apart from myself. When I am alone, when you are not here, you are no longer real: then, it's only imagining again. Then, all you need me for is to provide a stage on which you can project and view yourself, and see how your discarded experiences become alive again when they affect me. Am I right? You don't want me to love you; all you want is for me to abandon myself to the dreams and fantasies which you inspire in me. All you want is to prolong this impulse, this moment.<sup>46</sup>

There is a constant play of questions and answers which seem to bounce against the well-shielded selves. In consequence, the characters are neither able to know each other nor to comprehend themselves more. Intimacy and sex, instead of bringing them together, is used as a weapon in the battle for dominance. The two lonely people circle each other in anticipation of a breakthrough which never comes.

In this patriarchal world which subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male, the abstract notion of "equality" does not exist:

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<sup>45</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *The Devil Tree* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974) 100.

<sup>46</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *Steps* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969) 133.



[h]e [the hero] is a misanthrope, who gleefully expects the worst of everyone, and like most misanthropes, he majors in misogyny. Kosinski's heroes move from one faceless woman to another without establishing (or looking for) either friendship or love. Only the women who are unfaithful, unobtainable, or deformed are fleshed out...<sup>47</sup>

If one is to accept Foucault's argument that what is "true" depends on who controls the discourse,<sup>48</sup> then it is logical to argue that men's domination of discourses has caught women inside a male "truth". Kosinski's novels are full of examples of a typically male discourse which reinforces stereotypes of strong and assertive men and feeble and passive women:

Within the week she became his mistress. He described her as devoted and ready to do anything for him: she had become his instrument, and if I was ready to possess her, he could arrange it. He added that he had already required of her that she submit one day to another man as proof of her love and loyalty to him.<sup>49</sup>

Widely recognized attributes of masculinity such as money, independence, physical strength and a fast car extend the protagonist's potency. Yet, the number of sexual partners and eventual failures at communication may suggest that the struggle to comprehend and harness sexuality is, nonetheless, a fiasco as Lavers contends:

Perhaps it is because in each relationship he insists on absolute control, and he does not claim his control by the power of his person, but rather uses either money or some other sort of lever,

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<sup>47</sup> Kosinski, *Steps* 100.

<sup>48</sup> Tadeusz Komendant, *Władze dyskursu. Michel Foucault w poszukiwaniu Siebie* (Warszawa: Fundacja Aletheia, 1994), 87.

<sup>49</sup> Xana Kaysen, "Kosinski: Rapist as Moralizer", *New Boston Review* (1978): 18, 22.

blackmail, or some sort of contractual arrangement that forces compliance with his will. He becomes, to the others, that totalitarian State which he could not endure to have over himself, and the women cannot endure it either.<sup>50</sup>

Game both as "sports game" and as "life game" serves as a metaphor of the protagonist's whole life. In *Passion Play* it is polo. "Fabian's polo - polo as Fabian played it - was the ground of his being in the world, the only uniqueness at his command."<sup>51</sup> But his game is somewhat different from other sports; it is without beginning or end, one is never sure about the results, high risks are involved, rules are unclear to the participants, there is no referee, and the victory is secured at all costs. The hero himself establishes the rules, and he acts as the ultimate judge, never accepting any complaints. Fabian's game is polo, "a sport of solitary valor and collective assault", and he is a real master at it. Although basically a team game, "for Fabian [it] was essentially a one-on-one contest between two players fighting for possession of the ball during any moment of the game."<sup>52</sup> That is why he has to restrain his individuality and remember the rest of the team. His distrust of team play dates back to his recollections of the collective strategy games in which an individual mattered very little. Not only did the team spirit diminish individual achievements, but it also diluted one's responsibility., Fabian, therefore, is prone to look for one-on-one duels in the short span of the play, rather than to rely on the team effort. However good the players are, "[t]he essence of competition, for him, lay not in the challenge offered by others but always in the challenge posed by oneself."<sup>53</sup> When he admits, "I don't deliberately hurt people. I like them. I play with them"<sup>54</sup>, he reveals how he understands human relations. He needs others to test his own strength and weaknesses, to probe how far he can go alone and still be accepted by the team. His contestants mirror his capabilities, and since

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<sup>50</sup> Lavers, Jerzy Kosinski 106.

<sup>51</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 35.

<sup>52</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 33.

<sup>53</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 37.

<sup>54</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 30.

he never loses the experience of the game reinforces his sense of dominance. As long as the characters look at one another as though they were constant rivals, there will never be any mutual understanding. Hence it is no wonder that under such circumstances all efforts to communicate end in failure.

Games, as a strategy by the means of which they can achieve their aims, are often used by other protagonists, too. In many of his books, Kosinski uses skiing which he explains as follows: "I think it is a natural activity. Skiing lends itself to my vision; that is, it is societal to a degree, and yet it is solitary and it is mute. It's a sport in which you usually don't talk or listen to anyone."<sup>55</sup> Tarden from *Cockpit* enjoys skiing because it gives him a feeling of freedom and vigor in the face of powerful nature. He also orders two military uniforms which "must not link [him] to any particular country or military branch, but they must create the impression that [he] is a high-ranking military official."<sup>56</sup> In this way he intends to prove that people generally believe what they see on the outside, without questioning the inside. In *The Devil Tree* Jonathan James Whalen, who looks like a tramp, lets the policemen believe that he has stolen the money. But after making an inquiry the policeman returns apologizing for the mistake:

I'm really sorry about this." He laughed nervously. "You know, there are a lot of creeps—that is, uh, a lot of strange-looking people—walking around these days..."<sup>57</sup>

In another incident, he comes back to his old family house at night, accompanied by a prostitute, and is mistaken for a burglar. Similarly, a telephone call clarifies his credentials and he is released.

Tarden's favorite "life game" seems to be manipulating other people. "I pick a life and enter it, unobserved: none of my pseudo-family members ever know how I gain access to their lives."<sup>58</sup> In order to do so, he forges documents, reads people's mail, copies business and

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<sup>55</sup> Griffin, "Conversation With Jerzy Kosinski". Teicholz 140.

<sup>56</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 144.

<sup>57</sup> Kosinski, *Devil Tree* 6.

<sup>58</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 163.

government stationery, and applies various methods of invigilation. "Many times I've worked my way into other lives through real estate firms, insurance or employment agencies, collection services, marketing research firms, publishing houses, newspaper or magazine offices." <sup>59</sup> It appears that he wants to probe into other people's lives and sort them out, because his own life is so utterly empty. By engaging in their problems, he wants to play God - the final arbiter. Maybe, because the control over other people gives him a feeling of control over his own life.

Kosinski also plays with language and meaning. As I have already indicated, the term "play" has at least three basic meanings:

a form of usually competitive play or sport with rules the result of which is determined by skill, strength, or chance, an amusement or an activity undertaken in a spirit of levity, a secret and clever plan, a trick. <sup>60</sup>

The game understood as sport implies a contest whose rules are clear and known to everyone. Competitors, in turn, act in accordance with the rules and observe fair play. The final result is determined by special ability in a task usually acquired by arduous training or chance. Participating in the game involves planning, tactic and developing a successful strategy. If, however, the legal means do not secure victory, a player may resort to a trick or foul play. "Game" means also "amusement," an activity which is a diversion from the ordinary, and which makes people happy. If one says "it is only a game", one is being light-hearted and carefree, and definitely does not treat it seriously. The game understood in terms of business implies risky enterprise and adventure, with high degree of gambling and speculation. Finally, there is the game in terms of hunting for sport, food or profit, where the competition between the hunter and its prey is the battle for life. All the above meanings of "game" have been employed by the Kosinski's heroes. It is interesting, though, how the commonly acknowledged, positive meaning of "game" is subverted in order to highlight its negative connotations: the lack of specified rules,

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<sup>59</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 167.

<sup>60</sup> A.S.Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 486.

cheating, injustice, deceit, trickery, and disguise. Kosinski's protagonists engage in games in which they set their own rules. They do not observe fair play because it is not the spirit of the game that matters to them but the victory at all costs.

In Kosinski's fictional world its components are not arranged logically and comprehensibly, and one might as well give up the idea of looking for natural harmony there. What emerges from the mosaic of disjointed narrative is a world where chance is the driving force. Series of unrelated events are intersected by blind coincidence which respects neither time nor space. Tarden accidentally finds a defected agent whom he is supposed to eliminate because a local photographer displays the agent's picture in the shop window. Discussing the release of a naturalized American citizen, who was arrested during an unscheduled stop in his native country, he threatens the ambassador: "[b]y the strangest coincidence, I have become familiar with the unusual terms by which Your Excellency acquired ..." <sup>61</sup> a custom-made sports car parked outside. Needless to say, the detained man soon returns home. Levanter miraculously escapes death because his luggage is misdirected at the airport. Otherwise, he would have shared the fate of Sharon and her guests who were murdered by the Mason gang. When Fabian decides to have a haircut, he stops the car by the first barbershop he sees. It seems that:

Kosinski has an idea about the world that he is eager to communicate. He believes that life is a series of encounters with a vicious but disinterested "fate" or "chance" and that each encounter offers a man (never a woman) the opportunity to take control of events. This idea of control includes a violent, manipulative drive for power... The message appears to be that by emulating fate, that is to say, amorality, one becomes a real man . . . <sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 175.

<sup>62</sup> Kaysen, *Rapist* 19.

The lack of continuity and congruity in Kosinski's fictional world is also emphasized by the author's use of secondary characters and events which are referred to only once, and the narrator never comes back to them. As a result, they cannot be fully developed because the limited space allotted enables one to follow them only for a short period of time. The reader never gains access to their inner thoughts; what is available though, is to observe them from a distance. Xana Kaysen argues that:

The clichéd phrases and the narrative technique of eliminating motivation and sequence seem [to me] to be stylistic efforts to keep the reader worrying about what will happen next and to deflect any possible concern for why things happen, or for what anyone thinks about what happens.<sup>63</sup>

The protagonists are defined solely by their performance. Samuel Coale argues that:

The self or 'hero' in Kosinski's novels has been stripped completely of the identifiable dimensions of the fictional anti-hero; one cannot easily grasp the shape of these men, for they tend to exist only in their separate actions, either in their public events or in their private fantasies. They are formed only by the formlessness of the events and actions themselves that seem to imprison them totally. This 'cinematic self,' essentially different from the well-rounded, literary characters of earlier fiction, reveals the main feature of Kosinski's art.<sup>64</sup>

What is characteristic of Kosinski's fictional mode is the clarity of expression. In an interview with Brandon Tartikoff Kosinski comments upon his own style:

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<sup>63</sup> Kaysen, *Rapist* 18.

<sup>64</sup> Samuel Coale, "The Cinematic Self of Jerzy Kosinski", *Modern Fiction Studies* 3.4 (1974): 360.

The guiding principle of my fiction is one of reducing human reality to what I consider its most immediate dimensions. [...] In my writing I note the same tendency to develop more and more the contrast, and to remove the tones in between. Perhaps my removing the gray in the photographs could be compared to my sustained pruning of adjectives and adverbs, and my great belief in the verb, as the most involving, the propellant prose-element of writing.<sup>65</sup>

Even the most passionate moments are written in a simple and direct way; implications are eliminated. His style is minimalist, ascetic and unemotional. Kosinski argues: "For me to evoke more means to describe as little as possible. Trust the power of words. Trust the collective imagination."<sup>66</sup> One might argue that the flatness of his tone may be interpreted as the symbolic flatness of the modern world. Whether it is the influence of the author's second language, or a deliberate stylistic device, it has become a distinctive feature of Kosinski's prose.

A fragmented plot which is represented by a number of loosely connected vignettes enhances the characters' randomness and discontinuity. The beginnings of passages already imply their haphazard order: "Soon after arriving in America"<sup>67</sup>, "One evening"<sup>68</sup>, "Days later"<sup>69</sup>, "One morning"<sup>70</sup>, "One afternoon"<sup>71</sup>, "Once"<sup>72</sup>, "One day"<sup>73</sup>, "At another time"<sup>74</sup>, "Often"<sup>75</sup>, "About a year later"<sup>76</sup>, "In Tunisia"<sup>77</sup>, "Whenever"<sup>78</sup>,

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<sup>65</sup> Brandon Tartikoff, "Jerzy Kosinski". Teicholz 11.

<sup>66</sup> Klinkowitz, "Jerzy Kosinski: An Interview". Teicholz 49.

<sup>67</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 42.

<sup>68</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 7.

<sup>69</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 10.

<sup>70</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 20.

<sup>71</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 46.

<sup>72</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 55.

<sup>73</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 66.

<sup>74</sup> Kosinski, *Blind Date* 153.

<sup>75</sup> Kosinski, *Blind Date* 70.

"I remember"<sup>79</sup>, "At first"<sup>80</sup>, "In his travels"<sup>81</sup>, "Later in life"<sup>82</sup>, "In the late autumn"<sup>83</sup>, "There were times"<sup>84</sup>, "Sometimes"<sup>85</sup>, "A few years later"<sup>86</sup>. In an interview to Gail Sheehy, Kosinski explains:

An incident is simply a moment of life's drama of which we are aware as it takes place. This awareness and the intensity of it decides, in my view, whether our life is nothing but a barely perceived existence, or meaningful living. To intensify life, one must not only recognize each moment as an incident full of drama, but, above all, oneself as its chief protagonist. To bypass the moment, to dilute it in the gray everydayness, is to waste the most precious ingredients of living: the awareness of being alive.<sup>87</sup>

Each episode tells a story of its own, and each demands the reader's utmost attention. Such an accumulation of short events makes it hard to decide what is really important and what is insignificant. Episode after episode, the characters and events move quickly like in a kaleidoscope. The reader is confronted by one story after another, and, as many of them are unrelated to one another, it is difficult to make sense of the whole. It seems that the author intends to disrupt the process of reading, thus allowing the reader to pay attention to details. Lack of continuity

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<sup>76</sup> Kosinski, *Blind Date* 101.

<sup>77</sup> Kosinski, *Blind Date* 150.

<sup>78</sup> Kosinski, *The Devil Tree* 58.

<sup>79</sup> Kosinski, *The Devil Tree* 27.

<sup>80</sup> Kosinski, *The Devil Tree* 19.

<sup>81</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 5.

<sup>82</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 150.

<sup>83</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 254.

<sup>84</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 222.

<sup>85</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 221.

<sup>86</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 192.

<sup>87</sup> Gail Sheehy, "The Psychological Novelist as Portable Man". Critical Essays on Jerzy Kosinski. Ed. Barbara Tapa Lupac. (New York: G.K.Hall & Co., 1988) 121.



and the deliberate focusing on a particular, unique scene emphasizes the given moment. Action, and life, is taking place here and now. One might argue that the intention is to present a fictional story not as a purposely organized series of events, but rather as a compilation of ephemeral incidents all of which claim the right to its own importance.

A conventional plot carries a degree of prediction and consequence, makes the reader feel secure and in command of the text. In Kosinski's case, the intention is to attract the reader's attention to a particular moment, which:

seduces us away from looking at the incident before our eyes at the present moment, which is where our actual life takes place. Though coincidence, oddly, creates something like a plot in *Blind Date*, it is a plot of blind chance, of "blind dates", and so once more reminds us that the future is out of our hands, that only the present exists as an arena for our exertions.<sup>88</sup>

Jacques Monod, who is a more trustworthy character because he is a renowned scientist, expresses similar concerns about his friend Romarkin :

Romarkin doesn't dare to admit that blind chance and nothing else is responsible for each random event of his life. Instead, he is searching for a religion that, like Marxism, will assure him that man's destiny is spelled out in the central plot of life. Meanwhile, believing in the existence of an orderly, predetermined life scheme, Romarkin bypasses the drama of each unique instance of his own existence. Yet, to accept a notion of destiny, he might as well believe in astrology, or palm reading, or pulp novels, all of each pretend that

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<sup>88</sup> Tarikoff, "Jerzy Kosinski". Teicholz 125.

one's future is already set and needs only to be lived out.<sup>89</sup>

William Kennedy observed that only Fabian, an aging loner, seems to exhibit a somewhat different idea of the role of chance in life.

What seems new [in *Passion Play*] is Kosinski's interest in unmanipulable life, life in which the protagonist is neither victim nor hero but a spiritual substance subject to forces that can neither be challenged directly nor can be more than barely understood. Kosinski has always believed in chance as an overwhelming element in human conduct, but his heroes have either resisted it, outmaneuvered it, or taken revenge against its messengers. It is the placement of the hero in a condition where the enemy is vaporous, indefinable, that gives Kosinski a new direction.<sup>90</sup>

Kosinski's protagonists inhabit a world of spiritual wasteland in which all standards are dead. John Aldridge argues, that:

[Kosinski's] vision is primarily philosophical. He is interested not in making a satirical indictment of modern society - although satire is an abrasive secondary feature of his point of view - nor in attempting to explore, in the French manner, the various possible ways of dramatizing individual consciousness. He is concerned rather with understanding the nature and meaning of the human condition, the relation quite simply of human values to the terms of existence in an

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<sup>89</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 182.

<sup>90</sup> William Kennedy, "Kosinski's Hero Rides On". Book World-The Washington Post, September 16 (1979): 11.

essentially amoral and surely anarchistic universe.<sup>91</sup>

Kosinski puts it clearly in a conversation with Lisa Grunwald:

The negative protagonist, the accident, the disaster, the illness, the menacing characters are far more important to make us perceive ourselves as we are than the very opposite. My books should make readers euphoric that, one, they are different perhaps from my protagonists; two, that they have met my protagonist only on a printed page, thank God; three, that if one day they meet someone like my protagonist they should welcome it, then avoid it.<sup>92</sup>

The critical voices I have quoted attempt to clarify the relationship between fictional reality and Kosinski's protagonists who fail to understand the forces which shape their lives, but at the same time, they easily adapt themselves to life without any moral standards. In a world which offers neither God nor redemption but mocks humanity, protagonists come to the realization that each man creates his own morality, and whatever actions he performs, within that reality are justified because he is the source of his own system of values and principles. The heroes see nothing wrong in inflicting pain and sorrow because suffering is universal and its presence no longer raises questions. Omnipresent evil blunts emotional sensitiveness and Kosinski's characters display an indifferent acceptance of whatever chance brings. One can only have one aim in this world, namely to survive, and the protagonists resort to any means to achieve it, for instance, "adjusting [themselves] to reality by denying [their] civilized self and [their] moral judgment"<sup>93</sup> As long as survival, in body not in spirit, depends on lies and play-acting, truth does not exist. Even though the characters behave

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<sup>91</sup> John W. Aldridge, "The Fabrication of a Culture Hero", *Saturday Review* April 24 (1971): 25.

<sup>92</sup> Grunwald, "Jerzy Kosinski: Tapping Into His Vision of Truth". Teicholz 108.

<sup>93</sup> Prendowska, *Jerzy Kosinski* 22.

like agents of some higher order, they place themselves outside the commonly accepted definition of the law.

The discourse of revenge is constant in Kosinski's writings. Characters commit acts of revenge without showing any feelings. Whoever is the persecutor now, may well be the victim soon, as the methods are identical: both are equally cruel and merciless. There appear to be three main strategies to deal with the problem of revenge. Firstly, the protagonist takes up the impersonal role of the self-appointed reformer of an unjust world, a kind of

'scourge of God.' Like in the case of Levanter who killed a hotel clerk, an agent of an Eastern European country who is guilty of eavesdropping for evidence of disloyalty from the hotel guests who happen to come from the same country. Having committed the crime, Levanter assures himself that it '...was impersonal revenge, as simple as the verdict of a military tribunal.'<sup>94</sup>

The social rhetoric helps to justify the brutal and merciless action and alleviates the burden of individual responsibility. It creates a feeling of belonging, of being part of a group, of acting on behalf of a much greater force. Thus, revenge becomes one's personal duty towards one's own community where any act of violence against its member is understood as a direct threat towards the whole group. Then, an act of revenge acquires a different meaning and becomes an act of justice. Secondly, the protagonist seeks revenge on a personal level. The victims either wronged him in some way, or resisted being controlled and dominated by him. The philosophy of personal revenge is best put forward by Mitka, a Soviet Army officer:

a man should never let himself be mistreated, for he would then lose his self-respect and his life would become meaningless. What would preserve his self-respect and determine his worth was his ability to take revenge on those who

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<sup>94</sup> Kosinski, *Blind Date* 184.

wronged him. A person should take revenge for every wrong or humiliation. There were far too many injustices in the world to have them all weighed and judged. A man should consider every wrong he had suffered and decide on the appropriate revenge. Only the conviction that one was so strong as the enemy and that one could pay him back double, enabled people to survive, Mitka said. A man should take revenge according to his own nature and the means at his disposal. [...] The revenge should be appropriate to all the pain, bitterness, and humiliation felt as a result of an opponent's action.<sup>95</sup>

And thirdly, the very act is forgotten once it is committed. The protagonist never tries to rationalize it or deliberates on its consequences. The event is immediately expelled from his memory: "he was already feeling it was something he had done long ago", "what had taken place there had already receded into a remote corner of his memory. It was nothing but an old Polaroid snapshot; no negative, photographer unknown, camera thrown away."<sup>96</sup> Selective memory turns out to be a very good defensive mechanism which precludes any attempts at retrospection. Kosinski's characters are masters of manipulation and adopting a new persona enables them to slip out of the past and start anew. If they choose to ignore the past, they are compelled to look forward into the future for the absent meaning. Hence, the constant pursuit of new experiences and extreme emotions which, nonetheless, fail to satisfy the lack of inner peace and stability. If they decide to remember the past, and it is usually the character's own past, then the past is used to justify the revenge. "The veil of civilization is too thin, and the victim and victimizer can change places, showing how vulnerable a human is and what a terribly heavy burden one's humanity is."<sup>97</sup> Revenge serves as a de-

<sup>95</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *The Painted Bird* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972) 194.

<sup>96</sup> Kosinski, *Blind Date* 185.

<sup>97</sup> Yuri V. Stulov, "Jerzy Kosinski's World". Jerzy Kosinski. Man and work at the crossroads of cultures. Ed. Agnieszka Salska and Marek Jedliński. (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1997) 101.

fensive strategy in a world devoid of humanness: the heroes inflict pain preventively so as to avoid being abused by somebody else. This safeguarding presupposes evil intentions which are inherent in Kosinski's protagonists, and his fictional world proves how illusory the advancement of human civilization actually is.

Prendowska argues that:

[t]he purpose of the literature of evil has always been, if not inverted morality, at least utmost honesty. 'A little of 'confessed' evil saves one from acknowledging a lot of hidden evil,' says Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*. Celine, Gide and Genet were all tireless in presenting all truths—they did not stop at any truth. But they did not omit the torment of evil, the anguish of the sinner's excommunication. The Kosinski of the latest books offers a series of profane snapshots, told in a skimpy, conniving style, and supplying information typical of police and psychiatric files. His intense interest in violence is not accompanied by suffering, that poetry of violence.<sup>98</sup>

To Kosinski evil serves a different, a more noble, purpose especially in regard to his readers: "I feel that putting an individual on a constant moral and emotional alert has a positive effect in that it heightens the sense of life, the appreciation of its every moment, the sheer miracle of existence in a basically hostile environment."<sup>99</sup> Thus, a threat coming from the pages of his books may in fact help a reader to deal more easily with the risks of his own life. By creating a stark contrast to an immediate reader's reality, Kosinski's novels highlight the true value of human life, which may easily be forgotten among the boredom and dullness of everyday life. Yet, what seems to be lacking in this gloomy vision is an insight into the character's mind. Otherwise, the accumulation of violent and brutal scenes, which at first surprise and

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<sup>98</sup> Prendowska, *Jerzy Kosinski* 23.

<sup>99</sup> Sheehy, "The Psychological Novelist as Portable Man". *Tepa Lupac* 122.

bewilder the reader, loses its impact, as nothing important seems to be coming out of it. Brutality which is presented for its own sake fails to engage the reader's mind for longer. Since Kosinski's characters do not offer any plausible explanation as to their motives and arguments, the reader gets lost in the maze of shocking images and his confusion finds no explicable resolution.

In this one-dimensional reality the characters do not suffer from qualms of conscience, doubts or second thoughts. In a morally permissive world, it is impossible to recapture a moral balance, as it never existed there. The reader looks in vain for a catharsis, some kind of justification or explanation: no moral Phoenix rises from the emotional ashes. Characters' emptiness signifies the moral descent of the protagonists, and also portrays the failure of the whole society:

[w]hat is omitted in the novels means as much as what is chosen, and, beyond that, there are no "unloaded" choices. Kosinski's pretense that he has dispensed with an outlook on his characters only means that he doesn't object to them. He has refrained from "injecting the moral" - because the moral is there, clear as day. These books are not unbiased reports from an eyewitness in Hell; they are propaganda for one of mankind's most disreputable ideas: might is right. Kosinski has modified this slightly into: might is right when used for Our Cause, and is a moral outrage which must be punished when used by Them. The trouble with this, as everybody knows, is that using Their methods tends to blur whatever differences there may have been between Us and Them.<sup>100</sup>

What Kosinski is trying to disclose in his first nonfiction sociological novels *No Third Path* and *Future Is Ours, Comrade*, i.e. collectivized life under the Soviet regime, is echoed in the above quotation. Those who support the regime, and those in opposition

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<sup>100</sup> Kaysen, *Rapist* 22.

constitute a familiar binary opposition: the individual versus society, private versus public, freedom versus constraints, participant versus observer, Me versus Them. The tension between the two poles is the driving of Kosinski's fiction. Since the golden mean does not exist, the protagonist constantly mediates in-between, finding the only meaning in constant searching.

The protagonists wander through a landscape of solitude, passing others, and never really committing themselves. Loneliness seems to be inscribed in Kosinski's fictional world. The modern instruments of civilization fail to secure human happiness. Power and money provide partial independence, but prove useless when it comes to self-discovery. The recurrent motif of nature which appears in the final scenes of all the novels discussed is an important clue. Chance leaves the dancing crowd and goes out into the garden where he finally finds peace in his heart, Fabian galloping along the runway is a symbol of unrestrained freedom and unity between a man and an animal. Other endings offer the repeated image of water: Tarden recalls an old army tank left in the shallow lagoon "steadily washed over by the waves; its corroded gun defiantly trains on trenches and machine-gun nests, long buried in the sands of a deserted beach,"<sup>101</sup> Whalen suffering from insomnia:

rose, left the clinic and walked directly to the shore of the lake. A sheet of mist rolled along the water, hiding all but the banks from the view. The smell of moss spread through the air. He sniffed the dew, listened to the lapping of the water against the stones and felt the skin on the back of his neck prickle,<sup>102</sup>

a female character from the *Steps*:

undressed, entered the ocean, and started swimming. She felt the movement of her body and the chill of water. A small rotten brown leaf brushed against her lips. Taking a deep breath,

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<sup>101</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 273.

<sup>102</sup> Kosinski, *Devil Tree* 211.



she dove beneath the surface. On the bottom a shadow glided over the seaweed, lending life and motion to the ocean floor. She looked up through the water to find its source and caught sight of the tiny leaf that had touched her before,<sup>103</sup>

Levanter watches a boy playing on the beach: "[I]like a fencer frozen in a pass, he let the next wave swell on the sand toward him, and then the next. The waves deposited their foam on the steamy sand, one after another, one after another, and the boy, his back to Levanter, watched them mindlessly."<sup>104</sup>

Nature, embodied by the images of water, a garden, a tiny leaf or the unity between a rider and a horse, offers what is missing in a man-made environment. It reminds one of the existence of such forces in human beings which cannot be harnessed. Measureless waters promise unrestrained freedom in which the only challenge is one's own weakness. A galloping horseman racing the wind or a boy cutting at a wave with an invisible sword, stand for a man's fight with the immaterial enemy of his own fate. Flowing water symbolizes the passing of time, inevitable change which reminds one that nothing lasts forever. The lapping waves bring to mind the human cycle of life and death in an unbroken sequence. By performing his ablutions, a man may purify both his body and his soul, and when this does not help, he may sink into the waters of oblivion. In the jungle of human suffering and misery, nature offers a moment of peace and comfort. That is why contact with nature, not with other human beings, brings a man closer to the mystery which he pursues throughout his life. Even if other characters, through various interactions, help to define one's own self, it is direct contact with nature, solitude face to face with the ultimate power, through which self-discovery may ultimately be accomplished.

My discussion, I believe, has demonstrated a complex yet recognizable structure which may be called a "Kosinski hero." Although the protagonists of Kosinski's major novels: Levanter, Tarden, Jonathan

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<sup>103</sup> Kosinski, *Steps* 148.

<sup>104</sup> Kosinski, *Blind Date* 269.

James Whalen, and Fabian differ in age and appearance, come from various social backgrounds and live at different times, they share a number of characteristic features which can still be recognized. As a social and political being, a "Kosinski hero" is an outsider who places himself outside any political and social system. Even though he is critical of officialdom, he does not want to reform or improve the system but persistently aims at its destruction. Yet, his rebel against any form of totalitarian regime brings in its wake his distrust towards organized forms of human activity. That is why he is no longer able to function in a society without disguise, cheating, and trickery. His insatiable craving for power and authority, which observes no limits of any nature, propels him to commit most horrid crimes against other characters. As a self-appointed reformer of an unjust world, he often resorts to revenge as a means of exerting power on others. He is a detached observer who rarely takes sides unless it is his personal revenge or broadly understood idea of the "right cause", where the definition of the word "right" depends entirely on him.

A "Kosinski hero" is a loner for whom individual freedom is the ultimate value. In contacts with other, especially female, characters, he exhibits all the features of a stereotypical macho who achieves his dominance by employing human sexuality as a means to subdue others. His unrestrained sexual desire and the pursuit of self satisfaction are the only criteria of his actions. What is more, he deliberately crosses generally accepted norms of social behavior questioning and undermining their validity. Other characters serve as mirrors in which his powers may be reflected and confirmed, or they are used to achieve his goals. In Kosinski's fiction his protagonists enjoy undisputed power and authority and, as they also demonstrate the lack of retrospection, no moral or ethical qualms may endanger their inner equilibrium.

I have argued that a "Kosinski hero" falls into the category of post-modern fictional characters. Life for him is a series of loosely connected episodes in which chance has become the only driving force. There is no need to draw conclusions from the past actions because nothing is predictable. That is why a Kosinski protagonist never dwells on the past or tries to forecast the future, instead he concentrates on the given moment in life: here and now. The belief in contingent existence and the ease with which the protagonist adapts himself to the changing circumstances evoke the post-structural view which holds that there is no

fundamental "truth" in the universe. The lack of stability in life, on the one hand, makes the protagonists better suited to a life in a post-modern society as he is able to react quickly to the demands of the transforming reality. But on the other hand, constant movement and change prevent him from securing his own place in a society. Therefore a "Kosinski hero" is a nomad who belongs nowhere except to himself.

## CHAPTER II:

# The Place of Sexuality in Kosinski's Human World

One of the characteristic features of Jerzy Kosinski's fictions is the abundance of obscene images. An average reader is struck by realistic descriptions of pain inflicted on a loved person, explicit scenes of lovemaking or sado-masochistic exploits. Kosinski's protagonists employ sex to their own obscure ends, very often depriving it of positive connotations. The kind of sex that readers encounter in his novels is brutal, brings pain and humiliation and is rarely associated with love. Male characters attempt to master the female by any available means: force, indifference, egotism, and possessiveness. The characters involved in lovemaking draw neither pleasure nor joy, as very often they did not choose to participate in the act. The images of men and women in Kosinski's novels answer to the description of conventional fantasies of sexual and social domination.

There are also numerous examples of love-making scenes which leave little to the imagination and are full of passion and tenderness. "Being together" is presented as a unique experience available only to human beings. Entirely disengaged from procreation, sex is a means of self-discovery, a key which, when used properly, opens the deeper layers of the self. Two opposing views: one regarding sex as the force which limits self-discovery, and the other one seeing it as expanding self-cognition are both at work in Kosinski's novels. This complexity, or paradox, is my main concern in this chapter: I want to find out whether

textual analysis would give prominence to either of the contradicting views.

Whether we are following Fabian, Tarden, Whalen or Levanter we are sure to partake in their private lives in which sexuality plays a very important role. Their minds seem to be occupied by the need to satisfy a variety of their sexual needs which appear to be as basic as sleeping and eating. As people cannot do without sleep and food for extended periods of time, likewise engaging in sex is an opportunity "[to] be wanted, rather than remembered. To have a fresh emotion, a sensation that isn't just a ricocheted memory. To be part of that spontaneous magic."<sup>1</sup> To Kosinski's protagonists sexual experience is especially valuable by virtue of being instantaneous, not foreseeable and sudden. This is not a kind of sex which is typical for married couples or longer and stable relationships; quite the opposite, it is an unexpected moment of lust which finds its realization in a brief sexual act. A protagonist feels no need for continuation, nor is he willing to take his partner's feelings into account. In this way sexuality enables him to focus on his particular and unique needs, and enjoy a carefree moment of happiness.

As a marketing device, sex has always sold well, attracting attention either by exciting potential readers in the simplest physical way, or arousing strong disapproval. Porno novels put sexuality in the limelight as a strategy to respond to the cheap demands of mass culture. So do, in part, Kosinski's novels, which like any other products must compete on the market. The marketing strategy<sup>2</sup> which Kosinski employed he himself called a sex supermarket:

Popular culture uses these images as shock treatment in a desperate attempt to wake up its audience, which has been made sexually neutralized - or should I say neutered? by overexposure to a blunt diet of television. The

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<sup>1</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *Blind Date* (New York: Bantam Books, 1978) 260.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Kasperski, *Pop i pornopowieści Jerzego Kosińskiego* (Warszawa: DiG, 1996) 175.

preoccupation with S&M is nothing but a short-lived scream for attention.<sup>3</sup>

Although Kosinski claims, that "in matters of sex I trail way behind television and contemporary magazines, [...] as a novelist, I haven't been part of our sexual avant-garde,"<sup>4</sup> his treatment of sex is considered to be unusually explicit by the majority of readers. Considering that the literary success can also be measured by the number of volumes sold, a large dose of sexual imagery awakes public interest and also provokes the reader's response, whatever it may be, which is exactly what its aim is.

Whenever the protagonists are engaged in some sexual exploits, they disregard the emotional part of the experience, concentrating on what they are going to gain through sex. A sexual act does not only serve as the fulfillment of a physical kind, but becomes the means of obtaining further knowledge, whether of oneself or of fellow beings. In this way, the reader is tempted to look at sex as merely another kind of experience available to human kind, without demonizing or undermining its importance. Yet, the very nature of this experience places it immediately in the cultural, ethical, moral and religious contexts, thus making the readers' response more problematic. Therefore, any discussion where human sexuality is concerned immediately involves the whole range of attitudes and perspectives without which, on the one hand, the analysis would not be complete, but which, on the other hand, obscures the final arguments.

Kosinski himself admits that sexuality plays a very important role in his imagery:

Sex was something important for my generation namely because it was regarded as the only peaceful and uniting life force in the society, contrary to ideology which separates people. Sex was God's gift, instinct blessed by the divine. Nowadays, I am not interested in anything else as much as in people's sexuality because the conclusions which I can draw are very reliable.

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Leaming, "Penthouse Interview". Conversations with Jerzy Kosinski. Ed. Tom Teicholz. (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi 1993) 200.

<sup>4</sup> Leaming, Barbara. "Penthouse Interview". Teicholz 200.

The thing is that we are truly ourselves in the sexual act.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of whether sex unites or divides the protagonists, an observant critic cannot fail to discover its significance in Kosinski's novels. A closer look at the problem may reveal the meaningfulness and the consequences of its presence. The importance of sex drive is probably best explained by Fabian who:

speculated that if nature had given humans, in proportion to their size, the largest and most developed organs of sex, it had done so because, of all mammals, only they could keep themselves in a state of perpetual heat. Sexuality thus became the most human of instincts. Life gave humans the fullness of time, to think and to do, to lust and to act.<sup>6</sup>

A similar view was shared by Witkacy who claimed that "eroticism is a constant, hidden foundation of all experience [...] on the basis of which all other concepts of the soul arise in the form of transformation and sublimation of the primary self-addressing individual and his higher will to affirm the very fact of his own being."<sup>7</sup>

A review of the Kosinski's novels shows a recurrence of sexually explicit scenes. Yet, in an interview with Mike Leiderman Kosinski maintains that there is not enough sex in his novels "[b]ecause it is a force of life. I don't know of any other. You wouldn't be here without it. I wouldn't. Sex for me, it's an instinct of life. It's pro-creation."<sup>8</sup> The amount of space allocated to the descriptions of lovemaking suggests the importance of that sphere of life for the protagonists. Tarden strikes a longer relationship with Valerie, Theodora and Veronica, and all the three cases are marked by violence, pain and brutality. In the meantime

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<sup>5</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *Passing By* (New York: Random House, 1992) 66.

<sup>6</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *Passion Play* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980) 8.

<sup>7</sup> S.I. Witkiewicz, *Niemyte Dusze* in Rafał Dziurla, Jarosław Groth, eds., *Pisarz i psychoanalitik* (Poznań: Wyd. Fund. Humaniora, 1999) 183.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Leiderman. "Encounter - Jerzy Kosinski". Conversations with Jerzy Kosinski. Ed. Tom Teicholz. Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1993. 217.

he encounters a number of prostitutes, tries group sex, bets a horseshoe juggler and wants his daughter as a prize, invites a lesbian couple to his residence, abuses a newlywed wife, visits sex shops and peepshows, and takes photographs of nude prostitutes. Jonathan James Whalen continues a rough relationship with Karen. He does not hesitate to let her experience sex with two persons but at least he tries to acknowledge their relationship.

An attempt to stay together involves not only answering the question "Who am I?" but also "Who are we?" For Whalen, sexual experience leads directly to self-discovery without which one cannot unite with another human being. Fabian is infatuated with youthful Vanessa, seduces or is seduced by Alexandra, discovers the secret of a white Negress Stella, takes interest in transsexual love with Diana and Manuela, and has a brief affair with a girl who later commits suicide as a protest against his abandoning her. Levanter brutally rapes a girl-scout, meets a prostitute Serena, spends a night with the seductive Jolene, visits a public bath and meets a transvestite Foxy Lady.

The overview provided above shows the variety and intensity of the sexual experience in Kosinski's novels. Neither of the male heroes-narrators is faithful to one woman, nor are any of them married. The deliberate omission of marital vows allows sexual promiscuity. Each character samples the pleasures of sexual diversity and dissimilarity not finding what he is looking for, otherwise he would have stopped doing so. Kosinski's protagonists have a large number of sexual partners, many of whom are prostitutes. This sexual quest seems to have no happy ending and the reader may finally doubt if this experience has actually proved worthwhile. Stretching and probing sexual limits may become a tedious task, with no guarantee of success at the end. A closer look at the characters' motives will show to what extent they were right in taking such a path.

Among the critical approaches to sexuality there is one which claims that a text aims directly at stimulating physical sexuality as opposed to intellectual activity. Numerous love scenes are usually very detailed and elaborate, leaving little to imagination. What might have only been hinted at is explicitly presented, as if the narrator drew pleasure from the very theme itself. Suggestive imagery and the rich and expressive vocabulary of such a passage directly appeal to the reader's senses and offer instantaneous excitement, disregarding the rest of the



plot. The reader allows himself to be carried away by the flow of the narration and all other aspects of the scene are pushed into the background. When Levanter is making love to Jolene whom he has just met at a hotel:

He pinned her down, wedging his legs between hers, spreading her wide apart. [...] To make certain she was pinioned, he first trailed his other hand idly over her body, then cupped and pulled at her flesh until she squirmed. He sank into her suddenly. She strained and twisted, but he rammed into her, battering her with all his weight, smacking her loins, each butt tearing the tender tissues of her flesh, pounding her back against the floor. She began to scream ...<sup>9</sup>

What Levanter did not know was that Jolene was just taking revenge on her husband and his family, all very rich and respected in the area. The woman, feeling abandoned and rejected, used her charm and, probably the only thing left to herself, her sexuality, to humiliate her husband. Since her husband's family controlled her life, sex was the only thing she could still make a decision about. The lovemaking scene is not preceded by any explanation or justification; what drives the two characters is just pure lust. Only later does the reader learn more about Jolene and only then is one able to try to understand her behavior in one way or another. Their lovemaking is purely a physical experience which has no bearing either on her or his life. Soon Levanter is advised to leave town and never come back again, which he gladly does. Needless to say, he never comes back to this episode, which is one of many of the similar kind.

When Fabian takes Vanessa to a sex club "Dream Exchange" they watch the guests:

He led her past bodies glistening with sweat on couches, bodies stretched on mattresses or pillows banked against the walls, bodies kneeling

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<sup>9</sup> Kosinski, *Blind Date* 122.

or curving beside each other, bending, moving above or beneath one another, sliding from kiss to embrace, lips to groin a damp circuit of voyage and return in the misty air.<sup>10</sup>

The couple successively visit all the rooms and peep at the guests engaged in all sorts of activities. This purely descriptive passage which contains words referring to human senses renders very well the stuffy, hazy and dim atmosphere of such places. The milieu of a sex club, carrying with itself the air of the forbidden fruit and waking up basic instincts, makes the passage even more fascinating and provoking. The characters' anxiety lasts as long as there is a stimulus, in this case the sex club's atmosphere. Once they leave the place, they quickly forget the whole experience.

Brian McNair argues the importance of individual experience in relation to sexually explicit scenes. He calls it ethnographic approach and explains that it "seeks to analyze the meaning and significance of sexually explicit images by reference to the personal experiences of those involved in producing, distributing or consuming them."<sup>11</sup> By the amount of time allocated to sexuality, Kosinski's protagonists undoubtedly hold this sphere of life in high esteem. Yet, the quantity does not necessarily ensure quality. The fictional world of Tarden, Whalen, Fabian, Levanter, Domostroy is inhabited mostly by prostitutes of all ages (Serena, Red Whore, Veronica), porno-stars (Donna's boyfriend), transvestites (Foxy Lady), lesbians (Alex and Linda), porno-magazines, photographs, scenes of rape (a girl-guide, Veronica), group sex (Valerie), sado-masochistic images, all that is disturbing and bizarre in human psychology and behavior. Kosinski presents a style of life which would hardly be called conventional but which, nonetheless, constitutes a part of the spectrum of human activities.

The solitary heroes seem to be living a life denied to ordinary people; they never hold an ordinary job, are usually rich, independent and enjoy unfettered freedom. They are also characterized by solitude which

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<sup>10</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 233.

<sup>11</sup> Brian McNair, *Mediated Sex. Pornography and Postmodern Culture* (London: Arnold, 1996) 5.

is connected to life in a big and modern city; a life devoid of long-lasting human relations, full of lonely individuals desperately looking for their match. Fabian remarks:

Nature opened between men the chasm of forest and river, but a city offered that solitude which was not only freedom but refuge. To Fabian, a city was always a place of deliverance. Here, in this enclosure of touch, of sidewalks, subways, buses, theatres, hospitals, morgues, cemeteries, where flesh was always only feet away from flesh, all streets led to his psychic home. The city was the habitat of sex.<sup>12</sup>

Fabian needs the company of others to satisfy his sexual needs, and the city's crowded streets, bars and clubs offer such possibilities. There, one can encounter various situations while remaining anonymous. Densely populated areas are full of noise and haste and such is the sexual act - brief and quick. Because characters often change their sexual partners, there is no possibility of a deeper acquaintance. They live in the given moment not worrying about the past or future.

If we look at their personal experiences, one thing becomes clear: sex is a purely physical act, completely lacking in higher emotions such as caring, a sense of safety, responsibility, an urge to give, respect for the other person and the overall intention to do good. The ease and readiness with which the characters engage in sex is the reason why the act itself is taken for granted and never raises questions of a moral nature. Kosinski's male fictional characters seem to have had similar sexual experiences as they follow the same patterns of negative, stereotypical male behavior, at the bottom of which lies masculine sexual self-actualization. For such a character, the only aim is to satisfy his own carnal desires and the partner's role is reduced to praising his sexual performance. "Why are you so worried about whether you were good with me?" asks Karen and Whalen replies "ambition is natural to me and that I want to succeed with everyone. I can't stand the idea of being merely an adequate sexual part-

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<sup>12</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 8.

ner".<sup>13</sup> For Whalen, sexual potency is crucial to his masculinity and it helps to define his worth. Finally, it provides an efficient vehicle for comparing men on the basis of their sexuality. Whoever excels in *ars amandi* is regarded to be more macho than others. To evaluate his own worth he needs the participation of others, that is why Whalen's partners serve as mirrors in which he can see himself. Excelling as a man means excelling sexually, which allows for the gratification of man's natural desire for women. The incessant pursuit of new thrills seems to fulfill the male characters' entire lives, making it the core of their existence. Karen, on the contrary to male characters, expresses her fear of rejection: "I'm terrified of being taken lightly".<sup>14</sup> Masculinity requires differentiation from femininity that is why Kosinski's male protagonists show no signs of weaknesses or uncertainty, which in Kosinski's fiction pertains entirely to female characteristics.

Kosinski presents sex which is fragmented, brief and coincidental thus never leading to a long-term commitment. Even if a longer relationship seems to be forming, such as the relationship between Whalen and Karen, it is immediately spoilt by the main character because he is afraid to open to another person as it may result in losing his independence and becoming vulnerable. Karen explains that:

she needs brief, perishable relationships because they give her the illusion that time is meaningless, that the end of one affair means the beginning of another, that the circle of unpredictable events and wavering emotions makes her eternally available for a new adventure. For her, every free moment is a victory over the tedious roles of wife and mother that she might otherwise be playing.<sup>15</sup>

Karen tries to sustain the illusion that she may master the passing of time, that she is in control of her life. Ephemeral affairs authenticate her role as an active individual who holds control over her destiny. Family life, with the well defined roles of wife and mother, seems monotonous, prosaic

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<sup>13</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *The Devil Tree* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974) 69.

<sup>14</sup> Kosinski, *Devil Tree* 67.

<sup>15</sup> Kosinski, *Devil Tree* 81.

and unattractive; the opposite of what she believes life should be like. She wants to stay available for any opportunity life may bring; accepting any of the standard social roles would deny the possibility.

In the world of chaos and constant change, brief sexual relations between men and women could be substituted for stability. By the virtue of being readily accessible and unconditional, they offer to the characters something they can hold on to, a feeling of availability and continuation. Short and occasional sexual encounters are usually associated with prostitutes, and that is why there are so many "fallen women" in Kosinski's fictional world. Not only do they not pose a threat to protagonist's stability, ask nothing in return in terms of a deeper commitment but also can be readily got rid of. "A prostitute was a stranger pretending to be a lover; she turned sex into a single act", where the roles are clear-cut and boundaries well established.<sup>16</sup> There is no danger of rejection, humiliation and shame. A man does not need to reveal himself or get an insight into another person. The union is superficial and shallow, thus, safe for both parties. A prostitute is only a promise of something more profound, a hint of a truer nature. All Kosinski's protagonists are on the move, going from one place to the next, from one episode to another. The uniting element of changing places and time is the sexual experience. Its intensity and repetitiveness are to create among characters a feeling of stability and familiarity. As they appear unable to sustain a satisfactory relationship, the frustration deepens with the number of attempts. What was to allow fulfillment only intensifies the frustration.

The reader does not gain any insight into the partner's or victim's perspective, as the events are narrated only by the protagonist. All the others, except for him, are denied their say in what is happening. A one-sided account does not give the other participants a chance to voice their presence in the experience. The protagonist's refusal to acknowledge and accept his partner's presence aims at avoiding the painful experience of rejection and humiliation. Karen confesses that "even more she dreaded the thought of sex with men with whom she could honestly abandon herself. She was afraid that once they saw what she really was, they would leave her."<sup>17</sup> For the sexual act to be complete people must be true

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<sup>16</sup> Kosinski, *Blind Date* 229.

<sup>17</sup> Kosinski, *Devil Tree* 117.

and honest, even if it means being vulnerable and defenseless. By neglecting other people the hero automatically robs himself of the opportunity to form any deep and meaningful relationship. Therefore, the protagonist remains untouched through the course of the novel, never undergoing any significant change or even allowing the experience to mould him. In this respect Kosinski's protagonists bear resemblance to Sade's characters who do not solely aim at sexual satisfaction. Sade's idea of eroticism emphasizes the violation of the sovereignty of the other person which results in his or her total negation. In consequence, a character who is to be a partner in the sexual act becomes its victim. Sade claims that erotism which brings peace and harmony is in fact the contradiction of its nature; it is force and compulsion which lies at the bottom of true human sexuality.<sup>18</sup>

Detachment and total control is the key to survival in Kosinski's world.

"Aroused he wanted to take her, but his purpose was stronger than desire. He knew that if Vanessa were to come to him as he willed, it must be to imprint him in her memory: like a colt, she was to be schooled, he at the lead, she following at liberty, without rigs, harness, reins."<sup>19</sup> "Fabian wished to initiate her, to keep a hold on her will and emotions, to leave his brand."<sup>20</sup> Chance permitting, all Kosinski's male characters try to attain control over their fate. It is they who give orders and make decisions. Sex is the instrument of discipline during the educational process. It is the "master and disciple" strategy where the goals are clearly set and consistently striven at. The teacher, however, does not respect the student's needs, does not wait for a feedback from the pupil but imposes his own will. Success equals undisputed control over the pupil who is constantly being manipulated. Only Whalen realizes the futility of such a scheme when he wonders:

Why do I always choose women who cannot give  
of themselves, whose concept of love is based on

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<sup>18</sup> Georges Bataille, *Erotyzm*, trans. Maryna Ochab. (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 1999) 163.

<sup>19</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 221.

<sup>20</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 156.

repression and undeclared competition? I see a ludicrous picture: It is after midnight; grey-haired Jonathan James Whalen sits in his library. That afternoon he has confessed to his psychiatrist that he has never lost to a woman, that he has always established control over women. While Whalen sits at his desk, the woman he desires lies in his bed, unattended.<sup>21</sup>

With a pinch of irony Whalen realizes that having control over others, however advantageous it may appear, leaves some emptiness in its wake. Victory, so understood, brings neither joy nor peace. Sitting alone, late at night, Whalen comes to the conclusion that there is something missing in his life.

Individual experience, whichever sphere of life it involves, appears to be more authentic in the world where the dangers are not as obvious as they used to be. The modern world is unpredictable and constantly changing. What was out-of-the-question a few years ago is treated as a norm today. What appears to be missing is a solid foundation which would serve as an unquestionable point of reference (if that is possible); let it be marriage, family, religion, social norms, etc. Personal interests multiply and, in order to be still distinguishable from one another, become more and more bizarre thus making it more difficult for an individual to create his or her own unique space in the society, to have his own 15 minutes of public attention. Because public images are too numerous, the protagonist must construct his own authentic experience making it as different and dissimilar from the others as possible. That is why he is constantly on the move, testing the various situations which life brings and not dismissing even the most bizarre opportunities in the hope that they will make him unique. This is the well known fear of being unnoticed and forgotten, the need to stand out in a crowd. In Kosinski's fiction unsuppressed sexuality is to confirm the character's presence in the fictional world.

Obscene images, which are intended to arouse, cause a particular kind of effect. Usually they are "offensive to community standards of

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<sup>21</sup> Kosinski, *Devil Tree* 38.

what can be depicted in public about sex."<sup>22</sup> Such images subvert the moral values of a community, posing a threat to family and religion:

in this country we don't think enough of sex to believe that anyone could restrict his obsessions to it. In America, a man who is overtly preoccupied with sex is automatically considered a pervert, an alcoholic, an addict, a criminal, an all-around deviate. We expect to find all the social ills in his mind and body, and because we expect to find them, we do.<sup>23</sup>

Something is anomalous only when juxtaposed with normality *ergo* bizarre sexual activity must be confronted with the existing social standards, which in this case stand for acceptable "normality." Pierre Klossowski claims that transgression would not be possible in a world without any norms. Transgression would also annihilate itself by becoming similar or even adopting another existing norm. There must be a distinctive difference between the standardized norm and its offender otherwise one cannot talk about transgression.<sup>24</sup> The better-founded and constant the norms of a society are, the bigger the offence will be.

In Kosinski's world, sexuality involves destroying and questioning rather than enforcing the established forms of social behavior. Sexual pleasure is drawn both from breaking the prohibition, and from the knowledge that the transgression is condemned by others. Yet, Tarden's or Levanter's world seems to possess no clear norms regulating sexual behavior, the only existing principle regulating sexual behavior is the principle of unlimited power which they exercise over the others as long as it suits their purposes. Power may be exerted only when the other person is still uncertain, nearing fulfillment but not yet there:

As she [Alexandra] spoke, Fabian reflected that her lawlessness in seizing her pleasure, bending him to her will, that very lack of constraint might

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<sup>22</sup> McNair 157.

<sup>23</sup> Kosinski, *Devil Tree* 97.

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Klossowski, *Sade mój bliźni*, trans. Bogdan Banasiak, Krzysztof Matuszewski (Warszawa: Aletheia, 1999) 29.



have arisen from a vanity and terror at abandoning herself to the play of sex, to the risk that she might, in the presence of her lover, lose the carriage and control that her profession imposed. Knowing that, with his orgasm, her power over her lover waned, she would violate any taboo to prolong his craving, break any bond, penetrate any boundary.<sup>25</sup>

So, according to Fabian, the willful violation of communal standards of sexual behavior has at its background not sexual satisfaction but rather the fear of being seen through. Abandoning oneself in sexual pleasure carries the risk of losing self control. Such a moment of weakness may result in giving access to knowledge which would allow the other person to manipulate the protagonist.

The reader will quickly notice the recurrence of scenes where sex is forced, as a rule, by a man onto the woman. Theodora was raped by an Arab diplomat while showing him an apartment:

Just as she was about to show him the master bedroom, he grabbed her by the neck and tripped her with his leg. When she fell, he ripped off her underpants, and, with a single, rapid movement, shed his robe and covered her mouth with it to muffle her cries. He dropped onto her and spread her legs with his knees. He moaned and gasped when he raped her.<sup>26</sup>

Tarden abused a psychiatrist's newly-wed wife:

I covered her mouth with my hand, pinning her head to the pillow. I climbed onto the narrow bed, pressing hard against her, my hand covering her mouth while the other moved under her nightgown [...] I turned her over and eased into her from behind. She stifled a moan, and

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<sup>25</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 64.

<sup>26</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *Cockpit* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976) 62.

I deliberately forced myself deeper into her. She was sweating but she didn't scream.<sup>27</sup>

And Oscar boasted his sexual exploits:

At coeducational events, Oscar would point out a girl he found attractive. The girl, responding to what she took for a sign of his interest, would smile at him and he would smile back at her as if he were simply too shy to approach her. In a low voice, he pondered the girl's reaction when, in the woods or on a street, behind a bench in the park or in a niche in a basement, he would trap her and command her to obey him. He described in great detail what he would do to her when he had ripped her clothes off and subdued her again and again, until he was exhausted.<sup>28</sup>

The men employ brutality so as not to risk refusal. The sexual encounter does not start with the agreement of the two parties. The man does not give the woman a chance to say "yes" or "no". The use of force seems to be an inevitable part of the protagonists' sexual lives, and as a consequence their entire existence. The characters' deeds and decisions are not subjected to any profound reflection which would cast light on their motives. Commonly accepted norms do not apply here, neither does a sense of justice. Kosinski implies that man can exist for his or her own sake only, create a unique and exclusive little space which does not overlap the surrounding world. But then, the relationship between man and the rest of society is one of discordance.

A reader's refusal to such brutal fictional reality is the result of his immersion in the real world full of restraints and rules. The elements of fictional reality which mirror the real world are well recognizable but their play and functions are different from the reader's expectations. A defamiliarization, which happens at this level, disturbs the reader's consciousness and questions his *status quo*. The fictional and forbidden

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<sup>27</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 78-79.

<sup>28</sup> Kosinski, *Blind Date* 71.

world should not overlap with the known and accepted one. What keeps the two worlds apart is the inevitability of punishment. For Levanter, imminent retribution does not exist, even when he admits having raped the girl-scout at a summer camp, nobody believes him. All suspect that he just wants to protect his friend, who is also not innocent. Levanter escapes punishment and nothing can disturb his peace of mind. Georges Bataille claims that it is not prohibition which stops other characters from committing crimes but the possibility of choice which is open to human beings but closed to animals. People are different from other living creatures because they can choose the way they behave, and later take responsibility for their choices.<sup>29</sup> In this respect, Levanter seems to be drawn more by animal instinct and carnal passions than by civilized and socially sanctioned behavior.

"For Marquis de Sade, the artist was permitted to transgress sexual, and thus social restraints on human behavior. In the context of a sanitized, morally regulated society, indeed, this transgression could be a healthy, radical movement."<sup>30</sup> Sexuality, which is repressed and denied its place in society, may assume perverse and fantasmatic forms only because it has been silenced and has no longer access to its legitimate forms of fulfillment. Then, such sexuality is free from the shaping pressures of the reality and norm.<sup>31</sup> Kosinski's protagonists, as products of the fictional society, share the same sexual characteristics: all are dominant, powerful, treat others as instruments, and remain untouched. They do not seek recognition by relating to their sexual partners but by negating them. There is always a distance between them and the rest of the world and nothing seems to be able to bridge it. As in a mirror, this world reflects all that is negative and unwelcome in the real one, and what it really tells the reader is that "there is such a thing as good sex somewhere, since I am its caricature. There is a yardstick since I am excessive."<sup>32</sup> As Theodora put it: "I [Tarden] could trap plenty of women of my own because the passive, repressed types I preferred were always the easiest

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<sup>29</sup> Bataille 215.

<sup>30</sup> McNair 140.

<sup>31</sup> Ian Hunter, David Saunders, and Dugald Williamson, *On Pornography* (London: St.Martin's Press, 1993) 114.

<sup>32</sup> Baudrillard, *Przed końcem*, Trans. Renata Lis (Warszawa: Sic!, 2001), 85.

to find. But in the end, she said, it was I who would be trapped: these women were just the opposite of what I really wanted."<sup>33</sup> The image is distorted because it is merely another copy, a simulacrum which presupposes the existence of an original, which in this case would be a good and just world without brutality and cruelty in which people respect one another. By contrast, such a world is quite unlike the fictional one.

For Kosinski's characters, sexual act is a substitute for communication. Sexuality makes people more sensitive to experience and enables them to forge a bond, even if only on the physical level. Sexual experience frees them from the purely rational consciousness of the structured world, and allows them to achieve self-fulfillment. "It is the dialectic of mind and body, consciousness and being manifested in sex which will diffuse itself and eventually allow the complete development of self and human culture."<sup>34</sup> Sexuality plays an important role in gaining access to the new depths of being which come to life through it: "Only by physically possessing her, feeling her surrender, and by surrendering to her at the same time, could he ever hope to gain - even at the risk of humiliation and rejection - a sense of being himself again."<sup>35</sup> Sartre claims that knowing and being known through sex is a possibility available only to humans.<sup>36</sup> Behavior, usually suppressed by the super ego, may be guided by sexual stimulation. When Tarden pretended that he was mutilated in a grenade explosion during the war, and retracted his member inside his body, the girl felt safe and was not afraid of pregnancy. As a result, she gave herself entirely to a new experience. Later, when she learnt the truth, Levanter tried to explain his behavior saying that: "withholding part of myself was not a game but an attempt to revive sexual sensitivity. I explained that, in avoiding what we had experienced so often with so many others, she and I had made the act of sex fresh and pure."<sup>37</sup> The girl finally confessed to her "new-found freedom, her new sexual identity,"

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<sup>33</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 66.

<sup>34</sup> Hunter, *On Pornography* 107.

<sup>35</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *Pinball* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982) 245.

<sup>36</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Egzystencjalizm jest humanizmem*, trans. Janusz Krajewski (Warszawa: Muza, 1998) 53.

<sup>37</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 142.

admitting that in this way a new layer of herself was unveiled. Yet, it would not have happened without the use of force. It seems that violence has always accompanied human beings, whatever their efforts. The sexual act as portrayed in Kosinski's fiction invariably employs the use of force in which large amounts of energy and vitality are expended. To gain success, a protagonist must overpower and subdue another character. The sexual satisfaction of the protagonist means failure and frustration of other characters.

The kind of relationships the protagonist initiates with other characters decides whether their communication is valid and meaningful or empty. Kate Millet argues that:

Taking the fundamental human connection, that of sexuality, to be the nuclear model of all the more elaborate social constructs growing out of it,[...], it is in itself not only hopelessly tainted but the very prototype of institutionalized inequality [...] by dividing humanity into two groups and appointing one to rule over the other by virtue of birthright, the social order has already established and ratified a system of oppression which will underlie and corrupt all the relationships as well as every area of thought and experience.<sup>38</sup>

The environment, in which communication is to take place, is populated by prostitutes, transvestites or anonymous women of doubtful reputation; sex clubs are socially accepted, and rape is common. All of the above elements of the fictional reality constitute the very denial of the milieu in which the communicative process is to occur. The presence of prostitutes is meant to be impermanent and ephemeral, the rules of the contract are clearly established and well known. There is no need for a longer acquaintance nor is there any responsibility or consequences to be suffered. Prostitutes occupy a marginal place in society, have little credibility and are not treated with respect so whatever happens to them is not usually taken seriously by the members of the society. This

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<sup>38</sup> Kate Millet, "Sexual Politics: Miller, Mailer, and Genet", New American Review 7 (1969): 30.

unfavorable context in which prostitutes found themselves automatically absolves a potential offender and invites ill-treatment. The same is true for rape which presupposes anonymity and concealment of identity. Whalen has sex with a woman whose name is not even mentioned. Similarly, Tarden's relationship with Valerie is built on very shaky ground because he "assured her that [he] did not expect her to love [him]. She would live with [him], but she would be as free as [he] to see other people."<sup>39</sup> One wonders whether in such cases any communication is possible at all. If the characters involved were thought to be generally decent and good, would communication take another, more successful shape? Kosinski's novels, which present a one-sided view of sexual relations, do not answer this question. Nonetheless, it is not so much a result of the conditions, as the participants who should acknowledge and overcome their old selves to reach for new ones. Yet, Kosinski's protagonists remain imperturbable and deny themselves a chance to become different, if not better. "There is a kind of self-recognition completely lacking in most conventional relationships. [...] It's sad, [...], that so many people never have the chance to discover or fulfill themselves through another person."<sup>40</sup> It seems that for Kosinski's characters the problem to form a meaningful relationship lies rather in their identity, than outside, in the fictional world.

Sex is used by the protagonists as a key to the identity of others:

Sex liberated him, giving language to an urgent vocabulary of need, mood, signal, gesture, glance, a language truly human, universally available. Sleep was the expression of his life's inner design, sex its outward manifestation. In sleep, he existed for himself; in sex for others. Thus, sleep imposed; sex proposed.<sup>41</sup>

During the sexual act people are naked both in the literal and the metaphorical sense of the word. Therefore, social, cultural and religious norms and constraints do not apply anymore. People are what they really

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<sup>39</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 6.

<sup>40</sup> Kosinski, *Devil Tree* 149.

<sup>41</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 8.

are, free and ready to be themselves. Kosinski explains that: "Pornography views sex as physical, not spiritual. It does to sex what totalitarianism does to politics: it reduces it to a single dimension. But for me, as for all my fictional characters, sex is a spiritual force, a core of their being, indeed, the procreative basis for self-definition."<sup>42</sup> Lovemaking focuses the characters' attention on the bodily and sensual emotions, diverting it from the surrounding world. This is the moment when reason sleeps and rationality fades away, and that is why people become so vulnerable.

It is very difficult to pretend strong sexual emotions, but not impossible, and Tarden seems to be totally in control. He participates in the act but never gives up control. He is always in charge of what is going on. He decides when and where he wants to meet his partner, and what they are going to do. Whether it was plotting a brutal and cold-blooded revenge against Veronica: "Was she stupid enough to believe that I would let her forget her personal debt to me or that she could abort our relationship when it pleased her to do so?"<sup>43</sup> or getting rid of the man who was following him by exposing him to the powerful quartz lights which blinded him:

"I put on my goggles and sat in the darkened room near the light switch. When I heard footsteps at the door, I faked a suppressed sneeze. I knew that everything depended on whether the man had noticed the danger sign posted outside the room. The door opened. I turned on the switch and light tore through the room like an explosion."<sup>44</sup>

Tarden elaborately planned and executed everything, leaving nothing to chance. Hiding behind his design, he watches people trying to figure out what they are really like. He uses his own body and the other's body as tools in this deceptive tactics. Each sexual encounter intends to break open the structure in which the partner is locked. But its transitory char-

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<sup>42</sup> Leaming, Barbara. "Penthouse Interview". Teicholz 197.

<sup>43</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 244.

<sup>44</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 165.

acter makes it impossible to have a better look at the other character. That is why Tarden constantly pursues another lover in the hope of another glance. Sexual experience is momentary; it is only a promise of what might follow. Not able to be satisfied and always craving for more, Kosinski's protagonists strive for the unattainable.

Kosinski's sexual images are full of voyeurism. The idea of looking is remarkable as there constantly appears to be an eye contact maintained between the protagonists, the narrator and the reader. The characters flip through the sex magazines, watch people in sex clubs and peepshows: "[W]ithin a few blocks, I discovered a sex peepshow that guaranteed a variety of new twelve-minute porn films, each one divided into three-minute segments. I went inside"<sup>45</sup>; participate in group sex: "[w]henever a girl could not arouse me, Theodora would help me; watching her make love to another woman invariably excited me"<sup>46</sup>; Tarden records Valerie making love to another man:

Next, I loaded a camera, attached an electronic flash to it, screwed in a zoom lens and put the camera in my darkroom hiding place. [...] When I heard the man begin to snore, I left my niche, moving stealthily into the main room. I stood behind the sofa bed, looking at the naked bodies. I could see only the vague shapes of their forms in the dark. I aimed the camera at them and took a test picture;<sup>47</sup>

In another episode he trades photographs for sex "I confessed that I had chosen to photograph her only because I wanted her, and suggested that she earn her pictures by making love to me. I promised that each time she brought me to a climax, I would pay her three photographs."<sup>48</sup> When Tarden witnesses a car accident he does not help a suffering woman but takes photographs:

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<sup>45</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 227.

<sup>46</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 65.

<sup>47</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 10.

<sup>48</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 201.



While other bystanders tried to comfort her, I began taking pictures from every side. I wanted to establish on film the precise angle and position of the wheels at the moment of the collision, the distance that the woman's body was dragged and the exact nature of the cab's contact with the body.<sup>49</sup>

Watching other characters implies identification, and the more the reader empathizes with his characters, the deeper impact they have on him. The narrated events had been witnessed or involved the narrator personally, as if they were his first hand experience. Such a device induces the make belief mechanism, assuring the reader of the authenticity of the experience. Nudity as the epitome of freedom from modern constraints is false as "it does not mean the liberation from the captivating desire to be seen."<sup>50</sup> Obscene images are secretive, they reveal what is most private and not intended for public eyes. Intimate moments which are exposed to public view become a public spectacle, thus violating their basic characteristics – being intimate and deeply personal. People are curious, and even more, they like to peep at other people's private lives. Forbidden knowledge which may be acquired by eavesdropping, spying or prying into private affairs gives the protagonists a weapon which might be used against others. It is believed that unobserved people do not pretend, do not play any games, and only then can one get a glimpse of their real selves. That is why Kosinski's male protagonists adopt the active role of those who look at others and they choose the objects of their interest, whereas minor characters are passive since they are merely being looked at. For the protagonists to watch means to have power and control over others. Freud emphasized the significance of the scopophilic as opposed to the epistemophilic instinct.<sup>51</sup> What is important, this means of acquiring knowledge is

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<sup>49</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 207.

<sup>50</sup> Edward Kasperski. "Pop i pornopowieści Jerzego Kosińskiego. Melanże polsko-żydowsko-amerykańskie", *Literatura i różnorodność. Kresy i pogranicza*, ed. Eugeniusz Czaplejewicz and Edward Kasperski (Warszawa: DiG, 1996).176.

<sup>51</sup> Michelle A. Masse, *In the Name of Love. Women, masochism, and the Gothic* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992) 67.

readily available to all involved and whoever exercises this power is automatically in control of the whole situation.

In the multidimensional web of glances and glimpses cast between the fictitious characters and the reader, another persona appears known by the name of "Jerzy Kosiński." In an interview with Stephen Schiff, Kosinski confesses: "I'm truly a born voyeur - I love watching people. I love it! I get never bored. I can sit in what might appear to others to be the most uneventful place, and I am totally enchanted by what I see. It's the kind of enchantment you get from a fable."<sup>52</sup> A reader following Levanter's, Fabian's or Tarden's adventures cannot help the feeling that these stories have their origin in Jerzy Kosinski's biography, in other words, that the reader has already heard something similar. The aura of autobiographical allusions, which is so characteristic of Kosinski's fiction, provides the reader with a lot of details connected with Kosinski's private life; regardless of whether they are true or not. It is very likely that an average reader may have heard the name of the author, not necessarily because of the publication of his latest novel but in the gossip columns of the glossy magazines. That is why it is so difficult for a reader to differentiate between the real author and his fictional reality. However confusing the situation is, it reinforces the text's supposed truth and the semblance to the real world. The intended likeness between the two worlds confuses the reader whose vision becomes out-of-focus. Jerzy Kosinski was well aware of the importance of publicity when he wrote: "[i]n America the writer is a part of the visual culture, as he is not only on the cover of the book, but other books are written about him."<sup>53</sup> Due to the importance of television, American culture (and now not only American) is based on pictures. Therefore, what Kosinski was selling were not only his books but also the image represented by the fictitious persona "Jerzy Kosinski." Furthermore, this persona is constantly looking at the reader through the pages of the novels, from behind the plot, never leaving him alone with the protagonists so that the reader can hardly tell who is who.

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<sup>52</sup> Stephen Schiff. "The Kosinski Conundrum". *Critical Essays on Jerzy Kosinski*. Ed. Barbara Tapa Lupack. (New York: G.K.Hall, 1988) 227.

<sup>53</sup> Czesław Czapliński, *Pasje Jerzego Kosińskiego* (Warszawa: BGW, 1993) 61.

Sexuality is designed to establish a hierarchy among the characters through subordination. In Kosinski's fiction the sex act is inherently an act of conquest and possession, and its participants are rivals and opponents. It is always the dominator not the dominatrix who derives pleasure from the submission of the other person. "Delusions about sex foster delusions of power, and both depend on the reification of woman."<sup>54</sup> When we look at the power-structured relationships between Patrick Domostroy and Donna Downes, Tarden and Valerie, and Levanter and Serena, we clearly see that does not so much concern sexuality, understood as pleasure between two, complementing each other individuals, but about domination. "I tell myself that it's right if I don't love you, but I can't stand your not loving me, because then I don't have any power over you,"<sup>55</sup> says Karen to Jonathan Whalen. Kate Millet claims that a male protagonist "associates sexuality with power, with his solitary pleasure, and with the pain and humiliation of his partner, who is nothing but an object to him in the most literal sense. Intercourse is an assertion of mastery, one that announces his own higher caste and proves it upon a victim who is expected to surrender, serve, and be satisfied."<sup>56</sup> Repeated and similar sexual acts are to strengthen the protagonist's control over his world. "No one ever noticed that she was repeating sexual clichés as mechanically as she manipulated her body."<sup>57</sup> Each act of love-making reassures Kosinski's heroes of their unshaken position. For this reason, the acts are similar, and the partner is the only element that changes. Kosinski's protagonists value their female partners very little and therefore cannot even imagine being influenced by them in a profound way. In turn, a deep emotional involvement could generate introspection which, unfortunately, is an alien concept to Kosinski's protagonists.

Although the sexual relationship is a dynamic process, the female is hardly ever expected to gain control over the male." Now I could manipulate her: she was in love with me,"<sup>58</sup> says a male protagonists to

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<sup>54</sup> Millet, *Sexual* 30.

<sup>55</sup> Kosinski, *Devil Tree* 67.

<sup>56</sup> Millet, *Sexual* 29.

<sup>57</sup> Kosinski, *Devil Tree* 71.

<sup>58</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *Steps* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969) 131.

his anonymous female partner. Kosinski's female characters are not to introduce changes but to restore and reaffirm the existing *status quo*: "[c]an't you see that when I do only what you tell me, it ends by revolting you as much as it disgusts me? We both wind up degraded."<sup>59</sup> This regular pattern, however false it proves, is essential to the character's identity as a social being. Sexual behavior becomes a safety-valve to other spheres of life, which are more difficult to manage. Real power is hard to obtain and, as a result, imaginary power becomes a substitute. In a world where man has little to say regarding his fate, sexuality remains the domain still relatively free from external pressures. Nevertheless, the roles enacted in private reflect those of the social structure.

A sexual act in Kosinski's novels is the denial of its very nature because it never leads to procreation. One of the aims of human sexuality is to prolong the species but human beings separated sex from reproduction. Kosinski's protagonists further modified the sex act so that it serves its own purposes. Sexuality in Kosinski's world does not sustain human relations, nor does it ensure the continuity of the human race. Fortuitous sexual activities of the protagonists are the very contradiction of a regular family and social values. The notion of a family i.e., mother, father and children is non-existent. Egoistic heroes are afraid to take responsibility for another human being, be it a woman or her child. If they did, they would have to leave their emotional shell and risk being exposed to the scrutiny of others. Showing affection to another person is a sign of vulnerability and, as a consequence, such people become an easier target of assault. The rejection of procreation is, for Kosinski's protagonists, an escape from the possible failure in the sex act. By refusing themselves all the usual attributes of a family: marriage vows, living together, having children, taking responsibility for the family, on the one hand, they are not treated as equal members of the society, but on the other hand, they also avoid all the failures which are associated with the problems of the modern family: breaking promises, unfaithfulness, the lack of trust, divorce, disappointment, the battles for the custody of the children, etc.

Plato's myth [The Symposium] says that in the beginning, people were hermaphrodites until God split them, and since then they have been

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<sup>59</sup> Kosinski, *Devil Tree* 71.

looking for the other half. Similarly, Kosinski's characters constantly pursue women because they "seek their own subjective and unchanging dream of a woman in all women, [...] they seek themselves in women, their ideal, and since an ideal is by definition something that can never be found, they are disappointed again and again."<sup>60</sup> Attempting to find their ideal of womanhood, the protagonists do not resign from any kind of sexual experience, however shocking and bizarre it may be. That is why they choose both prostitutes, transvestites, lesbians and ordinary, decent women as the objects of their frantic endeavors. Yet, such a diversity of female attitudes instead of provoking and inspiring makes them insensitive and callous. Kosinski's protagonists believe that the uniqueness of a particular self can be found in sexuality as it is the most private sphere in human life. Therefore, the protagonists engage in endless sexual exploits in which a woman is not a partner or an equal in the event, but merely a tool in the man's exploration; exploration which aims not so much at momentary pleasure, but at possessing the other person as a whole, and as a result at possessing the world. However, each sexual encounter brings frustration in this never-ending quest for the unattainable.

Gilles Deleuze argues that:

Psychoanalytic theories of sadism agree that perversion has its genesis in the trauma of a male child's oedipal relation to his father. In identifying with the power of the father and the phallus, the child rejects the mother in himself, expels his ego, and invests in the superego. The unconstrained superego runs wild and seeks external victims - victims who represent the rejected ego. This punishment of the female aspect of the self then yields sadistic fantasies of the obsessive and violent punishment of women who substitute for that rejected part.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Milan Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness of Being* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984) 201.

<sup>61</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Różnice i powtórzenia*, trans. Bogdan Banasiak i Krzysztof Matuzewski (Warszawa: KR, 1971) 109-110.

Kosinski's male protagonists exercises their power over a female, not over another male. The recurrent pattern is a man in a relationship with one or more women. Kosinski often shows male characters who abuse sexually their female partners: Oscar brutally rapes the girl-scout, Tarden plots Veronica's rape, Theodora is raped by a foreign diplomat, Levanter meets a prostitute Serena and then Jolene. Other male characters, if they appear, play secondary roles and are only puppets in the protagonist's hands, like the two tramps who helped Tarden to take revenge on Veronica, or a young skier who fell in love with a "Red Whore." As Gilles Deleuze claims the protagonists seek what is denied to them, the mother inside the self, but as a consequence entirely identify with the phallus, a symbolic father figure which is associated with power. The protagonist who is in power affirms his position by victimizing his partner, female as well as male. Brutality and the use of force seems to be the only mode of behavior accessible to Kosinski's protagonists, especially in regard to their female partners.

The past casts light onto the present but the readers know very little about the character's social background, childhood or family. Jonathan James Whalen is the exception because he is trying to learn more about his dead parents. Little emotional contact with his rich mother and constant arguments with his father left him without family warmth and parental love. The protagonists exist in the present moment, as if the past never existed. Or maybe the past events were so traumatic to them that they erased them from memory, and the only link to the past is their present way of behavior, which, according to Jill Montgomery: "nonetheless represents, [...], their best possible effort at creating and maintaining a separate and autonomous sense of self, one that salvages for them a modicum of satisfaction, security and self-esteem and thereby staves off tugs toward identity diffusion, psychotic regression and/or suicide."<sup>62</sup>

A closer look at the language of sexually explicit scenes reveals the omnipresent male dominance over the female. It is always the male who assumes the active role which is shown in the following passages: "Levanter was ready for her. Without warning, he grabbed her by the

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<sup>62</sup> Jill Montgomery, and Ann C. Greif, eds., *Masochism. The Treatment of Self-Inflicted Suffering* (Madison: CIUP, 1989) 79.

waist and forced her down onto the floor", "he pinned her down", "he flung her arms over her head with one hand and held her wrists still until she was flat and taut [...] she couldn't free herself from his hold", "He sank into her suddenly [...] battering her with all his weight, smacking, tearing the tender tissues of her flesh."<sup>63</sup>, "He picked her up and sat her on the arm of an overstuffed chair. He raised his hand and brought it down rapidly [...] He struck her again, harder this time, and heard her faint gasp"<sup>64</sup>, "Just as she [Theodora] was about to show him the master bedroom, he grabbed her by the neck and tripped her with his legs. When she fell, he ripped off her underpants, and, with a single, rapid movement, shed her robe and covered her mouth with it to muffle her cries. He dropped onto her and spread her legs with his knees. He moaned and gasped as he raped her."<sup>65</sup> The female role is only to be there for the male so that he may act. The language pertaining to the male discourse, and generally alien to the female, is full of verbs denoting the use of force: to grab, to force, to pin somebody down, to smack, to tear, to free oneself from somebody's hold, to strike, to batter, to fall, to rip, to muffle, and to rape. Kosinski's sexual act is full of fear and pain of the female which gives satisfaction to the male characters. The language of the male protagonists is that of authority and command; they either give orders or stay silent but never wait for an answer. The woman is a mirror in which the male *ego* is reflected reassuring his dominant position. There is no exchange of ideas or feelings, no questions or answers so there is no communication which may lead to further understanding of the characters. The vocabulary of sexually explicit scenes does not serve to maintain contact between the characters but only reaffirms the protagonist's dominance in Kosinski's fictional world.

For Serena, just as passion was demonstrated by gesture, desire was expressed by language. She would ask him continually about his feelings and responses. When his mouth was on her flesh, she wanted to know whether he felt that his tongue

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<sup>63</sup> Kosinski, *Blind Date* 121.

<sup>64</sup> Kosinski, *Devil Tree* 208.

<sup>65</sup> Kosinski, *Cockpit* 62.

was shaping her. When she kept him aroused, she asked if he was aware of her giving him pleasure, or of himself, or only of the pleasure. And each time they were together, she kept demanding that he tell her what it was that made him want her so much.<sup>66</sup>

The woman needs a verbal reinforcement of the physical gestures. The sexual act itself is not enough to assure her of the man's love. The above passage shows how one-sided the need is. The woman is expecting a certain type of conduct which she needs for self-assurance, the man gives an account of their meeting. It is the woman who asks, and the man who decides whether to grant her the favor or not. Furthermore, it is not a dialogue, in which both parties are peers, but simply another method of establishing a social hierarchy.

Kosinski's descriptions of sex make heavy use of repetitions and permutations, but lack metaphorical and metonymical imagination. "Repetition can often be read as an attempt to close the gap between word and thing, even though it is repetition which insistently opens up that gap."<sup>67</sup> The frequent presentation of sex acts in Kosinski's fiction as well as many references to various forms of human sexuality form an attempt to reaffirm their legitimacy, according to the saying that any lie which is repeated long enough becomes the truth. Since sexual appetite starts in the brain "the sexual imagination of the pornographic spectator attempts, through repetition of imagery and words, to bring the desired object into 'reality'"<sup>68</sup> To repeat is to overcome the "unreality" of the image so that it begins to exist on its own. On the other hand, the repeated actions lose their sensuousness and appeal because the reader becomes used to the wording and imagery which no longer generate a strong response. Instead of exciting, sexual imagery becomes merely an overused illustration of certain ideas. "The constant inscription of sexuality threatens to become excessive, driving the book itself toward

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<sup>66</sup> Kosinski, *Blind Date* 216.

<sup>67</sup> Graham Fraser, "The Pornographic Imagination in All Strange Way". *Modern Fiction Studies* 41.3 - 4 (1995): 518.

<sup>68</sup> Fraser, "Pornographic" 518.



effeminacy and weakness rather than manliness and potency."<sup>69</sup> Kosinski's model of male sexuality demands from his protagonists a demonstration of high sexual drive, and they see no danger of going too far. Yet, it brings the whole idea of the protagonists' virility uncomfortably close to reifying sexual overindulgence, which in turn, acquires involuntarily, or maybe voluntarily, a satirical accent: the constant capacity for sexual intercourse makes the protagonists less human and more robot-like. And it is widely known that readers rarely identify with perfect heroes but easily sympathize with the imperfect ones.

Apart from the verbal mode of communication, non-verbal communication also plays an important part in Kosinski's sexual imagery:

Silence was their sound, an echoless chamber.  
 Gesture, touch, pressure, stroke composed their  
 only language, a vocabulary of such variety and  
 plenitude that it restored the dominion of a power  
 usurped by speech. In their hours together,  
 sensation was unsullied by thought, thought  
 impervious to feeling.<sup>70</sup>

Sex enables people to restore their primal state of being, come back to a natural and spontaneous way of perceiving another person, to reinstate the importance of the body language and to stimulate the senses which are diminished by social conventions.

The two elementary modes of human behavior meet in this context: sexuality and language. Not only are they primary to human experience, but they are also readily available to all, and, therefore, easy to corrupt. Other social relations spring from them, and, as at the very beginning they are already tinted, this might explain why it is so difficult to attain balance between the two sexes in the other areas of social discourse.

Intellectual and emotional groping towards the discovery of sexual identity involve testing the extremes of behavior; hoping to find in violence some substitute for absent meanings. The postmodern world with its industrialization, dehumanization, and alienated and deperson-

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<sup>69</sup> Fraser, "Pornographic" 530.

<sup>70</sup> Kosinski, *Passion Play* 185.

alized work offers the lost individual a retreat into privacy and individualism. Entirely subjective, unique and sexually varied experience, seems to be given veritable and genuine sense. In the modern world there is hardly anything more true-to-life.

Michel Foucault claims that the emergence of sexuality in our culture is closely connected with the disappearance of God and the ontological vacuum that was left in our thinking.<sup>71</sup> The search for totality is replaced with a question about limits. As a result, transgression, and especially sexual transgression, has become a key concept for the modern hero. Although obscenity, nudity, pornography still awake mixed emotions in many readers, the literary and responsive standards have changed in time. What was shocking for the readers of *Sons and Lovers* (1913) does not seem scandalous to a contemporary reader. Jerzy Kosinski argues that: "If writing about sex enhances our view of life, then it is art. If it doesn't, if it counteracts the wholesomeness of sex and degrades it, then it belongs in the Yellow Pages, under a more commercial listing."<sup>72</sup> Kosinski's protagonists discredit the sexual adventures without admitting its, even basic, educational value. Such experience leads to no enlightenment about the world or the self, nor might it be applied to future experience.

My analysis, I believe, have shown how important the concept of sexuality is for Kosinski's protagonists. The amount of space allocated to sex proves that the characters hold this sphere of life in high esteem. Sexuality is a very complex phenomenon which combines both the experience of the individual self and that of the whole society. My argument is that sexuality in Kosinski's human world does not only aim at fulfilling the desires of the flesh but, more importantly, helps to establish a hierarchy among the characters through subordination. A sexual act is the means through which control over others is gained and that is why it is a purely physical act dissociated from higher emotions. Kosinski presents sex which is coincidental and never leads to a long-term commitment because there is simply no need for that: once the hierarchy has been established the act itself becomes useless. The characters do not

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<sup>71</sup> Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits. 1954-1988, vol. I-IV* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1994) 64.

<sup>72</sup> Leaming, Barbara. "Penthouse Interview". Teicholz 198.

engage in sex because of love or affection but in order to achieve certain goals. Sex is just another tool in a battle over dominance, in Kosinski's case, the battle between a male and a female. As in most battles, there is always a lot of brutality and violence accompanying sex in Kosinski's novels. Needless to say, the male protagonist always wins and freely enjoys his victory and unrestrained power.

My argument is that excellent sexual performance is a characteristic feature of Kosinski's protagonists by which they may be easily recognized: mature and handsome professionals, free from everyday problems, and enjoying their personal freedom inevitably engage in numerous sexual exploits in which they prove their virility and outstanding sexual performance. For Kosinski's protagonists their sexuality defines their male worth and is forever connected with the idea of power and dominance. Kosinski's protagonists are macho types who need to be constantly reassured of their masculinity. Hence, a large number of different partners who are to prove the characters' skill in the matter of sex. Any failure would mean for them a loss of authority and self esteem.

I have also argued that bizarre sexual behavior helps Kosinski's protagonists to highlight their presence in the fictional world. In the unified world of mass culture and mass production, a character feels the need to differentiate himself or herself from the crowd, to show his or her uniqueness and individuality. Unconventional sexual behavior, which breaks all the taboos and borders on pornography, may be a good vehicle for the character's self promotion. It is not important whether the protagonists evoke positive or negative emotions, what matters is how much they disturb others. Probably the worst thing which could happen to Kosinski's protagonists would be indifference and boredom of other characters.

I have also claimed that repetitiveness of sex acts in Kosinski's fiction sustains the illusion of stability and familiarity in the world of chaos and constant change. The protagonists resort to sex because it offers a brief moment of happiness and fulfillment, otherwise so rarely achieved in the modern world. Sex unites people, if only temporarily, and provides grounds for further acquaintance. The fact that the characters usually miss that chance suggests that there is a lie, an unfulfilled promise behind obscenity in literature, namely that sex (contrary to love) can easily be dissociated from the rest of human experience. Kosinski's presentation of human sexuality only reaffirms the importance of

ordinary normality, in which there is a balance between all human activities. Too much stress on sexuality prevents a holistic approach to human nature. Therefore, although sexuality may very likely be one of the keys to define the self, undoubtedly it is not the only one and cannot be viewed in isolation.

## CHAPTER III:

# Are Jerzy Kosinski's Novels Autobiographical? The Problem of Self-Creation.

"How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

(Paul J. Eakin)

When *The Painted Bird* was published in 1965, the most frequent question that readers asked was how much of the text was actually drawn from the author's life, and how much of it was the product of his pure imagination.<sup>1</sup> To make matters more obscure, Kosinski himself made a habit of providing contradicting statements. As a recognizable celebrity, he appeared repeatedly on *The Tonight Show* with Jeremy Carson, enchanting and confounding his viewers with bizarre stories. Long before writing the book he regaled friends at dinner parties with macabre tales of a childhood spent in hiding among the Polish peasantry. Yet, when asked directly if *The Painted Bird* is an autobiographical novel, he always gave evasive answers, directing interrogators to his concept of autofiction.<sup>2</sup> Kosinski made a practice of smudging the borders between

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<sup>1</sup> Joanna Siedlecka, *Czarny Ptasiór* (Gdańsk-Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Marabut, 1994) James Park Sloan, *Jerzy Kosinski. Biografia*. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Da Capo, 1996) 202-207.

<sup>2</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *Uwagi autora do Malowanego Ptaka in Przechodząc Obok* (Warszawa: Da Capo, 1994) 219-240.

biography and storytelling. The more he sensationalized his life by his consciously eccentric behavior, which involved concocting odd, misleading stories about himself, the more inseparable his life became from his fiction.

Initially this strategy found a receptive audience among critics who looked with interest at his experiments in narrative style.<sup>3</sup> When much of his autobiographical account was disputed or disproved, the same strategy started to cast a pall on his literary practices and artistic credibility and ethics. Suspicions about Kosinski's authorship lingered and his literary reputation continued to sink. Although it is difficult to distill the rumors and innuendos that Kosinski himself helped perpetuate, a closer look at his narrative strategy and his concept of autofiction against the background of the autobiographical theory, hopefully will shed some light upon his creative process.

Defining an autobiography has been pronounced futile by many critics<sup>4</sup>, but the very attempts present the scope of problems involved. According to Timothy Dow Adams:

This form of writing, which may or may not be a genre, possesses a peculiar kind of truth through a narrative composed of the author's metaphors of self that attempt to reconcile the individual events of a life time by using a combination of memory and imagination – all performed in a unique act that partakes of a therapeutic fiction making, rooted in what really happened, and judged both by standards of truth and falsity and by the standards of success as an artistic creation.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas John Sturrock stresses the importance of autobiography for bridging the gap between writer and reader:

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<sup>3</sup> George Stade, *Harper's Magazine*, May, 1973: 90.

Samuel Coale, "The Quest for the Elusive Self: The Fiction of Jerzy Kosinski", *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, Vol. XIV, No. 3, 1973, pp. 25-37.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) 1-3.

<sup>5</sup> Dow Adams, *Telling* 3.

An autobiography is a text that seeks to draw us into itself without reservations and one which we are invited to read as being sanctioned by a "metaphysics of presence", its formal nature being belied by the intimacy and truthfulness with which it seems to address us. In autobiography, if anywhere in literature, we are expected to sense that these are texts inhabited by a living person, that an author who was peculiarly present to himself while he was writing is now present to us as we read. Autobiography is the certificate of a unique human passage through time and the theorist who comes to it full of skeptical questions about its rhetorical nature knows that he is playing an unkind game; he is not as other, more charitable readers of autobiography.<sup>6</sup>

The publication of Roy Pascal's *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960) marked out the area of interest for literary critics. The recurrent question of truth in autobiography seems to be basic. Yet the answer to this question, especially to modern readers, poses many problems. Is there "truth", objective truth, "truths".<sup>7</sup> Whose truth is it? Is truth what the autobiographer believes it to be, or what he wishes to be? Paul Eakin claims that "[a]utobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation."<sup>8</sup> To Donald Spence:

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<sup>6</sup> John Sturrock, *The Language of Autobiography: Studies in the First Person Singular* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 3.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, "On Essence of Truth", in *Basic Writings*. David Farrell Krell ed.(San Francisco: Harper, 1977).

Herbert Mead George, "A Pragmatic Theory of Truth", Studies in the Nature of Truth, University of California Publications in Philosophy 11 (1929) 65-88.

Graham Priest, "Truth and Contradiction", Philosophical Quarterly Vol.50 Issue 202 July (2000):305-320.

J.L. Austin, *Truth in Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: OUP, 1979).

<sup>8</sup> Paul J. Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992) 21.

Narrative truth can be defined as the criterion we use to decide when a certain experience has been captured to our satisfaction; it depends on continuity and closure and the extent to which the fit of the pieces takes on an aesthetic finality. Narrative truth is what we have in mind when we say that such and such is good story, that a given explanation carries conviction, that one solution to a mystery must be true. Once a given construction has acquired narrative truth, it becomes just as real as any other kind of truth.<sup>9</sup>

Janet Varner Gunn, on the other hand, looks for truth of autobiography "not in the 'facts' of the story itself, but in the relational space between the story and its reader."<sup>10</sup> Roy Pascal understands autobiographical truth as being close to imaginative arts:

The value and truth of autobiography - and its value is always linked with its truth - are not dependent on the degree of conscious psychological penetration, on separate flashes of insight; they arise out of the monolithic impact of a personality that out of its own and the world's infinitude forms round itself, through composition and style, a homogeneous entity, both in the sense that it operates consistently on the world and in the sense that it creates a consistent series of mental images out of its encounters with the world.<sup>11</sup>

Thus it seems that autobiographical truth is not a fixed and stable concept which can easily be defined. It is an individual account of what was, what is and what will be. "The autobiographer must create a text of what he knows from the *inside* in terms of what we recognize from the

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<sup>9</sup> Dow Adams, *Telling* 10.

<sup>10</sup> Dow Adams, *Telling* 12.

<sup>11</sup> Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (New York: Garland Pub, 1960) 188.



outside."<sup>12</sup> The inside view is not necessarily truer than the public view, and the readers are not in a position to know how truthful the author is. Not only can the truth of one's self be different from the truth of one's life, but it may bear only tangentially on literal accuracy. As there is no final truth about a man, there is no ultimate autobiographical truth. Instead, we should look at it as an ongoing process in which all of its components constantly develop, not as "a closing of accounts." In Roy Pascal's words we should speak of "the specific dynamic truth of the autobiography".

Any discussion of autobiographical truth is soon caught up in questions about the ontological status of the autobiographer's self.<sup>13</sup> There are two opposing views on the nature of the self and its relation to language: "is the self autonomous and transcendent, or is it contingent and provisional, dependent on language and others for its very existence?"<sup>14</sup> There is a controversy about whether self is before language, or language is before self. Finally there is the question if we shall adopt the idea " that the most promising contemporary treatments suggest that the self and language are mutually implicated in a single, interdependent system of symbolic behavior"<sup>15</sup> or not. The referential basis of autobiography fosters the possibly illusory conviction that there is such a thing as self, and that language is transparent enough to express it. How to mediate between inner and outer life, between the individual and the social without losing the distinctive characteristics of the author? When

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<sup>12</sup> Dow Adams, *Telling* 11.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Whiton Calkins, "The Self In Scientific Psychology", *American Journal of Psychology* 26 (1915): 495-524

William L. Benzon, "First Person: Neuro-Cognitive Notes on the Self in Life and in Fiction". *PSYART: A Hyperlink Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts*, article 000619. August 21, 2000. Available

[http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipsa/journal/articles/psyart/2000\\_benzon01.shtml](http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipsa/journal/articles/psyart/2000_benzon01.shtml).

J.P. Guilford, *Personality* (New York: Mc Graw, 1959).

Hans J. Eyseneck, and Michel W. Eyseneck, *Personality and Individual Differences* (New York: Plenum, 1985).

Michel Grimaud, "Poetics from Psychoanalysts to Cognitive Psychology", *Poetics* 13 (1984): 325-45.

<sup>14</sup> Paul J. Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1985) 181.

<sup>15</sup> Eakin, *Fictions* 192.

the personality fails to find its correlative in the outside world, the wholeness of the character is disturbed and autobiography loses its point. "Whether the self, that 'certain intricate watermark' is literally discovered, made 'visible' in autobiography, or is only invented by it as a signature, a kind of writing, is beyond our knowing, for knowledge of the self is inseparable from the practice of language. 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?'"<sup>16</sup>

Readers do not judge an autobiography solely upon the evidence of facts but also upon the distinctive coherent quality of a unique individual experiencing the world:

Rather than blaming our autobiographers for discrepancies between their stories and supposedly verifiable facts, we should realize, on the one hand, that memory's deceptions are not always conscious and, on the other hand, that the duplicity of memory affords us one of the most powerful avenues of entry into the self-identity of the writer.<sup>17</sup>

The personal history is a self-presentation of an author which starts in the writer's sense of uniqueness:

According to de Man the rhetorical figure which presides over autobiography is that of *prosopopoeia*, a Greek term translatable literally as a 'face making' - the autobiographer attempts to create in words a 'face' by which we can tell him apart from others, and thus to pass from a merely verbal to a conclusively pictorial representation of himself.<sup>18</sup>

The author writes an autobiography for his own sake, rather than for the reading public. "As a privileged theatre of difference, the autobiographical act may seem to be as various as life itself, as protean as

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<sup>16</sup> Eakin, *Fictions* 278.

<sup>17</sup> Dow Adams, *Telling* 170.

<sup>18</sup> Sturrock, *Language* 4.

desire, but it seems to promote without a predictable sameness an overwhelming sense of the elusiveness of self-knowledge."<sup>19</sup> Or, in Paul Eakin's words, writing an autobiography is not merely "the passive, transparent record of an already completed self but rather an integral and often decisive phase of the drama of self-definition."<sup>20</sup>

The creative process requires honesty and a sense of responsibility to one's self, as well as "search for one's inner standing (Selbstbesinnung)." The unveiling of the spiritual personality reveals what is true for this particular person, not in a general sense."

Life is represented in autobiography not as something established but as a process; it is not simply the narrative of the voyage, but also the voyage itself. There must be in it a sense of discovery."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, self-discovery becomes the primary motif of the genre. Such a conclusion supports Roy Pascal's claim that "a good autobiography represents a new stage in self-knowledge and a new formulation of responsibility towards the self; it involves mental exploration and change of attitude."<sup>22</sup> Both the writer and the reader take part in the process of taking off their masks to reveal the person behind the persona.

What an autobiographer uses in the creative act is his memory, which bears upon itself a mark of instability, changeability, and multivocality. "What we remember - which is a mysterious amalgam of what we choose, what we really want, what actually happened, and what we are forced to remember - once turned into language and written down, becomes our personal truth without much consideration for its literal accuracy."<sup>23</sup> Remembering is itself a creative process which involves recording and ordering of memories.<sup>24</sup> Despite its obvious fallibility,

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<sup>19</sup> Eakin, *Fictions* 276.

<sup>20</sup> Eakin, *Fictions* 226.

<sup>21</sup> Pascal, *Design* 182.

<sup>22</sup> Pascal, *Design* 183.

<sup>23</sup> Dow Adams, *Telling* 171.

<sup>24</sup> Alan J. Parkin, "British Memory Research. A Journey Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century", *British Journal of Psychology* Vol.92 Issue1 Feb (2001): 37-53.

Kathy A. Svitil, "Memory's Machine", *Discoverer* Vol.24 Issue 4 Apr (2003):10-11.

Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson, "Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story", in Robert S. Wyer Jr. (ed) *Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story* (Hillsdale, NY: Lawrence Associates, 1995)1-85.

human memory is what both readers and writers rely on. How conscious or unconscious this process is still remains unclear. On the one hand, "the self acts as a censor, selecting and deleting the flow of imagination"<sup>25</sup>. While on the other "[a]utobiography raises into consciousness whatever unconscious process the autobiographer accepts has brought him to his present condition."<sup>26</sup> Another aspect of the memorizing process lies in its being part (according to CG Jung) of the mythology of the given community. "What constitutes a self or an identity is a set of memories-turned-into-stories, memories shared by the successive series of personae occupying an individual mind. And like the most ancient mythologist, we tend to remember according to the needs of memory."<sup>27</sup> Our memory, however selective and faulty, is an immeasurable well of information to draw from. Its outcome both reports what memory selected and accounts for the selection itself.

Autobiography is an especially inviting literary genre because it purports to be mimetic of life. Yet, potentially verifiable events should not decide the value of autobiography, as they do not matter when regarding a work of art. as a work of art. "The great autobiographies are works that stand by themselves, and are appreciated without reference to the actual lives and works of the authors."<sup>28</sup> Existing on the borderline of fact and fiction, autobiography makes use of "the fictive nature of selfhood"<sup>29</sup>. Autobiographers are engaged in the "imaginative reshaping of experience which, in the novelist's hands, is called the art of fiction. In their hands the two arts become aspects of each other."<sup>30</sup>

No matter how eager critics are to draw the line between autobiography and fiction, no clear-cut definitions have yet been found.<sup>31</sup> Instead, we are supplied with a number of terms which aim at grasping

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<sup>25</sup> Dow Adams, *Telling* 170.

<sup>26</sup> Sturrock, *Language* 6.

<sup>27</sup> Dow Adams, *Telling* 169.

<sup>28</sup> Pascal, *Design* 189.

<sup>29</sup> Eakin, *Fictions* 182.

<sup>30</sup> Philip Dodd, *Modern Selves: Essays on Modern British and American Autobiography* (London: Cass., 1986) 171.

<sup>31</sup> Dow Adams, *Telling* 1-3. Presents a number of critical positions.

the taxonomic differences: autobiography, mock-autobiography, novelized autobiography, spiritual autobiography, fictional autobiography, autofiction, factual fiction, a biographical memoir or confession.<sup>32</sup> These are further expanded by the postmodern inventions of factoid, pseudo factual and docudrama. Such generic descriptions are characteristic for border areas with shifting boundaries especially when the same fiction-making techniques are also used to write autobiographies.

According to Timothy Dow Adams

all autobiographies are fictive rather than fictitious because the autobiographical act always includes - and even can be defined by – a discussion of itself. All autobiographers are in a sense self-conscious, characteristically asking as they start why they are writing about themselves and why they have chosen autobiography over another form, and often questioning their own veracity.<sup>33</sup>

The manipulation of autobiographical material, whether intentional or subconscious, is not only an inevitable element when fact and fiction exchange functions, but it also adds to the rhetorical effect.

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<sup>32</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, "Stranger Than Fiction", Writer Vol. 112 Issue 9 Sep (1999): 16-19 (discusses the concept of a memoirist).

Bruce Hindmarsh, "Early Methodist Conversion Narrative... ", Church History Vol.68 Issue 4 Dec (1999): 910-920 (looks at spiritual autobiography).

Laurie Winn Carlson, "Snooping in the Past", Writer, Vol.112 Issue 10 Oct (1999): 12-15 (discusses historical biographies).

Paul Archambault, "Autobiography and the Search for Transparency", Symposium Vol. 51 Issue 4, Winter (1998): 231-47 (discusses literature of confessions).

Luise D.Cary, "Margaret Fuller as Hawthorne's Zenobia. Problem of moral accountability in fictional biography", ATQ Vol. 4 Issue 1 Mar (1990): 31-49.

Karin Doerr, "Memories of History. Women and the Holocaust in Autobiographical and Fictional Memoirs". Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies Vol. 18 Issue 3 Spring (2000):49-64.

Brock Clarke, "Why memoir isn't always art", Chronicle of Higher Education Vol. 46 Issue 10 10/29/99: 9-10.

<sup>33</sup> Dow Adams, *Telling* 11.

When one looks at the relationship between Kosinski's life and his artistic endeavors one immediately concludes that the two are inseparable elements of his narrative. During his lifetime Kosinski often invited speculations concerning parts of his biography and on many occasions himself purveying contradicting details. Although he bitterly turned down any suggestions that of his novels are autobiographical, at one point, nevertheless, admitted that "[t]here is nothing in my novels that isn't derivative [of my life] in some way."<sup>34</sup> A survey of the critical analysis of Kosinski's fiction shows that many critics reject the biographical material as the verification of truthfulness to his novels. Thus, Paul Lilly's believes that: "[Kosinski's] personal experiences are not factors in assessing the quality of either individual novels or his work as a whole [...] these experiences were not composed of printed words arranged for specific artistic effects. What counts obviously is the art of each novel"<sup>35</sup>, Norman Lavers insists that "[t]o read all of Kosinski's novels as thinly disguised autobiography is to ignore Kosinski as artist, as creator"<sup>36</sup>, Welch D. Everman states that:

the critic who insists upon reading Kosinski's novels as if they were not novels but exercises in autobiography misses several important points. First, such a reading is not a reading at all, for it ignores the texts themselves and tries to erase the language in favor of the world beyond language. This attitude looks to the producer rather than to the products in the attempt to pretend that the novels were never written at all; or, at best, that they are the secondary results of Kosinski's experience.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Garry Abrams, "Jerzy Kosinski Leaves Them Amused, Bemused and Confused". Teicholz 213.

<sup>35</sup> Paul R. Lilly Jr., *Words in Search of Victims. The Achievement of Jerzy Kosinski* (Kent: The Kent State UP, 1988) 18.

<sup>36</sup> Norman Lavers, *Jerzy Kosinski* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982) 6.

<sup>37</sup> Welch D. Everman, *Jerzy Kosinski. The Literature of Violation* (San Bernardino: The Borgo Press, 1991) 8.

Average readers, however, which constitute a vast majority, tend to trace the facts from the author's life in the episodes of his novels. They were prompted to do so, in a way, by Kosinski himself who often recounted episodes from his own life by means of such popular media as TV interviews or the national press. At one point Kosinski asks: "Why should I run my life differently than I run my fiction?"<sup>38</sup> A reader equipped with this knowledge tries to verify its truth while reading the book in the hope of answering the question: what really happened? What usually follows is only a further confusion which is then translated from the text to the author. It is easier to blame the author for the inconsistency than the text's complexity. Looking at the numerous examples of blurring fact and fiction in which his novels abound, one must admit that Kosinski was willfully utilizing his autobiographical material as grist for his novels.

Fact and fiction, truth and lying, memory and imagination are only rhetorical figures in Kosinski's theory of art. Kosinski must have been aware of the consequences his literary strategy would bring about since in many interviews he tried to clarify his point. He also tackled this problem in *Notes of the Author on The Painted Bird* (1965), *The Art of the Self* (1968), and in a collection of essays *Passing By* (1992).

First of all, for Kosinski, memory has fictive nature: "What we remember lacks the hard edge of fact. To help us along we create little fictions, highly subtle and individual scenarios which clarify and shape our experience. The remembered event becomes a fiction, a structure made to accommodate certain feelings."<sup>39</sup> He puts it clearly in an interview with Jerome Klinkowitz: "I think our notion of ourselves is a fiction which is composed of what we have memorized, edited, created, imagined."<sup>40</sup> In this way everything we experience and store in our mind becomes fiction, and the process of recalling events from our memory is equivalent to what a writer does in the creative act of writing.

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen Schiff, "The Kosinski Conundrum". *Tepa Lupac* 227.

<sup>39</sup> George Plimpton, and Rocco Landesman, "The Art of Fiction XLVI: Jerzy Kosinski". *Paris Review* 54 (1972): 189.

<sup>40</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz, "Betrayed by Jerzy Kosinski". *Tepa Lupac* 191.

Anything written is auto-fiction, because in everything we write and almost anything we say, imagination interferes. I would like to see most writing, including journalism, defined as auto-fiction. What you will do with this interview - extracting, editing, the way it will be set in print - will turn it into yet another form of narrative. It will not be my voice, even though my voice is already auto-fiction.<sup>41</sup>

Whether the product is rooted in the real world or its creation is merely a matter of artistic inspiration does not really matter, as the two are indissoluble. In this light, the search for facts or the *true self* of the author in his books is a meaningless task.

Another aspect which Kosinski gives prominence to is the involvement of the reader in the act of reading. Kosinski says that: "[t]he act of writing makes me by its very nature more aware of my own relationship to my own self, to my own environment. Ideally, this should also happen to the reader [...] a man more aware of himself is less of an animal."<sup>42</sup> Both writing and reading are creative processes in that the text is structured in such a way as to invite the reader to fill in the missing information. In an interview with David Sohn, Kosinski explains:

The printed page offers nothing but 'inking'; the reader provides his own mental props, his own emotional and physical details. From the infinite catalog of his mind, the reader picks out the things which were most interesting to him, most vivid, most memorable as defined by his own life. Because it is uncontrollable and totally free, this process offers unexpected, unchannelled associations, new insights into the tides and drifts of one's own life. The reader is tempted to

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<sup>41</sup> Pearl Sheffy Gefen, "Jerzy Kosinski, the Last Interview". Teicholz 230.

<sup>42</sup> Everman, *Jerzy Kosinski* 10.



venture beyond a text, to contemplate his own life in light of the book's personalized meanings.<sup>43</sup>

A reader has to complete the text with his own mental pictures, and this active performance on the part of the reader makes him not only more sensitive to the fictional reality but also more conscious about himself. In another interview, Kosinski explains how indispensable the role of the active reader is:

A novel becomes concrete only through the reader's own imagining or staging-from-within, which is grounded in his memory, his fancy, his current reality. The act of reading ennobles this inner process. Above all else, literature orients us towards our own existence as we individually perceive and define it.<sup>44</sup>

Talking to Daniel J. Cahill, Kosinski shifts the responsibility for "understanding" the novel from the writer to the reader:

Whatever the reader 'recognizes' in the act of reading the novel belongs, by virtue of his imagination, to *him*, not to the author. By its very nature, language fictionalizes our 'real' experience. To me, 'recognition' by the reader - the semiconscious power of projection into another time, place, and identity - is fiction's foremost principle.<sup>45</sup>

Following his theory, one can hardly speak of a single, correct interpretation of the text, because there appear to be as many readings as readers. The fact that the reception varies from reader to reader, from period to period, does not worry Kosinski who maintains that:

A writer prompts a certain vision; he does not delineate it. His purpose is to awake, to trigger;

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<sup>43</sup> David Sohn, "A Nation of Videos". Teicholz 91.

<sup>44</sup> Sohn, "A Nation of Videos". Teicholz 91.

<sup>45</sup> Daniel J. Cahill, "An Interview with Jerzy Kosinski on Blind Date". Teicholz 153.

the rest cannot be guessed. After all, if the writer's imagination is free enough to arrive at this triggering moment, why shouldn't the reader's imagination be equally good? A writer is not superior to anyone; he merely reflects a human ability to evoke.<sup>46</sup>

Kosinski-the-author relies on the experience of his readers as well as on their collaboration. His books are intended to awake the latent emotions, at the same time forcing the reader to cope with them. Kosinski believes that "the purpose of fiction [therefore] is to tap what is already implicit in the culture but which the culture for some reason refuses to open."<sup>47</sup> The device to trigger the inner layers of consciousness is literature, which according to Kosinski, "is the last surviving awakener, the last form of art which still requires a profound effort from within."<sup>48</sup> Contrary to popular culture and mass entertainment, which fail to arrest the audience's attention for longer, fiction has enough strength to call forth hidden emotions and induce unexpected reactions. In the modern world, literature still has the power to bewilder and confront the readers without imposing a moral judgment. Kosinski concludes:

The purpose of fiction - of any art - is above all to evoke a concrete dramatic response: to accept the artist's vision or to reject it. My fiction aims at acceptance very democratically; it does not place itself above the reader by insinuating the novel's 'moral' and providing the judgment. As in ordinary life, it is the reader who, in the act of reading, judges the fictional events and the characters as they come by. The moral is, of course, implicit in any encounter whether with a fictional protagonist or with real heroes or villains. Fiction doesn't propagandize or advertise - it merely evokes; thus, to generate a moral

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<sup>46</sup> Plimpton, *Art of Fiction* 203.

<sup>47</sup> Lisa Grunwald, "Jerzy Kosinski: Tapping into His Vision of Truth". Teicholz 105.

<sup>48</sup> Gail Sheehy, "The Psychological Novelist as Portable Man". Teicholz 127.

judgment in a reader is yet another didactic purpose of literature.<sup>49</sup>

One more aspect of Kosinski's art, which I would like to address, is not as directly connected with his literary output as with the whole promotional industry surrounding it: the newspaper coverage, the TV interviews, talk shows, pictures on the covers of the magazines, articles, lectures and parties. Before the publication of *The Painted Bird* (1965) Kosinski joined the American jet-set, marrying Mary Weir and adopted the life of a celebrity. His becoming a recognized literary figure on the American map of *belles lettres* was confirmed by a National Book Award (1969), American Academy Award (1970), Brith Scholom Humanitarian Freedom Award (1974), ACLU First Amendment Award (1978), Writers Guild of America Award (1979), Polonia Award (1980), and the election for President of PEN American Center (1975), he was a Member of the Executive Board, National Writers Club (1979), and Director of International League for Human Rights (1979). His frequent appearances in the mass media turned out to be carefully planned, which he admits in an interview with Barbara Leaming:

For an artist there is no better safety than to go public. Once you are public, the public looks for what it has already seen. [...] In a sense, my visibility is my ultimate camouflage; nothing hides one better from the public than appearing on the Johnny Carson show, because everyone thinks they know what one is doing and what one is all about - and yet there are 364 other days in the year, when they don't.<sup>50</sup>

Kosinski believed that exposing one part of himself to the public would suffice and nobody would ask for more. He "ran head-on into the teeth of the new American celebrity culture - culture that proclaims 'Forget about your art; we want to know about your life. And don't try to

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<sup>49</sup> Sheehy, "The Psychological Novelist as Portable Man". Teicholz 126.

<sup>50</sup> Barbara Leaming, "Penthouse Interview". Teicholz 201.

bullshit us about that."<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, what he himself chose to share with his audience was not enough. It neither gave explanatory answers to the inconsistencies between his claims, nor satisfied the popular demand. Whether it was the nature of the message (very attractive and provocative) or the public pursuit for the ultimate truth amid all the speculations, the fact is that what he believed would protect and shield him, actually generated detrimental interest and demand for more and more information.

In the essay *Betrayed by Jerzy Kosinski*, Jerome Klinkowitz claims that "Kosinski's autobiography seemed to have been reinvented for a transient market at each turn of events."<sup>52</sup> The din and commotion which accompanied the publication of his novels was fuelled by Kosinski himself, once he realized the value of market publicity. Behind a novel, which may or may not become successful by its own virtue, there is also the person of its creator, which sometimes may be more interesting than the text itself. Kosinski, at least at the beginning of his literary career, was a successfully commercial author. This turned out to be more dangerous than he had expected. His life became an inseparable element of his fiction, soon making the point where one ended and the other began hazy. "Inventing his own life of fiction is Jerzy Kosinski's most natural act. His novels record this process, and virtually everything he does reinforces his writing and further secures his own existence."<sup>53</sup> Although he was aware of the dangers which were undermining his literary stature, he failed to detach himself from his created persona. How prophetic indeed his words sound in view of how his life actually ended:

The stress on 'what's autobiographical' in fiction (as opposed to what's imaginative) so dear to our popular culture has, in my view, its source in the Hollywood-made preoccupation with the life of the actor (as opposed to his ability to portray various roles). The popular culture shifts the source of celebrity from talent to that of simple

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<sup>51</sup> Schiff, "Kosinski Conundrum". Tapa Lupac 234.

<sup>52</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz, "Betrayed by Jerzy Kosinski". Tapa Lupac 194.

<sup>53</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz, "Betrayed by Jerzy Kosinski". Tapa Lupac 197.

visibility. Such attitudes applied to imaginative fiction simply mean its death.<sup>54</sup>

Even though Kosinski was a conscious artist who deliberately chose such an artistic strategy, and as an artist was well aware of its shortcomings, he was unable to escape the negative influence of his notoriety. By obfuscating the distinction upon himself between fact and fiction, he successfully experimented with narrative techniques, pushing back the borders of the acceptable. Yet, his fault was that he did not maintain distance to his art long enough. The fallacy of such an approach soon manifested itself in the fact that his literary standing plunged precipitously after his tragic death. Only then one could see how much of the persona was missing behind the novels.

Having discussed the main issues of autobiographical theory and Kosinski's views on the subject, I would now like to present a closer analysis of one of the texts (*The Painted Bird*, 1965), in an attempt to see how the theory applies to practice.

The publication of *The Painted Bird* (1965) received a mixed response. On the one hand, there were fascinated readers and official literary awards and on the other hand, a campaign of slanders and public outcry. Kosinski tried in vain to assure the public that the novel is not autobiographical, and that the little boy's fate is not a reflection of his own. All the same the readers persistently traced the similarities between the two stories, and the aura of mystery was only intensified by Kosinski's contradictory statements.

*The Painted Bird* was published in 1965 in English in the United States, and, before the Polish reading public could even read the text, it was attacked by the official propaganda as a novel defaming Poland and its national tradition.<sup>55</sup> The whole turmoil boils down to reading *The Painted Bird* as an autobiographical novel set along the eastern borders of Poland during the World War II. A repulsive portrait of a backward and primitive Polish village inhabited by Polish peasants who were degenerate and devoid of higher emotions, constituted the basis for such an

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<sup>54</sup> Cahill, "Interview on Blind Date". Teicholz 153.

<sup>55</sup> Wiesław Górnicki, "Życie partii", June 1996.

Jerzy Lisowski, jł, *Twórczość* 5 (1996): 153 and 7 (1996): 139.

"Antypolonica", *Stolica* 27 (1996), p. 11.

accusation. Was this opinion justified? I will try to answer this question in the following sections.

The Swiss edition of the book was accompanied by the notes from the author, which *nota bene* were fragments of the correspondence between his Swiss editor and Jerzy Kosinski.<sup>56</sup> Here, the author tries to explain his artistic intention: "There is no art which wouldn't be reality: art is a way to use symbols thanks to which, otherwise untransferable subjective reality, becomes possible to be communicated."<sup>57</sup> The creative process takes place between the external reality and the artist's inventiveness but it is not the reflection of either of them. An author draws freely from the surrounding world, molding experience according to his own aesthetic principles. Thus, the product resembles not only the material and the artist, but also possesses its own unique characteristics which places it alongside other works of art. *The Painted Bird* "may be the vision of one's childhood, the vision, not an analysis of the period or an attempt to come back."<sup>58</sup> As any vision, it is full of metaphors and symbols, which magnify some aspects and obscure others. The reader shuttles between recollections and fantasies which meet in the author's mind. "[I]f memories contain truth, it is rather of an emotional, not objective kind."<sup>59</sup> *The Painted Bird* is a metaphor of childhood when a child learns the rules of the world he happens to live in, a fairy tale which comes true, a symbol of the contemporary culture and civilization which tries to rediscover the sense of being after the Holocaust.

The author's extensive notes did not discourage less apt readers from tracking down similarities between the author's life and the novel's plot. Especially as at a first glance there appear to be quite a few: the World War II, the SS soldiers, the trains full of Jews, a little boy whose physiognomy suggests a Gypsy or a Jew who is sheltered by the peasants risking their lives by doing so, the Kalmuk's raid on the village, the Communists and the Red Army soldiers, and final reunion with the par-

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<sup>56</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *Notes of the Author on The Painted Bird*. (New York: Scienta-Factum, 1965).

<sup>57</sup> Jerzy Kosinski, *Malowany Ptak. Uwagi Autora* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1990) 232. (my own translation).

<sup>58</sup> Kosinski, *Uwagi* 234.

<sup>59</sup> Kosinski, *Uwagi* 232.

ents. Polish readers familiar with Kosinski's biography will quickly discover the allusions and, according to Małgorzata Czermińska, will look for "the differences between the real and fictitious biography"<sup>60</sup>, whereas the readers unacquainted with the author's life will look for "autobiography in the novel." Since Kosinski did not previously exist on the Polish literary market, the "schematic minimum knowledge about the actual author"<sup>61</sup> was not shared by the readers, who could otherwise decide for themselves what is verisimilar and what is not. Having no other point of reference and being subjected to the political propaganda of the state-owned media, the readers interpreted the novel literally. Some went so far as the eastern Polish border to find people who took care of the small Jurek Kosinski, to verify their account against the slanderous book.<sup>62</sup> Others stressed Kosinski's ungratefulness; he who owes his life to the care of the people whom he then portrays so badly in his book. Therefore, in spite of becoming another literary testimony portraying the horrors of war, *The Painted Bird* caused controversy, instead of compassion and profound reflection.

If we leave an author and the extra textual reality, we can focus on the signals in the structure of the text, which according to Irena Skwarek decide about the autobiographical features of the text.<sup>63</sup> *The Painted Bird* is a retrospective novel presenting a singular story against the background of a historical upheaval, in which narration prevails over description. There is no suggestion of the autobiographical nature of the text in the book's title but there is a dedication: "To the memory of my wife, Mary Hayward Weir, without whom even the past would lose its meaning"<sup>64</sup> So the book, which may be read as referring to the author's past, is directly offered as a tribute to his late wife's memory, to a woman who helped him to preserve the meaning of the past, his personal past. The dedication suggests that by means of this book the author was trying

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<sup>60</sup> Małgorzata Czermińska, in Jerzy Smulski ed., "Autobiografizm jako postawa i jako strategia artystyczna". *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (1988): 89.

<sup>61</sup> Czermińska, *Autobiografizm* 89.

<sup>62</sup> Joanna Siedlecka, *Czarny Ptasiór* (Gdańsk/Warszawa: Marabut/CiS, 1993).

<sup>63</sup> Irena Skwarek, *Dlaczego autobiografizm? Powieści autobiograficzne dwudziestolecia międzywojennego* (Katowice: Wyd. Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1986), 123-126.

<sup>64</sup> Jerzy Kosiński, *The Painted Bird* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), dedication.

to understand the past and discover the rules which governed the seemingly senseless and tragic events; to infuse them with some sense so that the pain and suffering would not be in vain. The story seems to address the everlasting question: Why me? Why did it happen to me?

Chapter I is preceded by an introduction which establishes the time of the action (autumn 1939, the first weeks of the World War II), the place (a big East European city and the villages in the East) and the main hero (a six-year-old boy who, because of his dark features, may be taken for a Gypsy or a Jew). Some of the details do not arouse doubts, e.g. year 1939 or World War II; others are so general that it is impossible to assign specific meaning to them. There used to be and there still are many big cities in eastern Europe, including Roman Catholic-Russian Orthodox villages, where the described rites used to be practiced. One cannot think about Poland or any other specific country as the setting for the novel. The only hint is that it is one of the East European countries under the Nazi occupation. The historical facts and folk customs are to authenticate the story, which in turn, creates a link between the plot and the reality known to the reader. To trust the written words, a reader needs tangential points between what is familiar and acceptable, and what is different and strange. Such an authentication of the text results in the emergence of an unwritten pact between the author and the reader receiver, in which the sender promises to tell the reader a story which might have happened.

*The Painted Bird* is stylized as a diary of a small boy. Although the reader gets to know the boy's external appearance, he never learns the boy's name, nor the names of his parents. But if it is to be read as a memoir, this fact is understandable - the "boy-author" does not need to tell himself what his name, or the name of his parent's is - he knows it perfectly well. The author's name is not mentioned either. That is why it is so difficult to classify the boy: a person without a name is nobody, so he may be anybody. An anonymous figure is just a representation, a symbol, and in this respect it does not matter whether the boy is a Gypsy, a Jew, or a Pole. The fate described in the book was shared by many other boys and families. The first person narrator is not omniscient, his knowledge comes directly from his experience. The hero is retelling his tragic ordeals but the reader may be free from worry as he knows that the boy is still alive for otherwise who would be telling the story? The narration is not linear, it is rather a cluster of episodes bound together by the person of the narrator. As Jean Starobinski notices, autobiography



often makes use of picaresque narration: the hero makes many mistakes in his youth, undergoes many trials, but now he is grown-up and his knowledge enables him to look back at his past with forbearance.<sup>65</sup> All the episodes are presented in a chronological order, which according to John Sturrock should be understood as an "intelligent [...] sequence of events,"<sup>66</sup> rather than their consequence. It is less important when something happened, than what consequences it held for the boy, and what lessons he could draw from the events. Rarely does the boy go down the memory lane, and he never thinks ahead. The world, for him, consists of a series of the here-and-nows. All his vital forces are engaged in surviving just one more day, and life is reduced to sheer physiology.

Wandering from village to village, the boy meets various people and gets to know their life full of supernatural powers, in which a man is only a weak part of nature. Naturalistic descriptions of scenes of cruelty and brutality; of pain and suffering are omnipresent. The places through which the boy passes do not look like typical Polish villages, although a lot of the folk customs described or referred to are commonly known in the area of stereotyped country "east of civilization": the fear of having one's teeth counted, the healing properties of herbs and charms, the evil eyes which may cast a spell, the strange rituals of folk medicine, etc. The descriptions contain numerous details which enable one to trace them back to Eastern Europe. The peasants' names like: Marta, Olga, Makar, Ewka, Ludmiła, Lech, Tęcza sound familiar to an East European ear, but they fail to identify a real person. The names are characteristic of an ethnic community which inhabited the eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic (presently the vast area extending from Lithuania through Byelorussia into western Ukraine). "By referring to the events existing in the real world a novelist makes a modal frame for the fictional world."<sup>67</sup> It depends on the reader's knowledge which elements he will classify as real and which as fictional. Needless to say, a well educated reader with some knowledge of European history will have no problems

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<sup>65</sup> Jean Starobinski, "Styl autobiografii", trans. Władysław Kwiatkowski, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1 (1979): 307-316.

<sup>66</sup> John Sturrock, "Nowy wzorzec autobiografii", trans. Grażyna Cendrowska, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1 (1979): 342.

<sup>67</sup> Anna Martuszczyńska, *Powieść i prawdopodobieństwo* (Kraków: Universitas, 1993).

with the above distinction. A naive reader on the other hand will treat the fictional reality as a relatively accurate depiction of the real world, as part of his own world and, consequently, will have the same expectations.

Another signal of an autobiographical bent is the motif which reappears in the majority of the works of the given writer, and which establishes his area of interest, his imaginative territory. In Kosinski's case it is the problem of alienation, which has become the leitmotif of his literary creation. In *The Painted Bird*, although the boy is never alone, he is very lonely. Even the return to his family does not change the feeling of alienation. Furthermore, the different role models he looks up to turn out to be stairs leading to nowhere. Kosinski's protagonists from his other novels share the same characteristics: Fabian, Levanter, Goddard, Norbert all desperately seek contact with another person so as to be able to cope with themselves. This recurrent motif has a common denominator - the author, who constantly tries to express the same emotional state in a different way.

The first person narration, a retrospective story in a prose form, and a personal account which focuses on the developing identity of the protagonist are, according to Philippe Lejeune features of autobiography.<sup>68</sup> Yet, in an autobiography two other requirements must be met: the identity must be explicitly posited between the central character and the narrator in the text on the one hand, and between the narrator and the author of the text on the other. "The narrator's and the main character's identity manifests itself in the usage of the grammatical first person forms, i.e. Gennett's autodiegetic narration"<sup>69</sup> says P. Lejeune commenting on the nature of Jean Gennette's texts. When the narrator does not identify with the protagonist, we have a biography. When an author denies the author-narrator-character identity, he automatically excludes an autobiographical pact on the basis of which a speaking subject refers to the author represented by his name on the cover of the book. Finally, the lack of identity between the author's and character's names implies a pact concerning a novel in which the character's name is not revealed.

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<sup>68</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu. O autobiografii*, trans. W. Grajewski, S. Jaworski, A. Labuda, R. Lubas-Bartoszyńska. Ed. Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska. (Kraków: Universitas, 2001).

<sup>69</sup> Lejeune, *Pacte 2*. (my translation).

A particular reading of a text depends on the nature of the pact which is negotiated with the reader. So, the main role is played by the extra textual relation between the text and its recipient. The protagonist of *The Painted Bird* has no name and the author does not make an unequivocal pact with the reader, so the decision about the kind of the text s/he is confronted with is left to the latter. "The referential basis of autobiography is [...] inherently unstable, [it is] an illusion produced by the rhetorical structure of language."<sup>70</sup> Autobiography is a purely rhetoric category which does not address the problem of truth. That is why one cannot say that it contains verifiable facts connected with the extra textual world. In case the relations between author, narrator, hero, and reader are unclear, it is up to the reader to figure out the connections. "Since an autobiography is to be defined on the basis of external factors, it is not a no verifiable reference to a real life person, but a style of reading which an autobiography requires, the invested trust, which can be found in critical analyses."<sup>71</sup> An author compels a reader to search for his own reading strategy, among which none is privileged. Małgorzata Czermińska recognizes here a condition for an autobiographical position: "the gesture by means of which an author confronts the reader with a riddle concerning his own identity: look, I am entirely different from what I have written."<sup>72</sup> It is a kind of game between the author, the reader and the intratextual figures of narrator and character. The author contradicts what the reader reads in the text.

The author of *The painted Bird* does not make the referential pact necessary for autobiography, which obliges him to tell the real-world truth. Autobiography and biography are both referential genres informing about the reality beyond the text, which can be verified.<sup>73</sup> However, it is not the same kind of "truth" which binds a cartographer or a botanist. As Philippe Lejeune notes "telling his story a narrator may be wrong and may lie because these are the features of a narration which, in any case,

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<sup>70</sup> Eakin, *Fictions* 186.

<sup>71</sup> Lejeune, *Pacte* 49.(my translation).

<sup>72</sup> Małgorzata Czermińska, *Autobiografia i powieść, czyli pisarz i jego postacie* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1987) 15.

<sup>73</sup> Lejeune, *Pacte* 41.

in itself is authentic."<sup>74</sup> Authenticity does not relate to identity or probability, but manifests itself in the first person narration which attempts auto interpretation. Kosinski does not promise to "tell the truth and nothing but the truth"; on the contrary, the novel is a hide-and-seek game between the author and the reader, with the hero-narrator putting on different masks to protect himself from being caught in a single category, freezing his protean identity in a single stereotype.

*The Painted Bird* was Kosinski's first novel, and according to Małgorzata Czermińska "when the autobiographical elements appear at the beginning of the writing career, as a rule we deal with an autobiographical novel or story, which means a novel pact excluding [the author's and character's] identity."<sup>75</sup> A fictional plot earns authenticity when linked to the author's biography. Since the past can only be presented by means of the present, the relationship between author-narrator works both ways. On the one hand, the author calls the narrator into being, on the other hand, the words spoken by the narrator come back to haunt the author. The distance which appears is not only temporal, but also in nature of the identity; where the "I" of the present moment no longer equals the "I" of the past.<sup>76</sup> "Literature [...] provides the opportunity to recreate in a new character what is already gone, bringing it back to life, connecting in a new way things and events separated by time, whereas an ordinary historical account is reduced to a merely chronological ordering of facts."<sup>77</sup> To read a Kosinski's novel one does not need to know his biography, nor does one need to have a personal key to understand it.

How should one deal with a text which makes its readers confused? In Kosinski's case we are overpowered by the abundance of acts of violence and evil. To escape the trauma, the reader seeks a strategy which would somehow order the chaos and introduce some kind of sense into it. In order to do this, the reader may include the real author into the reading of the text. Faced with manifold choices and unsolvable alterna-

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<sup>74</sup> Lejeune, *Pacte* 44.

<sup>75</sup> Czermińska, *Autobiografia* 25.

<sup>76</sup> Starobinsky, *Styl* 312.

<sup>77</sup> Gunter Grass, interview with Marek Orzechowski, "Włożyć palec do rany", *Gazeta Wyborcza* 9-10 Oct. 1999: 11.

tives the reader "tends to use the author's biography as a relatively fixed component which stabilizes the shifting meaning of the text."<sup>78</sup> The author with his biography justifies the existence of the text, is his causative force and takes responsibility for it.<sup>79</sup> A real life person is undoubtedly a constant factor in the fluctuating world of meaning. Yet, the reader looks in vain for help in the person of Jerzy Kosinski. Both his personal life and his literary career are a tangle of half-truths and false appearances resulting in doubts. Both his life and a literary career are not only not complementary but they foster the feeling of fortuitousness and instability. The feeling of confusion is deepened by the atmosphere in which the novel is created as well as by varied critical reviews which appeared after its publication. Contradicting voices of the author, the critics and the text itself add to the lack of clarity. Therefore a reader looking for confidence in Kosinski's biography will only become more and more disoriented.

Reception of the novel plays an important role in the reading of a literary text.

"Autobiographically marked work nurtures the writer's desire, always present, to put up an additional security system around his work, spurring the interest, clarifying the sense [...] Not only does the creator live in his work, also the work - for some time - prolongs its life by that of the author."<sup>80</sup> Showering the readers with brutal scenes to make an unforgettable impression, according to Kosinski's critics, is purely a marketing device.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, juggling facts and fiction, unveiling a secret and keeping the readers in suspense fosters arguments and stimulates public interest, which is an inevitable element of financial success. One cannot deny that all the publicity which followed the publication of *The*

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<sup>78</sup> A. Wit Labuda, "Biografia pisarza w komunikacji literackiej", *Teksty* 5 (1975): 107.

<sup>79</sup> H.P. Grice, "Meaning", *The Philosophical Review* 64 (1957): 377-388.

H.P. Grice, "Utterer's Meaning, Sentence-Meaning and Word-Meaning", *Foundations of Language* 4 (1968): 225-42.

<sup>80</sup> Zbigniew Łapiński, *Życie i twórczość czy dwie twórczości* in *Biografia-geografia-kultura literacka*. Ed. J. Ziomek and J. Sławiński. (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1975) 132.

<sup>81</sup> Elżbieta Morawiec, "O sprawiedliwej nienawiści i malowanych ptakach", *Arka* 50 (1994): 188.

Tomasz Sobeczko, "Groteskowe ptaszysko", *Więź* 11/12 (1989): 184.

*Painted Bird* encouraged the sales. To disavow the commercial success would be hypocritical. But this is, however, not the main reason why the book was published in more than thirty countries and translated into twenty languages.

The above analysis showed that *The Painted Bird* is not an autobiographical novel but that it contains echoes from the author's biography. The author's notes may help one to choose which convention to use when reading, although not every reader must accept them. Kosinski's works are full of disguise and implied meanings which highlight the importance of illusion in our life. The reader, looking for the truth, gets lost in the maze of changing signals and calls upon the author for help. The author, in turn, sends him back to the fictional reality where the narrator pretends to be the author, and the author pretends to be the protagonist. Nothing is certain or permanent when virtues lose their meaning. The very naming of the nightmare is the first step to get rid of it.

Marcel Proust observed that the world gives us one idea for a story - a history of our own life. Whatever the structure, it is still only our own story. When Gunter Grass was asked about the autobiographical elements in his novels, he said: "the loss of something important, maybe something that is most important in life, leads straight to obsessive writing; the grip of experience simply does not let go. It results in casting a spell on what was lost."<sup>82</sup> Kosinski's literary output is an attempt to reconstruct and tame both the horrors of the war and those of the totalitarian system. *The Painted Bird* brings into life the lost childhood through reliving the trauma once again. The act of reading allows the reader to submerge himself into the murky waters of the author's imagination, in order to look at oneself from another vantage point.

The importance of language for Jerzy Kosinski cannot be overrated. Abandoning Polish and adopting English as his new native tongue had far-reaching consequences. First of all, it prompted his assimilation into the American society and allowed him to rid himself gradually of the visible signs of his immigrant status. As far as his literary career was concerned, there was more to it than just a linguistic shift: the change deeply affected his mode of writing. Apart from being

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<sup>82</sup> Grass, "Włożyć" 11.

a means of communication, language carries with it all the cultural and social burden which has accompanied its structuring. Children learn the language together with the complicated rules of what may be said, and when and how they may say it. Kosinski remarks:

It seemed that the languages of my childhood and adolescence - Polish and Russian - carried a sort of mental suppression [...] I discovered that English, my step-tongue, offered me a sense of revelation, of fulfillment, of abandonment - everything contrary to the anxiety my mother tongue evoked.<sup>83</sup>

A new, consciously learned language frees the person from such inhibitions, Kosinski observed: "English [...] doesn't evoke any emotionally negative responses grounded in my past. [...] In English, I was not afraid to be myself, I didn't feel personally threatened by what I said and I still don't - when I speak or write in English."<sup>84</sup> Or in another interview: "I felt freer to express myself, not just my views but my personal history, my quite private drives, all the thoughts that I would have found difficult to reveal in my mother tongue."<sup>85</sup> This newly acquired freedom resulted in Kosinski's boldness in writing, especially regarding the sex scenes which leave little to the imagination and are written in a manner few, even contemporary, non-pornographic writers would follow. As Kosinski himself wonders: "My originality may be nothing more than a lack of cultural prejudice."<sup>86</sup> "The mother tongue is the father's whip", the saying goes, so when the threat of punishment by the mother tongue is gone nothing guards the passions from getting out of hand.

The shift from Polish to English increased the potential of the writer's imagination and consequently allowed Kosinski to move from autobiography to autofiction. Immersing oneself in a new language is like discovering oneself again. "In our life the culture of self and language

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<sup>83</sup> Sheehy, "Psychological Novelist" Tapa Lupac 125.

<sup>84</sup> Sohn, *Nation* 102.

<sup>85</sup> Sheehy, "Psychological Novelist", Tapa Lupac 125.

<sup>86</sup> Tom Teicholz, "My Books Are Weapons, A Blind Date with Jerzy Kosinski", Teicholz 146.

exist in an irreducible relation of mutually constituting interdependency."<sup>87</sup> New vocabulary enables one to define oneself anew and look at oneself from another perspective. What was unspeakable in one language may be freely uttered in another. Self reinvention or re-discovery may be a good exercise in autotherapy, especially when prompted by an introverted style of writing. Kosinski believed that: "What an acquired language does, more than anything else, is it allows you to come to terms with yourself much more."<sup>88</sup> It is like getting another chance, as a blank card promising anything one wishes.

But Kosinski often uses language in contradiction to its normal purpose of communication. Instead of informing and connecting, the language of Kosinski's novels alienates and distances. "For Kosinski language often indicates impotence, separation from either full engagement in one's own experiences or full participation in the human community,"<sup>89</sup> says Patricia Griffin. Muteness, which is yet another type of impotence, may be imposed by an accident or may result from one's willingness to remain silent. Because language is viewed as an oppressive force ordering the experience and imposing its own rules upon the user, muteness acquires a property of freedom. Yet, silence is also constructed in terms of words.

The idea of muteness, of the unspeakable, of the loss of words, of aphasia may go back to the traumatic events of the World War II witnessed by Kosinski. In making provisions for his safety, his parents concluded that his separation both from them and from his Jewish past was the only way to ensure his survival. This may have caused a loss of the feeling of self-identity. The willful disintegration and repression of his Jewish identity may have been restored by the reconstitution of his self through the writing process. The discontinuity in his individual consciousness was bridged by the metaphorical personal restoration. If the creation of an autobiography, a story taking one back to one's childhood is viewed as a symbolic speech act, then "the exercise of language is necessary to the realization of self" or, in other words, we acknowledge" the indispensable contribution of language to the

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<sup>87</sup> Eakin, *Fictions* 256.

<sup>88</sup> Grunwald, "Tapping Into His Vision of Truth". Teicholz 107.

<sup>89</sup> Patricia Griffin, "Conversation with Kosinski". Teicholz 133.



constitution of the wholly integrated self."<sup>90</sup> That is why in his novels Kosinski wrestles with a deracinated self, whose alienation may have originated in the experiences of the Holocaust.

Kosinski's readers will not notice many explicitly Jewish references in his novels, except for *The Hermit of 69 Street* (1988). The author does not use Hebrew, nor does he describe a distinctly Jewish milieu, or draw upon literary traditions that are recognizably Jewish. The characters' names, the geographical places or customs do not carry such characteristics either. When an eager critic tried to use a Jewish key to read his novel, Kosinski preferred talk about universal concepts.<sup>91</sup> Asked about his Jewishness, Kosinski said that it runs through his novels:

in the fashion in which they are written. You may have noticed that I don't stress plot. I don't believe there is such a thing. I stress the moment, the element of drama in every specific moment of life; hence my novels are devised, and designed, as encounters with each particular manifestation of life. There is no promise to the reader that at the end of the book there will be a resolution of some sort. No. You meet my characters and life within my books the way we meet each other. Confrontation.<sup>92</sup>

The author feels no need to highlight his Jewishness. "Life is not Jewish. Life is universal", he claimed in one interview.<sup>93</sup> Kosinski wanted to escape from his past, from the plight of the Polish-Jewish other. "I came to this country to become universal,"<sup>94</sup> he said. What interested him was the development of the character, regardless of whether the character was Jewish or Polish. What really matters is every separate moment in which there is a distinctly human awareness of the sanctity of life. To enjoy life, to test every opportunity, to feel happy; this

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<sup>90</sup> Eakin, *Fictions* 256.

<sup>91</sup> Teicholz, *My Books* 143-149.

<sup>92</sup> Mike Leiderman, "Encounter- Jerzy Kosinski". Teicholz 219.

<sup>93</sup> Leiderman, "Encounter". Teicholz 220.

<sup>94</sup> Leiderman, "Encounter". Teicholz 221.

is what Kosinski's characters do, and this is where his Jewishness is visible.

Kosinski's basis of Jewishness is the notion of liberty. "Judaism means the freedom to express a certain insight into the joy of life, life perceived as the tree of life with the roots and branches of equal importance, creativity for oneself and for others, a universal sharing. It means family, education, self-enlightenment."<sup>95</sup> He invested such optimistic ideas in the state of Israel, which would bring hope for the Middle East. Israel was hoped to become the place of cultural symbiosis between Jews and Arabs. Kosinski strongly believed that it was possible. He expressed similar optimism of the possibilities for the Polish - Jewish relations.<sup>96</sup> His participation in cultural foundations and his numerous public statements stress the importance of dialogue and understanding. He wished for the complementarity of his Jewish and Polish heritage, none of which he ever disavowed. Kosinski maintained that bringing the Polish and the Jewish cultures together would reconcile and reconstruct the common world which was lost because of World War II.

But I would like to make an even bolder claim. I would like to claim that the whole artistic career was dedicated to writing autofictions. I do not propose to analyze all of his novels from this point of view. For my purpose it will suffice that his first novel is, as was demonstrated, an autofiction and that his last novel is not only an autofiction but a revelation of the process by which autofiction is born; in a way an informal theory, or an anatomy of autofiction.

Kosinski's last novel *The Hermit of 69th Street* (1988) is difficult to categorize in terms of a genre. Partly a novel, partly an essay, partly a document with coy autobiographical scraps, a self-proclaimed "autofiction" full of ambiguity, word plays, games, puns, quasi pornography, dirty talk, and assorted mysticism it tells the story of Norbert Kosky, Kosinski's novelistic alter ego. Heavily annotated with intriguing foot-notes and biblical quotations the text resembles a biblical exegesis. "*The Hermit's* prose is rococo, prolix, clogged with the sort of clangorous puns that can sound charming when Kosinski whizzes them

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<sup>95</sup> Sheffy Gefen, *Last* 236.

<sup>96</sup> Jerzy Kosiński, "Przywracanie polsko-żydowskiej duszy" in *Przechodząc obok* (Warszawa: Da Capo, 1994) 187-190.

past you over dinner but look sodden and strained on the page."<sup>97</sup> Among the topics Kosinski takes on in the book are the spiritual life of the writer in exile, and the ethical desiderata of the post-holocaust Jew. The commercial failure of the novel was due to the fact that it is, first of all, very hard to follow and, secondly, too long (603 pages). The reader is virtually buried under the heap of intimate revelations and abstract musings on the nature of the self and the sources of artistic creativity.

A large number of boldface quotations from every imaginable source distract the reader, making the reading a difficult task. We encounter famous writers (Conrad, Dostoyevsky, Kafka), historical figures (Lenin, Stalin, Pilate, Goebbels), religious leaders (Abraham Heschel, Henry Ward Beecher), and important texts (the Talmud, Genesis, the Tantras). Such an accumulation of annotations and subtexts creates, whether intentionally or not, an effect of self-mockery. The novel is actually bursting at the seams: the clichés are growing here into an absurd and over examined story of life of Jerzy Kosinski. The additional notes complement and interact with one another and with the text, multiplying its meaning. According to Małgorzata Czermińska, "a consent to quote is a humble gesture. Frequent quotations result from the opening into the dialogue, without an egocentric need to explain everything in one's very own words."<sup>98</sup> Using other people's words is reassuring and gives the impression that one is sharing and belonging. It is like walking on a well-known track: easy and safe. The different passages quoted form a veritable choir of voices, a meeting place with other people who speak of similar ideas, and feel in a way similar to the author. Individual experience finds resonance in the heritage of human thought. Czermińska claims that "such a strategy becomes clear only when referring to the extra textual and extra generic sphere, to such a non-intertextual category as the subject, the person of an autobiographer."<sup>99</sup> The author makes extensive use of other people's thoughts in his writing but when he does it, these thoughts become his and he must take responsibility for them as well.

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<sup>97</sup> Schiff, "Kosinski Conundrum". Teicholz 223.

<sup>98</sup> Czermińska, *Autobiografia* 110.

<sup>99</sup> Czermińska, *Autobiografia* 114.

In an interview with Mike Leiderman, Kosinski explains what *The Hermit* is about:

Well it's an attempt at portraying the thinking process that goes into the writing of a novel. It's a novel about the state of mind in which a novelist lives - state with a capital "S". When one conceives of a novel, I don't think I can describe it in any better way. It's a state of mind as the environment of action - what happens in one's head, when one tries to envisage someone other than oneself, circumstances other than the ones one knows. In other words, what is the reactor? It's a novel about the spiritual reactor, the head, the mind.<sup>100</sup>

Kosinski is not so much preoccupied with the story of Norbert Kosky, a writer, as with the creative process: all the thinking and all the preparations made before a writer eventually puts his pen to paper. Consequently, we witness the gathering of the materials, assessing their value and the final choices. The reader becomes aware how much of painstaking effort must be made before the actual text is written. Stephen Schiff agrees with such an interpretation:

*The Hermit* is an attempt to portray what goes on inside a writer's mind as he composes a novel - his sexual fantasies, the readings he refers to, the way he associates his own predicament with his character's and with the predicaments of history. It is a book of both impressive erudition and bizarre naiveté, the product of a brilliant and ambitious mind that has long since outstripped its owner's talent.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Leiderman, "Encounter". Teicholz 216.

<sup>101</sup> Schiff, "Kosinski Conundrum". Teicholz 223.

Kosinski was very enthusiastic about the novel and pronounced it "the most imaginative novel [he] has written and certainly the most imaginative [he] has read in a very long time," adding boastfully: "You don't need any other book but this. You may not want to read any other book from now on, because this book gives you basically insight into the whole genre."<sup>102</sup> No matter how proud the author was of his creation, the fact is that it failed to convey what was intended. The outcome is chaotic and hardly readable, the reader gets lost in the maze of lengthy quotations and abundant footnotes. The creative act appears disorganized and muddled, bringing confusion to the reader's mind. Unfortunately, out of this chaos nothing definite is born, and the ongoing process is presented for its own sake. The novel becomes a dead end both for the reader and the author. For this reason the reader wonders whether there will ever be any fruitful results at all, or if the continuous struggle depicted is a sign of the author's creative impotence.

The story of Norbert Kosky is strangely similar to the painful episode from Kosinski's own life in which Geoffrey Stokes and Eliot Fremont-Smith, in the June, 1972, *Village Voice*, accused Kosinski of ghostwriting and lying about the authorship of his novels. The scandal practically ruined his literary career after which it never regained its previous status. The idea behind *The Hermit* might be that it was written as a rebuttal to all those questioning Kosinski's artistic credibility. Thomas S.Gladsky claims that:

In a broader sense, *Hermit* is Kosinski's response to the seemingly insignificant question, 'Is there any history in it?' - a response not only to the 'historical/factual' ambiguities in his fiction, but also to the allegations that Kosinski was a lightweight, lacking the depth and substance to write the fiction that he published.<sup>103</sup>

Another critic agrees that the novel:

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<sup>102</sup> Schiff, "Kosinski Conundrum". Teicholz 223.

<sup>103</sup> Thomas S.Gladsky, "Is There Any History in It? The Fiction of Jerzy Kosinski". Tepa Lupac 276.

functions as an elaborate vindication of Kosinski by relentlessly laying siege to the concept of authorial originality, by exposing the provisional, intertextual nature of all "meanings" and by pointing out the dangers implicit within any society where the "ownership" of language is rigidly defined and the free play of creativity and collaboration are unable to function.<sup>104</sup>

Numerous references to the writing techniques of Joseph Conrad, Honore de Balzac, J.W. Goethe and Thomas Wolfe, which are strikingly similar to those of the protagonist, justify and validate Kosinski's claim to his artistic originality. By posing himself in the company of such famous figures Kosinski provides a direct answer to the infamous accusations. Quotations, references and footnotes demonstrate the author's extensive knowledge and literary competence so that none could ever doubt his artistic talent.

In this novel once again, and for the last time, Kosinski made use of incidents coming from his own life. Undoubtedly, *The Hermit* can be read without any references to its author. But how much more interesting it becomes when juxtaposed with the life of Jerzy Kosinski. "*The Hermit* is designed to be a vast labyrinth of words, a dizzying series of textual passageways that must be negotiated individually and which ultimately all lead to a final destination: Kosinski's inner self, his soul."<sup>105</sup>

The fictional world Kosky inhabits is made of memories, fantasies and perso-nal experiences which become the source of his artistic creation. As the creative process is actually taking place in front of the reader's eyes, the footnotes and references provide additional insight.

*The Hermit* is a detailed and meticulous explanation of Kosinski's concept of autofiction. We are the witnesses of how, out of those many bits and pieces, Norbert Kosky is born, and how he recycles the same material to form the protagonists of his novels. Norbert Kosky, his life and his artistic career, are transparent extensions of those of Kosinski. "But Kosky's world is also a realm of words governed by esthetic struc-

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<sup>104</sup> Larry McCaffery, "Kosinski's Mask Behind the Mask". Tapa Lupac 115.

<sup>105</sup> McCaffery, "Kosinski's Mask". Tapa Lupac 113.

tures, so clearly it is different as well [from Kosinski's world], which is at once the most obvious and most profound point of this autofiction."<sup>106</sup> So elaborate is Kosinski's technique of confusing fact and fiction, that the reader eagerly follows the undemanding road and directs all his effort to comparing the text with real life, as if the intricate play of the textual reality was of no importance.

Even though the text may rouse critical interest due to its innovative technique, as a novel *The Hermit* is virtually unreadable. Therefore, its worth should be sought in the author-narrator-protagonist triangle. The novel is Kosinski's highly personalized response to all the charges leveled against him throughout his entire career, the charges which he himself helped to perpetuate. "*The Hermit of 69th Street* is a work so excessive and self-involved, so obviously written by Kosinski for himself, that it seems born out of precisely that sense of necessity and compulsiveness. It is a sense that is rare among writers but common among survivors."<sup>107</sup> The World War II decided about the drive of his childhood - survival. As one cannot leave one's past behind, all his adult and artistic life was governed by the idea of reassuring himself that he is still alive; there was simply no other choice.

Kosinski's concept of autofiction finds its place among the theories of biography and autobiography which are referred to as the literature of fact. Biography and autobiography may be looked at from a historical or an aesthetic vantage point. If we adopt the first one we look for the facts from the real life which are used as an artistic strategy. Whereas in the second case we deal with a narrative which presents characters far from the dullness and flatness of the ones embalmed in non-fictional accounts. The notion of autobiographical and biographical truth used to be a key criterion in measuring the novel's artistic value until the post structural critique of the referential possibilities of language and the concept of the self which changed that view introducing autobiography into the realm of imaginative arts. This shift in perspective from fact to fiction resulted in the appearance of new genres which make use of the similar strategy; non-fiction novel represented by Truman Capote *In Cold Blood* (1966), Tom Wolfe's New Journalism *The New Journalism* (1973)

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<sup>106</sup> McCaffery, "Kosinski's Mask". Tepa Lupac 114.

<sup>107</sup> McCaffery, "Kosinski's Mask". Tepa Lupac 115.

or magic realism.<sup>108</sup> The double nature of those genres manifests itself in being the creature of both fact and fiction.

In an answer to the question in the title of this chapter whether Kosinski's novels are autobiographical, my analysis of Kosinski's prose shows the strategy which enabled him to shift from autobiography to autofiction. *The Painted Bird* is not strictly an autobiographical novel as I have already demonstrated. As ethnic origin is one of the features of one's identity, the boy from *The Painted Bird* escapes recognition because his ethnic community is never revealed, which proves that *The Painted Bird* is not an autobiographical novel. One of the requirements of autobiography should be the fact that the boy is Jewish, but the author does not want to admit it. It is not because he wants to hide his Jewish identity or is in any way ashamed of it. He realizes his Jewishness through an artistic strategy which employs the notion of universalism. Let me quote Bernard Malamud's words that "all men are Jews", which cross ethnic borders to reach the universal truth about mankind. Similarly, the small boy from *The Painted Bird* is not Kosinski's *alter ego* but his tragic fate depicts all child-victims of war. What is more, Kosinski's change of the language from Polish to English enlarged the power of his imagination and enabled him to detach himself from his childhood reality. His first novel *The Painted Bird* bears, however little and loose, relation to his youth; whereas his last novel *The Hermit of 68<sup>th</sup> Street* marks an enclosure and recapitulation of his literary aesthetic by exploring Kosinski's concept of autofiction.

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<sup>108</sup> Frederick Luis Aldama, *Oscar "Zeta" Acosta*, Literature Interpretation Theory Vol. 11 Issue 2 Aug (2000): 199-219.



## Conclusions

I have focused my monograph on various aspects of Jerzy Kosinski's novels, with particular attention to those subject areas which constitute the characteristic features of his works. My aim was to show that Kosinski's novels may be analyzed in a number of different ways, and each method draws the critic's attention to a different aspect of his work. Thus, I have closely examined how he handles the problem of fictional characters, human sexuality, and an artist's place in the creative process. I believe that my re-reading of the Kosinski's novels offers new ways of approaching the texts in question, while at the same time authenticating Kosinski's place on the American and Polish literary scene.

Jerzy Kosinski is no doubt a controversial author, both in his choice of subject matter and its presentation. Explicit sexual imagery involving voyeurism, group sex, rape, and lesbian love shocks and confuses readers, in many cases preventing any deeper and more thorough analysis. Lured by popular and commercial aspects of the novels, the reader fails to notice their significance in the whole artistic design. I would not underrate the market value of the novels; for many years sex has been a vehicle for promoting virtually anything and, more importantly, has never ceased to attract potential customers. Books are sold just like any other goods, and their value is also measured in financial terms. Yet, I have tried to show that there is much more to Kosinski's novels than what a popular eye notices. The author also takes up the important problems of human alienation, of the dangers of a totalitarian regime, and those of a holocaust survivor. As I believe these topics to be representative of Kosinski's fiction, I have discussed them in the subsequent chapters of my monograph.

Kosinski's protagonists exhibit a set of characteristics by which they can be recognized. They are lonely wanderers who bitterly criticize their reality and act without any regard to the existing moral code and cultural constraints. They cherish their personal freedom, which, nonetheless, prevents them from participating in the social structure. They adopt a solipsistic viewpoint and reject any interference in their affairs, treating all such attempts as a direct threat to their independence. They devote their whole life to retaining their individual freedom, whatever the cost. Thus, they choose professions like secret agent or artist, solitary sports like horseback-riding and skiing, without ever bothering about everyday problems because they neither have a permanent home nor a family. They place themselves above society and claim the right both to judge and mete out punishment. The images of water, which I find crucial in defining the characters, point at what is missing in their world: the natural balance between the individual and the collective, and the harmony between human needs and capabilities, so that their lives become quests for the unattainable.

Sexuality is an important aspect of the characters' lives which functions primarily as a key to self-discovery. Yet, in the course of the discussion, I claim that the key is used not only to open, but also to lock. My discussion of Kosinski's presentation of human sexuality results in two opposing arguments: on the one hand, sex limits self-discovery, while on the other hand it may expand self-awareness. The complexity of the problem lies in the fact that both are at work in Kosinski's novels. Excessive exploitation of sexuality deprives the characters of their sex's communicative and constructive powers, leaving only desolation and emptiness in its wake. The model of male sexuality which Kosinski presents in his novels borders on inadvertent satire, as the hero's virility is so flawless that it begins to seem hardly human. On the other hand, female protagonists serve only as objects of desire, or as means through which masculinity may be proved. Emotional groping towards the discovery of sexual identity involve testing the extremes of behavior including transgression of socially accepted norms of sexual behavior. In my dissertation, I have argued that somewhere along the way, among tormenting desires and passions, the protagonists lose their humanity, and sex, instead of bringing personal liberation, becomes yet another instrument of oppression. Sex, as presented by Kosinski, is a lie; it cannot be dissociated from the rest of human experience.

Kosinski's characters are alienated both from the outside world and from their own selves. Whether the alienation is caused by external factors such as a political system, culture, social norms or beliefs, or whether it results from the individual desire to express oneself freely, its impact on human life cannot be overrated. The protagonists delude themselves that alienation from society will ensure their personal freedom and it will allow their self-realization. That is why they use it as a strategy of survival in the totalitarian system, or as a means of reaching certain goals. On the one hand they alienate themselves from the brute force of the totalitarian system, but on the other, they use the same force to bring other characters under control at the same time denying themselves the opportunity of finding allies to fight the system together. An alienated man, however, who cannot fully participate in social life and make use of the instruments of democracy, becomes an outsider. Alienation both from other characters and from the society presupposes a lack of stability and continuation, which fosters the feeling of isolation and loneliness. To overcome the sense of estrangement Kosinski's protagonists engage in various actions. Constant movement and change validate their existence and become a substitute for the absent meaning. They indulge in love affairs as a means of ridding themselves of the feeling of alienation. Yet, their idea of love is reduced to sex and as it turns out sex alone fails as a vehicle through which happiness may be mediated. Their expectations are not met and their lives do not become better because they mistake sex for love. What they experience instead is the perpetual transitoriness of their lives without any hope of ever reaching solid ground. Suspended between the social and the individual sphere of life, they fail to find a balance between the two. My argument is that this balance may be attained only through relating to others.

No doubt many readers find Kosinski's novels disturbing. Whether we consider the scenes involving human or animal slaughter, or the characters who oppress others, the readers' reactions are similar: they are shocked, distressed and confused. Literature has not only made personal identity one of its central topics, but it has also assumed a vital role in shaping the reader's identity. The unfailing popularity of horror, detective, and pornographic fiction proves that there is such a demand, that readers like to be disturbed. It is one of the qualities of fiction that it can create an illusion hardly discernible from reality. No matter how complex the reading process is, readers exercise their imagination by confronting

situations and characters, which their own lives do not supply. Hence, disturbing texts respond to hidden desires for adventure and hazard, all the more so because they can be experienced in a secure environment. Thus, the fictional reality becomes a part of the reader's own experience, and he/she may draw from it in the same way in which he/she draws from his/her own past.

The final chapter of my dissertation addresses the problem of self-creation. I have thoroughly examined Kosinski's novel *The Painted Bird* and looked for autobiographical elements in the plot. My analyses show that *The Painted Bird* is not an autobiographical novel. Yet, the question whether Kosinski's novels are autobiographical or not is the result of a special strategy which the author employs; namely, the deliberate mixture of his own reality with the fictional world. For Kosinski, a fact from a person's life, once it has happened, belongs to the realm of imagination. As people are unable to remember clearly every single moment of their lives, what they store in their memory is a mixture of fact and imagination, intermingled with instances of wishful thinking and the moments they wish had not happened. All these components meet and mingle during the creative process and, as Kosinski claims, it is simply impossible to separate them.

An artist draws from every available source: the real world, other works of art, his own or other people's imagination, etc. That is why it is impossible to establish the "ownership" of the ideas which appear in the novel. *The Hermit of 69th Street* is a novel which documents such a process of artistic creation. Kosinski's notion of autofiction finds here its full realization, in spite of the fact that the novel is very difficult to read in terms of a single genre. In part, the novel is to substantiate Kosinski's credibility in response to the accusations that he did not write his novels. More importantly, it is a very detailed account of what is going on in the author's mind while conceiving a novel. The readers follow in the author's footsteps from the gathering of materials to its crystallization into a final form. The enormous number of footnotes and little pieces of information collected along the way show that this process, although happening in the artist's own mind, makes use of the whole cultural baggage his mind has accumulated throughout his entire life. What makes the work unique is the organization and the presentation of ideas already common to humanity. Although *The Hermit of 69th Street* is very valuable in its allowing for an insight into the creative process, it is not

very accessible to readers. I find its worth in being a closure to Kosinski's artistic career which started with the publication of *The Painted Bird*. We can observe a shift from autobiography, *vide* my discussion of autobiographical elements in *The painted Bird*, to Kosinski's last novel *The Hermit of 68<sup>th</sup> Street* which is an artistic account of the concept of autofiction. In his first novel Kosinski uses autobiographical elements never openly admitting to it, in his last novel, on the contrary, he meticulously notes every single source of reference he makes use of. That is why *The Hermit of 68<sup>th</sup> Street* becomes a literary explanation of Kosinski's concept of autofiction so different from his other novels.

I hope to have provided grounds for further analysis of Kosinski's novels, especially with regard to the problem of autobiography and autofiction. Autobiography has, nowadays, become a popular genre; not only do the lives of famous people attract readers, but also popular magazines organize literary competitions, which aim at reviving diary-writing. In our standardized world, writing one's own story is not only an attempt to stand out from the crowd, but also a way to get to know oneself better, to find the reason for living in a world where there are more questions than answers. Kosinski shows how to make use of fact and fiction and how to play the two for the benefit of the literary text. His narrative technique marks another step in the development of literary theory, challenges the old rules, and poses new questions. That is where I find its worth.

Another interesting aspect of Kosinski's novels is that he easily joins high and popular culture. His novels have enjoyed great popularity wherever they have been published, despite the fact that they are not enjoyable in a traditional understanding of the word. Not only do they avoid a traditional story line, but it is virtually impossible to summarize them. Although Kosinski assaults both literary and moral traditions, his books have been read both by common readers and students of literature. I believe they are still a valuable source for Polish students and would make a good assigned reading. Their controversiality would spur any discussion and furnish a wide range of interpretations.

Since Kosinski's novels are structured in ways intended to include the reader rather than shut him off, they may be analyzed not only in terms of the texts, but also with regard to their reception. First of all, for a historian of literature it is interesting to trace Kosinski's reception in Poland. The Iron Curtain and the Cold War had a great influence on the author's reputation. Before the reading public had a chance to familiarize

itself with his novels, there appeared, in the popular press, articles questioning both his literary and personal credibility.

At the time of their publication (and we must remember that the first Polish translation of *The Painted Bird* appeared 25 years later) the novels were read strictly in ideological terms. Attacked as anti-Polish, they were widely condemned and criticized by the regime propaganda. I am afraid that many opinions about Kosinski's fiction nowadays are still based on incidents from Poland's highly ideological past. Therefore, a contemporary rereading of the novels, in my view, would result in their complete re-valuation.

Another useful conclusion that may result from the present research is connected to the idea of interdisciplinary studies. Kosinski's novels constitute a good basis for historical, sociological, psychological and critical approaches. The historical context of World War II and the Cold War period, the dangers of the totalitarian regime to individual freedom, the role of human sexuality in self-discovery, the problems of reader's response, and, finally, a willful employment of the author's life in the creative process provide material varied enough for further analyses. I believe that students of literature could also benefit from a comparative study, which makes use of Kosinski's novels. The juxtaposition of Kosinski's highly controversial protagonists with others relating to a similar problem-area may result in interesting interpretations. What is more, in the best tradition of American multiculturalism, Kosinski represents three cultural milieu: Jewish, Polish, and American. There is a whole new area to study how the three cultures are represented in Kosinski's novels, where they meet, and where the differences become apparent.

One should not overlook the numerous critical remarks, which accompany Kosinski's novels: excessive sexual brutality, abundance of pain and suffering, a diminished role of women, and one-dimensional characters do not have to titillate a more sophisticated palate. Having tried to show their part in the whole artistic design, nevertheless, I have to admit that their role is also purely entertaining: they are addressed to appeal to mass readers and, as such, fulfill their role without fault. One needs to acknowledge their twofold function, which, nonetheless, leaves the question as to their significance still open. On the other hand, so much has been written about Kosinski himself (and not on the texts he has written) that an average reader may easily confuse the two. For this reason, it would be interesting to see to what extent a narrative strategy

influences reader's response; how much of this response is indebted to the text, and how much results from Kosinski's being a well recognized international figure.

Finally, my monograph aims at reviving interest in an author whose name appears more often in American university curricula, than in Polish ones. The fact that Jerzy Kosinski was one of the very few Poles who gained high reputation in America should not be forgotten. His success is measured not only in the number of copies sold, but also in the number of public engagements, a filming episode, and a star status among the American "jet-set". Kosinski's name has appeared as many times in scholarly journals as in the gossip columns of glossy magazines. His novels have won a number of critical awards: the National Book Award, the Guggenheim Fellowship, the Award in Literature of the American Academy and the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the Brith Sholom Humanitarian Freedom Award, the French Best Foreign Book Award, which, together with high positions on the bestseller lists worldwide, prove that there is more to them than merely low-key entertainment. My monograph does not aim at restoring Kosinski's reputation, I believe there is no need to do that, but I do see the need to remind the reading public about an author who appears on Polish reading lists too rarely for his achievements.

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