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Here are two major works by the famed Polish novelist and dramatist Witold Gombrowicz. The first, *Cosmos*, a metaphysical thriller, revolves around an absurd investigation. It is set in provincial Poland and narrated by a seedy, pathetic, and witty student, who is charming and appalling by turns, and whose voice is dense with the richly palpable description that characterizes Gombrowicz's writing. The second, *Pornografia*, explores the sinister effect the young can have on the old. To serve their own secret eroticism, two aging intellectuals encourage a young couple to commit murder. Although the adolescents are the weapons used to commit the crime, the four become conspirators before the deed is done.

Cosmos and Pornografia: Two Novels Details

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Patty says

so far i've finished Cosmos. Taking a little break now. This was possibly the most disturbing story I've ever read. Not so much a mystery, not so much a story, sort of a step by step detailed description of how mediocrity can easily lead to insanity. kind of upsetting in a way, but with some really incredible moments.

Nikmaack says

This book has two novels. While they are two separate stories, there's a lot of overlap in the style. Sentences seem to construct and deconstruct as they go. "He was tall, but also short," except done in a more interesting way. While I enjoyed both books, I don't know that I would recommend them. They feel suspiciously like bad translations.

The following text appears before COSMOS:

"This version by Eric Mosbacher made from the French translation by Georges Sedir and the German translation (Indizen) by Walter Tiel."

The original text was in Polish. So I can't help but feel I'm getting a game of broken telephone. It's hard to tell what the emotions were supposed to be like in the story. All the same, Cosmos was interesting and weird. If I had to summarize it, the story is about pattern recognition gone bezerk. And yet the book isn't dry. It's fun to read.

PORNOGRAFIA is similar in theme. Characters pursue a quest of uniting a young couple, romantically. Because it has to happen, for some reason. And yet, this is no silly little comedy. It's dark and weird and ponderous. Despite the title, this is not a dirty book. The author (or translator, anyway) doesn't even use "bad words". Again, the translation feels off. This novel is translated from the French by Alistair Hamilton. And he clearly made some choices, because I doubt very much that the original Polish novel had the words "fait accompli" in it, as well as other French expressions left untranslated.

Prior to PONOGRAPHIA is a statement from the author (also translated from French) in which he compares himself to existentialism, and talks about the "philosophy" of the novel. That's the territory we're in -- books that have to MEAN something very profound. But the author, even as he compares himself to Sartre, tries to distance himself from the philosophy world.

Who are these novels for? Who would I recommend them to? Why did I even read them? I grabbed the book at random somewhere. I think in a bookstore in Philadelphia. And that made the random oddity of the two novels all the more interesting, to me. They are weird books.

Leah Kalmanson says

Nightmarish and hilarious. The novel exploits the idea that our minds interpret the world by making

meaningful connections--between words and objects, causes and effects, before and after, etc. What's the difference between a "meaningful connection" and "paranoia"?

Nathaniel says

Right from the beginning, you get the sense of how much is fastened, rattling, to the train of this man's thought. A sentence from page two:

"I wondered, standing in the midst of this chaos, this proliferating vegetation with its endless complications, my head full of the rattle and clatter of the nightlong train journey, insufficient sleep, the air and the sun and the tramp through the heat with this man Fuchs, and Jesia and my mother, the row about the letter and my rudeness to the old man, and Julius, and also Fuchs's troubles with his chief at the office (about which he had told me), and the bad road, and the ruts and lumps of earth and heels, trouser-legs, stones and all this vegetation, all culminating like a crowd genuflecting before this hanged sparrow--reigning triumphant and eccentric over this outlandish spot."

The narrator obsessively accumulates arbitrary signifiers, shuffling every loose end back into play in an effort to make things cohere. When his associative chains threaten to disintegrate, he begins to act and advances the plot with his compulsive, crowded manifestations. On the one hand (via the character of Leo) eccentric, privately-gratifying constellations of meaning are presented in a disarmingly sympathetic manner that becomes almost celebratory in the final quirky moments. On the other hand, the narrator, last name Witold, grinds his teeth over his different obsessions to an uncomfortable degree; a fact that he acknowledges in scattered moments of especially self-aware narrative:

"I must stop connecting and associating."

"Such a continual accumulation and disintegration of things can hardly be called a story" And

"Oh, merciful, almighty God, why was it impossible to concentrate on anything?"

While the inevitability of Witold's relentless recombination of items (a hanged sparrow, a deformed lip, a pattern on the ceiling) gets a bit oppressive, there is a dependable vein of humor in "Cosmos" that makes it a pleasurable read. The characterisation of Leo's family, his maid, two newly-wedded couples, Witold's friend and a fidgety rural priest is distinct, detail-oriented and intense. Witold finds the comic elements of everyone who surrounds him and skewers them to the wall.

BIG CAVEAT: This book is called a "version" of "Cosmos" because it is a translation of two other translations (to English from the French and German translations from Polish). I'm not really comfortable with a text so far removed from the actual language of its author and I might not have purchased or read this "version" of the text if I had noticed what a game of telephone it has already passed through.

_____ [Review of "pornografia" forthcoming] _____

"Pornografia" is more entertaining than "Cosmos" and a better introduction to Gombrowicz. The narrator contextualizes his "feverish" excitability--the animating force, mirrored in Frederick, his peer, that bullies this story forward--by saying, "it must be understood that all this suddenly happened to me after stifling, gray years of horror and exhaustion, or of insane extravagance. During which I had almost forgotten what beauty was." Frederick and the narrator set about trying to manufacture beauty in a delusional and ruthless fashion, using all of the ancillary characters of the book to advance their scheme of prompting a young man and a young affianced woman to hook up with one another, simply on account of their proximity and youthful freshness.

As in "Cosmos," much of the reality is compiled and determined by two quite similar middle aged men with too much free time and great psychological insight with little psychological grip. A representative passage: "He was abject, humbly odious in this submission to his own horror--and his abjection contaminated me to such an extent that my own worms arose, crawled out, climbed up, and polluted my face. But that was not the limit of my humiliation. The sinister comicality of this situation was mainly due to the fact that we were like a couple of lovers deceived and rejected by another couple: our passion, our excitement had nothing on which to feed and now raged between us." "Sinister Comicality" may be the best overall descriptor of Gombrowicz's style. His protagonists are decidedly creepy, unstable looming voyeurs, who for all their menace are endearing for their superior intelligence and dependable wit.

Readers see everything from the perspective of these idle men, who are happy to introduce other characters in this fashion (of Hippolytus): "He looked as though he were bloated by a tumor that had distorted his limbs and stretched his flesh in every direction so that his repulsively flourishing body was like an erupting volcano of meat." And when this same man is speaking, "At the same time his disillusioned, implacably present face was a real insult to Amelia and her guests. The destructive force of his speech was inconceivable, and you could see this force, this marginal force, carry away the orator like a bolting horse." The humor in these excerpts is characteristic of "Pornografia," which for all its violence and foul intent is lighter and more digestible than "Cosmos."

I wonder what influence Gombrowicz had on Thomas Bernhard.

Jim Leckband says

Cosmos: Why is something something? Why did this or that thing happen? What does my perspective on things change what they are?

These are some of the weightier questions that ran through my head while I was reading this weird novel. Narrated by a man visiting a Polish household in the countryside where some quite inconsequential things happen, it adds up to a philosophical mystery - the Cosmos, in other words is where ultimately inconsequential stuff happens that only appears consequential due to our perspective.

The prose is a little like Paul Auster or Knut Hamsun - you absolutely never know where the author is going, which is one reason why I finished the book, that approach was interesting to me. However, due to the wackiness of the interior monologue a lot of readers will be left at the side of the road as the author goes on his way.

Pornographia: I got into this book much more than Cosmos. It is similar to Cosmos in that it throws two visitors from the city into a country village house. The main difference is that this visit takes place in occupied Poland in 1943 - which puts an edge on every action and motive. The Germans (and approaching Russians) are offstage during the novel, but the fact is that anything that might alert them to the household must be avoided - if only because there is no way to predict what could happen.

One of the main characters, Frederick, is a master manipulator that loves to involve others in his charades and fantasies. One might say he is a little fascist reflecting the monstrous Fascism they live under - I am sure this was intentional by Gombrowicz. The parallels of the household's intrigues to the greater situation reminds me a lot of Renoir's movie "The Rules of the Game": the village house, the thrown together mixture of people, the manufactured dramas, the mistaken identities leading to death and of course the allegory contained within the work.

The title "Pornografia" makes the book seem like it is going to be something different than it ends up to be. To me it referred to the impotent gaze and manufactured situations that obsessed Frederick and the narrator when they are manipulating the others in their dramas and it quite fits the creepiness they exhibit.

Gombrowicz's style is incredible, a writer could learn a lot from him. There are flashes of Nabokov without the look-at-me virtuoso feeling. Every sentence feels unexpected but after reading it you see how it fits. I did enjoy reading this book.

Sabrina Calle says

This is an amazing read. And proof- as if we needed it- that Eastern Europe pretty much corners literature.

Antonio Delgado says

Following the groundbreaking *Ferdydurke* and the irreverent humor of *Pornografia*, Gombrowicz's modernism explores the nothingness of trivial events when experience within the everyday relationships while revealing its inherent boredom.

Marc says

While "Cosmos" is sufficiently excellent, "Pornografia" is an effervescent, fearless exploration of the dire potentials of decentralised existential meaning. Modernist genius at its finest, and not for the faint of heart. Bravo!

Jon says

I liked this. I usually like goofy eastern european kafka-y novels that question my reality. because, after all, reality is just a function of the state, man. this one is from the dirty thirties and the land of poland (hey, how come the pope wore a funny hat? cuz he was a fuckin' polack and they're so goddamn dumb they also do stupid stuff that stands out like that, fuckin' polacks). anyway, this book is pretty short and hard to make sense of, which are both to its credit. it's a murder mystery where all the clues are unreadable -- like some unknown loon will hammer a rabbit to a barn door and or put two sticks in a weird formation out in the yard (these thing might be in the book or not i can't recall) -- and the guys who are all shook by the strange assortment of clues invent some sort context to keep the mystery alive. See, that's how language works, we make systems up because we gotta or we'd all be ordering purple for happy hour. I can't remember what happens after about half way through but I recall the end being crazy.

John M. says

These two novels are both exercises in the absurd; taut and paranoic with a thick streak of black humor. I particularly enjoyed the symbiotic relationship between the younger and older characters in 'Pornografia'.

You have the interesting case of Frederick and the narrator corrupting and manipulating the two youths through whom they live vicariously but the issue can also be considered in reverse; Karol and Henia playing up to the expectations of the elders and manipulating them. Then you have the relationship between the narrator and Frederick which has shades of rivalry and is characterized by subtle mind games. All this tension slowly builds toward a violent conclusion but the ending was far from satisfying in my opinion.

Elie says

Both Cosmos and Pornografia start with a storyteller's "once upon a time" and feature the author-as-narrator stumbling to make sense of a reality clouded by obsession. In Cosmos, the narrative gluts with repetitive associations, hinged around hanging dead animals and a convergence of women's mouths in an enjoyably mystery that disappointingly never takes off. In Pornographia, the narrator's voyeuristic fixation on eking erotic experience from innocence is told with a pitching and doomed hysteria that is all the more enjoyable for achieving fruition.

Already similar, both novels also have character doubles of the narrator, but Pornographia's has balls and moves the narrative admirably, while the double in Cosmos rather resembles one of the buttered radishes the characters forever consume. If you pick this up, be aware that the text is a translation of a translation from Gombrowicz's Polish and read the second one first.

(Since Cosmos and Pornografia are essentially two novels, I allow myself to expand my usual three-sentence reviews to a liberal six.)

Scott says

The first book has especially followed me around. I am quite curious to re-read this by another translator, Danuta Borhardt.

Elena says

I read this book a few years back and kind of forgot about it. So far I have only re-read Cosmos and was so happy to remind myself how the story is so graceful with its dry observations and a mix of absurdly, hilarious points. Everything is nothing, and nothing is everything, and here we are in the middle of it trying to figure it out.

- "I had been ready for anything, but not for a teapot. Enough is enough, and this was the last straw. There is a sort of excess about reality, and after a certain point it can become intolerable." p.66

- "A growing distraction was associated with this, and there was nothing surprising about that, for excessive concentration leads to distraction, looking at one things masks everything else - when we stare at a single point on a map we are quite well aware that the others elude us." p.20

- "Nevertheless, in spite of all the talk and the noise, the whole thing was somehow hollow, incomplete, lacking in conviction, to such an extent that for a time I had the feeling that I was was looking at my companions and myself through the wrong end of a telescope or from a great distance, as if the whole thing

were happening on the moon." p.106

Monica says

Incredible!

Gerbik says

I was recently reminded of this book. I bought it as a teenager because the two titles seemed to be a perfect summation of my mind's competing interests at the time. I remember COSMOS to be one of the funniest things I'd ever read. It's Kafka without legitimate horror, and Proust without legitimate desire; somehow, the book doesn't get engulfed by those two influences. The ending is one of the great metaphysical jokes of all time.
