

# Ecstasy and matter

Agnieszka Waligóra

ORCID: 0000-0002-4316-9207

c r i t i c s :

Katarzyna Szopa, *Wybuch wyobraźni. Poezja Anny Świrszczyńskiej wobec reprodukcji życia społecznego* [An Explosion of the Imagination. Anna Świrszczyńska's Poetry and the Reproduction of Social Life], Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, Katowice 2022

*Wybuch wyobraźni. Poezja Anny Świrszczyńskiej wobec reprodukcji życia społecznego*<sup>1</sup> [An Explosion of the Imagination. Anna Świrszczyńska's Poetry and the Reproduction of Social Life] by Katarzyna Szopa is her second individual monograph, published four years after *Poetyka rozkwitania. Różnica płciowa w filozofii Luce Irigaray*<sup>2</sup> [Poetics of Blossoming: Sexuate Difference in Philosophy of Luce Irigaray] on French feminist thought.

Katarzyna Szopa has been studying works by female Polish poets for years. Apart from feminist criticism, materialism constitutes one of the most significant methodological contexts of her work. In *Poetyka rozkwitania* she analyzed the problem of gender difference in reference to poststructuralism, focusing on discourse and sign qualities, confronting it with the feminism of difference postulated by, among others, Irigaray and Rosi Braidotti. It resulted in a concept of materiality – especially of the body – as something independent of discourses and therefore constituting a real limit to oppressive narratives, naturally immune to the postmodernist, anti-essential vision of language.

However, what is equally important, in Szopa's work materialism also assumes a historical formula – she combines the cultural vision and representation of women with their socio-economic situation, mechanisms of production, or categories of social class and exploitation, which positions her amongst scholars applying Marxist criticism.

*Wybuch wyobraźni* consistently elaborates on themes from Szopa's earlier work, and focuses on material aspects of women's functioning in culture, society, and economy. It is still a double-track materiality, which includes both the commonly understood "physicality" of subjects, and analyzing those embodied entities in their various political and economic contexts. Simi-

<sup>1</sup> Katarzyna Szopa, *Wybuch wyobraźni. Poezja Anny Świrszczyńskiej wobec reprodukcji życia społecznego*, Katowice: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2022. In the text, I refer to pages from this edition following the abbreviation WW.

<sup>2</sup> Katarzyna Szopa, *Poetyka rozkwitania. Różnica płciowa w filozofii Luce Irigaray*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2018.

lar motifs appeared e.g., in interpretations of Joanna Mueller's works, which Szopa proposes to read through the prism of embodied language and materialist visions of reproduction<sup>3</sup>, therefore positioning herself in opposition to, among other things, postsecular visions from Mueller's works<sup>4</sup>. However, according to Szopa, the material – or the materialist perspective – does not exclude this imagination potential. On the contrary: as showcased by *Wybuch wyobraźni*, the feedback of these categories can bring us significant cognitive profits.

The issue of reproducing social life – which goes beyond the narrow understanding of reproduction – is obviously nothing new. *Akuszerki awangardy: kobiety a początki nowej sztuki* [Avant-garde's midwives: women and the beginning of a new art] by Iwona Boruszkowska<sup>5</sup> is a seminal work demonstrating how the most celebrated – male – works of high modernism and the avant-garde were a product of the exploitation of women. Women did unpaid and virtually invisible work, providing (emotional) care and reproduction (we shall return to this question later) thanks to which the privileged (also by a romantic-modernist artistic vision) could fully devote themselves to creative work. Szopa's previous work seems to have been founded on a similar premise (e.g., the paper *Karmicielki świata. Mamki mleczne w świetle reprodukcji życia społecznego*<sup>6</sup> [Feeders of the World. Wet Nurses and Social Reproduction]) and it consistently appears in modern criticism of women's writing; Monika Głosowicz's *Maszynerie afektywne* [Affective machineries], awarded with Nagroda-Stypendium im. Stanisława Barańczaka<sup>7</sup>, is one of the most famous and important examples of such analytics practices in recent years.

At the same time, Szopa's book represents the turn towards authors who today are either forgotten, or rarely read critically. It seems that Lucyna Marzec's analysis of Kazimiera Iłakowiczówna's works is another example of this, as well as the renewed interest in Urszula Koziół's and Lucyna Skompka's work, and suggestions to revisit established convictions regarding Wiesława Szymborska's poetry.

Szopa's monograph is thus a well-thought continuation of her individual research path, and a contribution to significant trends of modern literary studies. It should be mentioned that the publications mentioned above – both books (Głosowicz, Marzec), and scattered in the form of papers (Boruszkowska) – represent an unusually high level of academic precision and innovativeness, which poses a challenge for scholars interested in similar topics.

<sup>3</sup> Katarzyna Szopa, "Dermografie: poetyka relacji. Wokół związków materii i języka w poezji Joanny Mueller" [Dermography: Poetics of Relationships. On Relationships Between Matter and Language in Joanna Mueller's poetry], *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 10, (2013): 137–160.

<sup>4</sup> Piotr Bogalecki, "Od apokryfu do «anarchomistycyzmu». Postsekularne narracje (liryczne) Joanny Mueller" [From apocrypha to «anarchomysticism». Postsecular (lyrical) narratives by Joanna Mueller], *Świat i Słowo* 1, 24 (2015): 129–144.

<sup>5</sup> Iwona Boruszkowska, "Akuszerki awangardy: kobiety a początki nowej sztuki", *Pamiętnik Literacki* 3 (2019): 5–14.

<sup>6</sup> Katarzyna Szopa, "Karmicielki świata. Mamki mleczne w świetle reprodukcji życia społecznego", *Wielogłos* 1, 47 (2021): 1–24.

<sup>7</sup> Monika Głosowicz, *Maszynerie afektywne. Literackie strategie emancypacji w najnowszej poezji kobiet* [Affective machineries. Literary emancipation strategies in contemporary poetry by women], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2019.

*Wybuch wyobraźni* is just as excellent: it is a well-written book with an impressive list of references, presenting a deep and interesting analysis of a phenomenon illustrated with adequate literary examples. It is divided into three parts, entitled: *Genealogie feminizmu* [Genealogies of feminism], *Praca reprodukcyjna* [Reproductive work] and *Praktyki ekstatyczne* [Ecstatic practices]; with an introduction and concluding remarks. The first part discusses relationships between feminist thought with the notion of reproductive work, identifying its origins (e.g. in Engels's texts) and its various (historical) interpretations: narrow, in which it refers to the extension of our species (producing new laborers), and broad, in which it is connected with all ways of sustaining societies; not simply reproduction, care or emotional work, but also all forms of caring about survival, which includes subjects' care for themselves. This part also describes the post-war controversy regarding women's literature, i.e., when literature by women was perceived mostly through the prism of emotional lyricism.

The second part discusses various forms of reproductive work, elaborating on ideas from the first part. Szopa analyzes the issue of the functioning of the family in the context of patriarchy, identifying different ways of oppressing women; she also analyzes different manifestations of love – romantic, maternal, heterosexual, lesbian, and auto-erotic. She concludes this part with care economies. All of the issues discussed in this part are rooted in studies, described and organized with great precision: chapters are logically connected, gradually elaborating on the titular reproduction of social life in its broad understanding. The first two parts are exemplified mostly with poems from *Jestem baba* [I am woman] by Świrszczyńska (which should not be surprising to anyone familiar with her work).

The third part discusses ecstatic practices. Szopa analyzes surrealism and other modernist and avantgarde theories, the titular motif of imagination, and futurist motifs – how Świrszczyńska's poetry is oriented towards the future. That part also analyzes decolonialism in *Czarne słowa* [Black words] and an apocalyptic vision from *Budowałam barykadę* [I built a barricade].

Although the sudden appearance of ecstatic practices in the title of the third part may be surprising, ecstaticity provides an important context for the whole book, and it is significantly connected with all the issues listed above. The key to understanding the close relationship between ecstasy and social life can be found in the introduction, where Szopa explains it using Dawid Kujawa's understanding of that notion: "here ecstasy refers to a specific artistic practice, which is about oscillating between the real and the possible" (WW 14)<sup>8</sup>; "this oscillating motion, as Kujawa explains, results in extending the horizon of social imagination" (WW 14).

Ecstaticity refers to art reaching towards the (im)possible: going beyond the limitation of the present towards what only begins to be imaginable. In this sense, ecstatic poetry possesses imaginative potential – it is able to construct, establish or foretell a world that is yet to come; model the (un)expected, and open us to surprise. Of course, this way of thinking results directly from the romanticist, modernist, and ultimately avantgarde tradition of utopian and

<sup>8</sup> See Dawid Kujawa, *Pocałunki ludu. Poezja i krytyka po roku 2000* [Folk's Kisses. Poetry and Criticism after 2000] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art 2021), 27.

futuristic thinking. It is enriched with a “spiritual” vision of ecstasy, which refers to going beyond oneself, transgressing the borders of self – and the system.

Similarly to Kujawa, Szopa highlights the critical value of utopian reflection and emancipatory contexts of art oriented towards the future. In their shared understanding, imagination allows us to construct a model of a better world or to create an enclave of unrestrained freedom in the space of what is currently surrounding us. At the same time, imagination has not only an abstract dimension: it translates into the functioning of a community – even if this is a community of the future.

In Szopa’s understanding – in Świrszczyńska’s understanding – ecstasy is directly connected with social issues: it shows a vision of reality, in which various limitations, hierarchies, and exploitation will disappear. This is of course connected with Świrszczyńska’s pro-socialist ideas, which she made clear on numerous occasions. Such a way of thinking about ecstasity is somewhat more specified than for Kujawa, for whom “engaged” topics are not a major issue<sup>9</sup>; however, as Szopa points out, Świrszczyńska was deeply interested in the reality of functioning during wartime and the post-war era – and that interest is clearly visible in her poetry.

Szopa highlights Świrszczyńska’s critical attitude towards the reality of life in the Eastern Block. In this sense, observations regarding the functioning of former Soviet states, which in fact acted according to the capitalist desire for profit and maximalization of production, but achieved it using different tools than western countries, are among the most interesting if not the most exposed ideas of the monograph. Thanks to this interpretative insightfulness, Szopa does not fall into an idealized vision of People’s Poland period, and also avoids overenthusiasm for the contemporary socio-economic and cultural situation of women. Szopa notices numerous inconsistencies and downsides – from the perspective of excluded subjects, including women – of the classical materialist thought and its extensions, frequently citing various corrections which feminist critics applied to Marx and other theoreticians.

Szopa consistently bases her work on Świrszczyńska’s ideas. In this perspective, Świrszczyńska is a critic of the received social, political, and cultural situation – and like Szopa, a critic interested in the multidimensional materiality of excluded subjects’ condition. Her criticism is specific – in Szopa’s vision, Świrszczyńska very often focuses on showing possible alternative realities, presenting readers with visions in which the world is free from currently perceived limitations. Interestingly, Szopa demonstrates how such dependencies can be seen not only in Świrszczyńska’s “engaged” poems, but also in her famous auto-erotic texts, which clearly show the unexpected tangle of politics, ecstasy and imagination, whose analysis is the goal of her monograph. How does taking care of one’s own happiness lead to ecstatic states? What role does the body play in that process? In what sense does it prove

<sup>9</sup> I refer to ideas scattered across many papers – examples of ways of thinking about the politics of art, which has nothing to do with topics undertaken by that art can be found in a debate with Paweł Kaczmarek and Łukasz Żurek, conducted in “Mały Format”. See e.g. “Czułość i nieczułość w jednym stały domu” [Tenderness and non-tenderness were in the same house], *Mały Format* 4 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/04/kujawa-kaczmarek-polemika/>, date of access: 10.09.2023.

to be an emancipatory action? Does it produce a certain type of socialized individualism, which the neoliberal discourse cannot appropriate? How does it change our understanding of reproducing social life?

Szopa offers convincing answers to those (and other) questions, using literary examples and detailed theoretical analyses. The monograph is also an excellent starting point for further research into similar topics. Although Szopa seems to continue to support difference feminism, highlighting material dimensions of functioning of subjects doing reproductive work, her book encourages discussion of those issues in different contexts. For example, it seems that it would be a good reference for questions regarding reproducing social life among other excluded subject – even though it is obviously not a problem discussed by Świrszczyńska.

However, what does require a deeper analysis is a closer look at Świrszczyńska's texts as phenomena which have a material (!) form. It seems that Szopa did not appreciate formal interpretations of Świrszczyńska's poetry – ways in which that poetry generates new worlds; systems of words, which facilitate the titular explosions of imagination. This is interesting especially given the fact that Kujawa consistently advocates for the primacy of form in his critical texts. For him, the ecstatic hides in itself potential for vagueness, setting off different, often extremely varied qualities; this leads to an explosion of imagination, generating space for unlimited speculation. It is true that ecstaticity can be perceived differently – and that in contemporary literary criticism it is explored by other scholars. After reading Szopa's brilliant monograph, the key question is: what about Świrszczyńska's poetry makes it so open to the imagination, utopia, to what is new, unknown, incomprehensible?

Katarzyna Szopa focuses mostly on meanings – on what results from a representationalist reading of Świrszczyńska's poetry, even if this representation is specific, open to depriving itself of the subject (the future does not exist yet, and so we cannot refer to it). Meanwhile, Kujawa is clearly against representationalism as a dominating way of reading poetry, postulating to focus on possible sensual arrangement of words – especially syntax and the semantic relationships it introduces (and modifies). And considering Świrszczyńska's minimalist poetry, laconic in terms of stylistic devices and typically associated with explicitness (however, with a lot of lyrical potential), a question about the ecstaticity of such a raw form would seem interesting. Is it set off mostly by the few means of expression, which leave space for movements of imagination? Does its quality differ from ecstaticity of more minimalist poetics? Are such understood texts machineries generating a chemical reaction rather than actually precisely constructing new worlds?

Although Szopa's monograph obviously discusses these questions, confronting a different understanding of ecstaticity and aesthetic concepts of modernism and the avantgarde, and analyzing their connections with politics or different forms of systemic violence (colonialism, war), this issue requires more attention. The unusual insightfulness of Szopa's political, theoretical, and methodological interpretation could therefore be refined with analyses of its relationship with aesthetics and identifying this connection where it seems to take place – in textual mechanisms.

Nonetheless, Szopa constructed an interesting, unusually broad and profound interpretative framework for Anna Świrszczyńska's poetry, which is an excellent basis for similar studies, at the same time representing current considerations of literary studies, and renewing interest in Świrszczyńska's work. And if that discussion focused – at least to some extent – on the question of ecstaticity of forms, this would be even better for Świrszczyńska, whose work found an important advocate in *Wybuch wyobraźni*.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

## References

- Bogalecki, Piotr. "Od apokryfu do «anarchomistycyzmu». Postsekularne narracje (liryczne) Joanny Mueller". *Świat i Słowo* 1, 24 (2015): 129–144.
- Boruszkowska, Iwona. "Akuszerki awangardy: kobiety a początki nowej sztuki". *Pamiętnik Literacki* 3 (2019): 5–14.
- Głosowicz, Monika. *Maszynerie afektywne. Literackie strategie emancypacji w najnowszej poezji kobiet*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2019.
- Kujawa, Dawid. *Pocałunki ludu. Poezja i krytyka po roku 2000*. Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2021.
- – –. "Czułość i nieczułość w jednym stały domu". *Mały Format* 4 (2021). <http://malyformat.com/2021/04/kujawa-kaczmarek-polemika/>. Date of access: 10.09.2023.
- Szopa, Katarzyna. "Dermografie: poetyka relacji. Wokół związków materii i języka w poezji Joanny Mueller". *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 10, 4 (2013): 137–160.
- – –. *Poetyka rozkwitania. Różnica płciowa w filozofii Luce Irigaray*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2018.
- – –. "Karmicielki świata. Mamki mleczne w świetle reprodukcji życia społecznego". *Wielogłos* 1, 47 (2021): 1–24.
- – –. *Wybuch wyobraźni. Poezja Anny Świrszczyńskiej wobec reprodukcji życia społecznego*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2022.

# KEYWORDS

Anna Świrszczyńska

ecstaticity

*feminist criticism*

**ABSTRACT:**

This is a review of Katarzyna Szopa's latest book, *Wybuch wyobraźni. Poezja Anny Świrszczyńskiej wobec reprodukcji życia społecznego* (Katowice 2022). It summarizes Szopa's academic achievements, contextualizes her research (feminist and Marxist criticism), and provides a brief description of the monograph's contents. The paper analyzes the titular notion of reproduction of social life and imagination, which are referred to the ecstaticity category employed by Szopa, ultimately problematizing all three notions in Anna Świrszczyńska's poetry.

*social life reproduction*

KATARZYNA SZOPA

**NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

Agnieszka Waligóra – Polish philologist, philosopher, literary scholar, literary critic and translator, PhD in humanities. Her research interests focus mostly on Polish poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century and its theoretical, political, and philosophical contexts, as well as literary studies methodologies, including translation studies. Beneficiary of the Diamond Grant in 2018-2022. Author of *Nowy autotematyzm? Metarefleksja w poezji polskiej po roku 1989* [New mise en abyme? Metareflection in Polish poetry post 1989] (Kraków 2023) and scientific editor of *Nowy autotematyzm? Metarefleksja we współczesnej humanistyce* [New mise en abyme? Metareflection in contemporary Polish humanities] (Poznań 2021). She has published in “Porównania”, “Przestrzenie Teorii”, “Wielogłos”, “Przekładaniec”, “Czas Kultury”, “Kontent”, “Notatnik Literacki”, and co-authored many papers. She has (co-)translated into Polish texts by Elaine Showalter, Emily Apter and Rita Felski. As a critic, she works for WBPiCAK in Poznań. |