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*HIGH, POP, OR TRASH? MISTER D.'S RUDE SOCIETY OF SUBMISSIVE CONSUMERS*

Two years after the collapse of Communism, a racy German TV commercial of soap bar inspired Mikołaj Korzyński and his father Andrzej Korzyński, known for composing the music to Andrzej Wajda's "Man of Marble" (1976), to write a song called "Mydełko FA" (Soap Bar FA). The song was recorded later that year by established singer Marlena Drozdowska and popular actor Marek Kondrat. The humorous single was nothing like Andrzej Korzyński's previous work: the inane lyrics mocked the absurdity of the FA commercial featuring a naked woman taking a bath and riding a white horse. Musically, it was a pastiche of disco polo<sup>1</sup>, a tacky type of music created in the late 1980s (Kowalczyk 1997; Piotrowicz 2012). At first serious radio stations were reluctant towards the genre and did not want to play the song; however, when it reached the top of the Polish radio charts in Chicago, local deejays, impressed by its American success, put it on heavy rotation. Most listeners did not understand the mockery and, to the surprise of critics, "Mydełko Fa" became a big disco polo hit, for many synonymous not only with the genre, but also with the 1990s, the time of political, social, and cultural transition, and the rise of post-Communist popular culture. Despite the critical backlash and decline in popularity in the early 2000s, to the discontent of the intelligentsia and music critics, disco polo remains the most popular type of music in Poland, with the only Polish songs with more than 100 million views on YouTube being disco polo videos (Oto dziesięć najpopularniejszych).

Similar to the authors and performers of "Mydełko FA," before releasing her first song in 2014, Dorota Masłowska had had a different career path<sup>2</sup>. To the surprise of many, Masłowska, an award-winning author, took a masculine pseudonym of Mister D. and recorded an album called "Społeczeństwo jest niemile" (The Society is Rude). She wrote all of the songs and worked with professional musicians such as Jakub Żulczyk, Marcin Macuk, and Kuba Wandachowicz<sup>3</sup>. The project was accompanied by a national tour and

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<sup>1</sup> At the time known as "sidewalks music", the genre was criticized by most Polish professional musicians and supporters of other types of music because of the lack of originality, naïve lyrics, and primitive music.

<sup>2</sup> Since the release of *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą białą-czerwoną* (published in 2005 in the USA as *Snow White and Russian Red* and in the UK as *White and Red*) in 2002, Dorota Masłowska has been referred to as an *enfant terrible* of Polish literature. Written and published when she was still a teenager, her controversial first novel was a critical and commercial success praised by established writers, critics, and celebrities. Consequently, it won Paszport "Polityki" Award, scored the Nike nomination and was heavily promoted on television by one of the judges on *Idol*, a talent show popular in the early 2000s. A few years later *Wojna polsko-ruska* was successfully adapted, first as a stage play and then a movie directed by Xawery Żuławski (2009). (Sawicka 2005). Since then Masłowska has been experimenting with genres, forms, and different types of cultural texts. She published two novels, a picturebook, two plays (*A Couple of Poor Polish-Speaking Romanians* was published in English in 2006), and two collections of essays. She also starred in the Xawery Żuławski's movie adaptation of her first novel.

<sup>3</sup> Masłowska had previously recorded two songs with Cool Kids of Death (2003) and two with Pałac Wujka Leszka.

the release of nine music videos, eight promoting the CD and one to a song released as a digital single only<sup>4</sup>. Even though most radio stations did not play her songs, the popularity of the music videos on YouTube resulted in the album debuting in the top 10 of the official Polish album chart, extensive media coverage, including mentions in international press<sup>5</sup>, as well as Masłowska's newly found popularity among Internet users unaware of her status as an established author.

The critical reception of *Kochanie, zabiłam nasze koty* (Honey, I killed our cats), Masłowska's long-awaited third novel, published six years after the award-winning *Paw królowej* (The Queen's Peacock/The Queen's Puke)<sup>6</sup>, was lukewarm, with most readers disappointed by the absence of "Polish issues." On the contrary, her music project, a cultural text which can be read in a similar way to her novels and plays, was criticized as being "too Polish." In an interview with "Newsweek" Masłowska said that she made this record as an answer to the pressure: "When I wrote books, I was told to stop writing. Now I am told to start writing and stop singing. (...) I am not here to make the audience's wishes come true. Disappointing their wishes is my own act of personal freedom" (Łupak 2014). In this essay, I want analyze Masłowska's Mister D. project and show that by recycling cultural trash and combining literature with music and visual arts, she manages not only to reach new audiences and cross the line between high and low culture, but also to create her most socially-conscious work dealing with such issues as gender inequality, celebrity culture, and consumerism.

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<sup>4</sup> On 11 November 2014 – the National Independence Day – Masłowska released the video to a song originally not found on the album, yet one perfectly fitting into its discourse. "Tęcza" (Rainbow), featuring Kuba Wandachowicz as Monsieur Z, directed by Monsieur Zupika & Kee-Zoo and starring Masłowska, Wandachowicz, and Michał Piróg – an openly gay choreographer and celebrity (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9XOtdXY9kQ>), was inspired by an artistic construction made of artificial flowers on the Savior Square (Plac Zbawiciela) in Warsaw, which had been permanently vandalized. Even though the construction was supposed to provoke positive emotions due to the universal symbolism of the rainbow, the far-right and Catholic groups believed it to be a symbol of the LGBTQ community, with Tadeusz Rydzyk calling it a "symbol of deviancy" (Burski 2013). Masłowska wrote the song about the danger of mixing hatred with God and patriotism. The most contemporary and socially conscious song by Mister D., "Tęcza" further explores the fear of the others found on the album: "My old lady's at work, there's noise on the block, there's shit on TV/It was supposed to get cheaper but it got more expensive/And if that wasn't enough, I go outside to get some relief/And what I see is a/Rainbow/Everybody would get pissed off/I understand weather, rain, sun rays, all this stuff/But/a rainbow?/Those are just made-up gay shit/Did it bother anyone when everything was normal, empty, grey?/It suited people's faces at least," Mister D. sings (Mister D. 2014 - unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Polish are mine). The narrator is disappointed with the present and blames her failures on the others, who do not have to explicitly mean gays. With almost a million views on YouTube, it remains Mister D.'s third most popular video, yet the one with the biggest percentage of dislikes and negative comments, interestingly, representing both right- and left-wing views.

<sup>5</sup> Such as the international issues of "Vogue", "Huffington Post", and "Harper's Bazaar."

<sup>6</sup> The reception of Masłowska's second novel, written in the form of a poem in prose reminiscent of a rap song, was mixed. On the one hand, in 2006 she won the Nike, Poland's major literary prize, with some critics focusing on her writing skills and praising her ability to poke fun at the mass-media and her new-found success. On the other hand, others criticized the loose plot and aggressive language.

### Popular culture and trash. Kitsch, camp, and parody

In the last few decades, the world became media-saturated, with mass media and popular culture being powerful institutions which “control and shape all other types of social relations” (Strinati 2004: 205). Because of the Internet, the already blurry limits between high and low cultures became even more unclear, and there are no firm principles which can help to distinguish art from pop culture (Strinati 2004: 207). While it is difficult to differentiate between high and low culture, Marcel Danesi acknowledges that “high implies culture considered to have a superior value, socially, aesthetically, and historically; low implies culture considered to have an inferior value. Low is often applied to pop culture generally, along with negative descriptive terms” (Danesi 2015: 5). Moreover, he notes that the latter “rejects both the supremacy of tradition and of established cultural norms, as well as pretensions of intellectualist tendencies within contemporary artistic cultures” (Danesi 2015:4). John Storey in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* recognizes a few possible explanations of popular culture and notes that it “is always defined, implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories” and “any definition of popular culture must include a quantitative dimension” (Storey 2015: 1,5).

Furthermore, in *Trash Culture: Popular Culture and the Great Tradition* (1999) Richard Keller Simon argues that the high culture and literature of the past have been rewritten to fit contemporary consumer society (Keller Simon 1999). For instance, he proves that it is possible to read “Cosmopolitan” as a modern-day version of Jane Austen’s novels. The notion of trash culture used by Keller Simon is noteworthy while discussing Masłowska, who frequently references both high art and popular culture. Robert Stam in an essay titled “Palimpsestic Aesthetics: A Meditation on Hybridity and Garbage,” portrays trash as a re-creation of things which used to be valuable and claims that “as congealed history, garbage reveals a checkered past. As time materialized in space, it is coagulated sociality, a gooey distillation of society’s contradictions” (Stam 1999: 68–69). Moreover, he suggests that trash is a “truth teller” that “defines and illuminates the world” because “the truth of a society can be ‘read’ in its waste products” (Stam 1999: 76). I would like to argue that a similar thing can be said about Mister D., a socially-conscious project built upon recycling unwanted “waste products.”

Pigeonholing Masłowska is a challenge because she is an acclaimed author, yet in all of her works she heavily draws from the language of the streets, the *dresiarz* subculture, and pop-cultural trash. Mister D. gives her a platform to not only further blur the limits between high and low, but also fully explore the artistic possibilities that combining literature with music and visual arts gives. Because “Społeczeństwo jest niemiłe” is an eclectic record, both textually and musically, and the release of the music videos not only popularized the songs but also gave them additional meanings, its reception was mixed, with some professional critics dismissing it musically and treating as Masłowska’s whim (Fall 2004; Chaciński 2014; Grygiel 2014). For example, Marek Fall in his review for Onet called it “a play of the elite in an elite cultural discourse” (Fall 2014), while Bartek Chaciński from “Polityka” referred to it as “a bad record” yet “an interesting one” (Chaciński 2014). However, I would like to point out that just like Masłowska’s previous works, “Społeczeństwo jest niemiłe” prominently depends on intertextuality, quotations, and pastiche. Despite the lukewarm critical reception, Mister D. quickly gained popularity when videos promoting “Hajs” and “Chleb” went viral. The viewers, some unfamiliar with her books, were puzzled and referred to them as “trash”

and “kitsch,” while others were enchanted and praised her unmistakable ability to depict and criticize Poland (Łupak 2014).

While Masłowska recycles pop-cultural trash, calling Mister D. “kitsch” is a palpable oversimplification. The most popular explanation of this term (synonymous with tackiness and cheesiness) comes from the classic works of Hermann Broch and Clement Greenberg, who oppose kitsch with high art and treat it as its biggest enemy (Broch 1969: 49-76; Greenberg 1939). Additionally, in his *Kitsch and Art*, Tomáš Kulka claims that objects which can be referred to as kitsch provoke emotional reactions, are usually associated with fixed topics, and contain no educational value (Kulka 1996: 37-38). Jean Baudrillard proposes a different characterization of kitsch: “to the aesthetics of beauty and originality, kitsch opposes its *aesthetics of simulation*: it everywhere reproduces objects smaller or larger than life (...) *it repeats fashion* without having been part of the experience of fashion” (Baudrillard 1998: 111). Masłowska, a critically-acclaimed author, does not fit into this untenable understanding of kitsch. While in her lyrics and videos she recycles pop-cultural references, she does not only merely repeat fashion. Moreover, Mister D. provokes “emotional reactions” whilst containing educational value.

Despite its tackiness, according to the aforementioned definitions, Masłowska’s project should not be read as kitsch. Still, one may argue that Mister D.’s ironic value and self-consciousness make it “camp.” This term, popularized by Susan Sontag in her 1964 essay “Notes on Camp,” is ubiquitous in cultural, gender/queer, and literary studies. Sontag defines it as a “disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical” sensibility, similar to kitsch, yet, unlike it, self-conscious (Sontag 1964). She believes that “many examples of Camp are things which, from a ‘serious’ point of view, are either bad art or kitsch,” moreover, “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’ not a woman, but a ‘woman’” (Sontag 1964). Barbara Klinger, however, argues that “camp results from an imposition of present standards over past forms, turning them into the outdated” (Klinger 1994: 140). She also believes that “camp resurrects past artifacts, not to reconstruct their original meaning in some archaeological sense, but to thoroughly reconstitute them through a theatrical sensibility that modifies them by focusing on their artifice” (Klinger 1994: 140–141). Likewise, Peter Rehberg and Mikko Tuhkanen believe that camp “functions as a mode of *archival production*, that is, an actualisation of something new from the past and its archives” (Rehberg and Tuhkanen 2007: 47). Presumptively, Mister D. is campy, as Masłowska’s pseudonym is masculine, the project involves cross-dressing/role-playing and heavily depends on nostalgia, both in the lyrics and music videos. Because of the camp sensibility, Masłowska talks about serious and political issues such as gender inequalities, consumerism, misogyny, and poverty without the pathos usually used in the socio-political discourse.

Nevertheless, Mister D., who is ironic and has the ability to comment on her own representation, can also be read as “postmodern parody” with its questioning the “unacknowledged modernist assumptions about closure, distance, artistic autonomy, and the apolitical nature of representation” (Hutcheon 1989: 99). According to Linda Hutcheon, “parody—often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality—is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders” (Hutcheon 1989: 93). Hutcheon famously claims that “through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (Hutcheon 1989: 93). Unlike kitsch or camp, “parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (Hutcheon 1989:

101). Masłowska's project can be regarded as one representing postmodern parody which "may indeed be complicitous with the values it inscribes as well as subverts, but the subversion is still there" (Hutcheon 1989: 106).

### **Femininity and masculinity in the rude society**

The album consists of eleven songs, which can be split into two groups based on the dominant issues they represent. The first one is the objectification of women and the passivity and infantilism of men. The opening "Ryszard" is an ironic depiction of the relationship between the almost 60-year-old left-wing politician Ryszard Kalisz and the narrator, a woman in her early 20s. She is in love with Kalisz but is told by the "rude society": "girl, where have you lost your eyes?/ look at you, so young, how come you're with such a fat and old commie?/He'll play around and leave you"<sup>7</sup>. She knows that people talk behind her back: "she's with that Kalisz only for his money" but "they won't give a thought that it could be something more." The music video directed by Aneta Grzeszykowska is very simple, yet it was blocked on YouTube because Masłowska appears in it painted in white, lying naked on the wine-red floor. She looks like a corpse and someone moves her motionless body in a cross-like position, then puts black ribbons on her heart, and finally starts moving her body like a wheel-of-fortune. The lyrics and the visuals do not focus on the way a politician becomes a celebrity and the thin line between politics and tabloids news, but on the lack of agency of the girl, left alone at the hotel, objectified not only by her partner but also by the tabloids and commentators.

In "Prezydent" (President), a song with a chorus sung by children, Masłowska once again discusses politics by mocking and infantilizing the figure of the symbolical head of state. Masłowska's president is a universal figure that can also be read as a stereotypical Pole, an absent husband and father. In the music video directed by Maciej Buchwald, Kazimierz Wysota plays the president and Masłowska the first lady. It shows the president staring at the skyline of contemporary Warsaw and then coming back home, which looks like a typical Polish one from the 1980s and early 1990s, an apparent reference to the lack of changes in a typical Polish household and Polish politics. Masłowska's first lady is a stereotypical housewife, a sad and well-dressed woman waiting for her scruffy husband, crying while cooking chicken broth and at the same time taking care of her equally miserable daughter.

The theme of infantile and absent men is continued in "Żona Piłkarza" (Soccer Player's Wife), which is an irreverent portrayal of the life of a stereotypical WAG<sup>8</sup>. Soccer is usually referred to as a hypermasculine sport providing men with examples of hegemonic masculinity (Anderson 2009: 77). Moreover, it plays a central role in the construction of masculinity due to gender stratification, homophobia in sports, and soccer's function as a boys bonding pursuit. By singing: "I will never be a soccer player's wife/and it's not about possible obstacles such as height or beauty/it's all about my ego," the narrator mocks the popularity of soccer players and their wives, who frequently become celebrities. The soccer player in the song appears passive and uninterested in the life of his devoted and sad wife, similar to the first lady in "Prezydent" and the narrator in "Ryszard." The animated video directed by Maria Strzelecka includes three female

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<sup>7</sup> Mister D. (2014). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Polish are mine.

<sup>8</sup> WAG - an acronym used to refer to **W**ives **A**nd **G**irlfriends of high-profile soccer players. At first, it was used mostly by the British press, to be adopted by tabloids in other countries. In Poland, it is frequently used in reference to Anna Lewandowska, Marina Łuczenko, and Małgorzata Rozenek-Majdan.

dolls: Masłowska the narrator, two WAGs (or wives/girlfriends of supporters)<sup>9</sup>, as well as two male ones – soccer players/supporters who look the same and have footballs instead of heads. Both men appear to be interested only in their sport and seem not to see their (hyperfeminine) wives. Instead of portraying fit soccer players, Masłowska and Strzelecka depict headless men who are passive partners focused not on practising sport but on watching it on TV. Given that masculine sports culture is eerily similar to the one surrounding military life, it is possible to read “Czarna Żorżeta” (Black Georgette) as a darker take on “Zona Piłkarza.” This time Mister D. takes her listeners to pre-1989 Poland and gives voice to the wife of a wealthy soldier, neglected by her cheating, alcoholic, and parsimonious husband. Depressed and lonely, she eventually commits suicide, wondering if he would bury her in the promised black georgette dress. The music video directed by Marcin Nowak and produced by Efektpol looks like a high-budget production reminding an old film. The plot directly retells the story described in the lyrics. In all four songs, men appear as passive husbands and fathers, treating their wives as accessories, sex objects, or housekeepers.

“Córka” (Daughter), featuring Kuba Wandachowicz, might be the most thought-provoking song on the album, and the first one with no music video. While promoting *Kochanie, zabilam nasze koty* (Honey, I Killed Our Cats), Masłowska was asked about the Smoleńsk catastrophe<sup>10</sup>. She said that it was a tragedy which made a lot of people suffer. Her words were misinterpreted and, consequently, she was quoted on the cover of a right-wing journal. Afterwards the left-wing media accused her of supporting Tadeusz Rydzyk and called her “Rydzyk’s daughter”. Remarkably, father Tadeusz Rydzyk, the founder of Radio Maryja and TV Trwam, which broadcast anti-Semitic and homophobic views, is known for his lavish lifestyle, love for fast cars<sup>11</sup>, and support of right-wing politicians. Furthermore, he is often criticized for being too political and taking financial advantage of elderly people. Masłowska used her experience to write lyrics narrated by the daughter of the priest. Despite the title, it is not a critique of Rydzyk but a story of loneliness, lack of acceptance, and the hypocrisy of the society: “they tolerate everybody/ Jews and Black people/they tolerate gays and the disabled/they tolerate everything and everybody/ but they don’t accept Rydzyk’s daughter”, she sings. In an interview with “Newsweek” Masłowska argues:

In Poland, everyone who doesn’t fit in has to go. (...) It’s the communist legacy: the expectation that everyone has to be the same. I am against the fascism of the old ladies supporting Radio Maryja, but I am also against the Warsaw elites, which think they are tolerant, but in reality, are filled with fascism. [...] The right to be free, to be accepted and understood is given to certain people, but not the symbolic Rydzyk’s daughter, because she has the wrong surname and represents the unattractive fraction. Those sitting in the fancy restaurants on Plac Zbawiciela, just like the right-wing, hate everything that is unpredictable, different and does not fit into their worldview (Łupak 2014).

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<sup>9</sup> Reminiscent of Victoria Beckham and Doda (Dorota Rabczewska), a Polish singer who during her marriage with soccer player Radosław Majdan was called the Polish Victoria Beckham.

<sup>10</sup> In the 2010 Polish Air Force Tu-154 crash 96 people were killed. Among the victims were the President of Poland Lech Kaczyński and his wife Maria Kaczyńska. Since then there have been many conspiracy theories about the crash.

<sup>11</sup> In early 2018 he made the news after claiming that his new, luxurious car was a gift from a homeless man.

Rydzik's daughter, just like women in the four aforementioned songs, has no agency and is judged because of her relationship with a man, this time with her own absent father.

The theme of social indifference appears in the last song on the album, the title track, which is a gloomy depiction of the society consisting of people living their grey lives, uninterested in others, ignoring poverty, prostitution, and abuse. This rude society is so passive and indifferent that it can no longer be moved. The video, directed by Karolina Jacewicz, depicts a sad woman – this time not played by Masłowska – struggling with preparing traditional Polish pork chops and continuing the theme of loneliness and oblivion.

### The rude society of post-Soviet consumers

The second dominant theme on the album is consumption and globalization, both present in "Haj\$" (Ca\$h), the first single promoting "Społeczeństwo jest niemiłe." Accompanied by a colorful music video directed by Krzysztof Skonieczny, the song received mixed response. The lyrics are narrated by a school girl growing up in time of social transformation. She attends school but dreams of a better life, which, for her, is synonymous with having money: "I don't want it with sausage/and I don't want, don't want it with butter/make me a sandwich with lard and cash," she sings. Also, she wants her friends to envy her:

They're crying, all my friends are crying/ when I stuff my face on lunch break/ give me a bite, just let me have a lick/ fuck off and eat your own, cause my sandwiches are/ made with cash, big fat cash/ with Egypt, with Audis and lard/ made with cash, big fat cash/ with ham made out of amstaffs/ and with cash. (...) We'll joyride through the Grand Canary Islands/ just remember, I've got math at 8 tomorrow (MISTER D. - HAJ\$).

Unlike the stereotypically Polish sausage (*kielbasa*), holidays in Egypt or Grand Canary Island<sup>12</sup>, driving Audi, and eating fancy ham – referred to as one made out of breed dogs popular with the *dresiarz* subculture – represent the dreams and wishes of the narrator, who is an underprivileged child. The video was Masłowska's first release as Mister D. It is a collage of scenes from a film called *Hardcore Disco*, Masłowska dancing and singing in front of a greenscreen, old-school computer animation, as well as home footage from the 1990s. Mister D. appears in a few different outfits, representing various identities of the narrator: she is a school girl, a rapper wearing lots of jewelry, a provocative woman in a swimming suit, and a basketball player. She drives gold Fiat 126 pulled by Amstaffs<sup>13</sup> and flies on a tiger-shaped carpet. The video is campy and nostalgic. Masłowska references popular culture and recycles trash from the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, such as computer games, toy soldiers, My Little Pony, rollerblades, plastic Virgin Mary-like bottles for holy water, Soviet cartoons, Trolls, Monopoly, Gameboy, Furby, cassettes, and Polaroid cameras. By doing so, she comments on the society's fascination with consumerism, a theme she further explores in *Jak zostałam wiedźmą* (How I Became a Witch), a picturebook also published in 2014. The video was successful and as of 2018 it has almost two million views on YouTube. Most of the commentators argue over the meaning of the lyrics and the symbolism found in the video itself. Some, especially the earlier commentators, struggle with finding meaning in the palimpsestic video and refer to Mister D. as "insane," while others focus

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<sup>12</sup> For many Poles a place synonymous with luxury because contestants of pseudo-reality shows, such as "Pamiętniki z wakacji," usually go there.

<sup>13</sup> American Staffordshire Terrier.

on the depth of the content and call it “a picture of contemporary youth obsessed with money” or “a song about the grey, stupid, and poor Poland.” (MISTER D. - HAJ\$) Masłowska’s narrator is a young representative of the consumer society. Even though she is just a school girl, she tries to impress her peers with the only thing she has (the sandwiches). She wants to be rich, yet has a very limited understanding of wealth, a result of her exposure to the mass media promoting consumerism.

Similar themes appear in “Chrzcziny” (Christening party), featuring Jakub Żulczyk. Here Mister D. once again goes back to the 1990s, to Poland during the time of social transformation. The narrator is a woman who falls in love and wants her boyfriend to take her to a christening party. With references to Jean-Michel Jarre, deodorant FA, FSO Polonez<sup>14</sup>, but also religious ceremonies connected to family gatherings with lots of food, alcoholic beverages, and abusive uncles, the song seems like a fitting sequel to “Haj\$”. Unfortunately, it is one of the three songs without a music video.

In *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* Dominick Strinati maintains that consumption influences popular culture and popular culture determines consumption (Strinati 2004: 206). Masłowska explores this theme in the last song with no music video, “Kinga,” controversially named after a popular TV presenter and celebrity Kinga Rusin. “Kinga Rusin cheated me when she offered me a mortgage/ she said: low percent, pure profits, I took it, and it was not worth it”, Mister D. sings. While Rusin has never endorsed a bank, with her books and cosmetic products she represents the omnipresent celebrity advertisements and the ubiquity of certain unqualified individuals. Even a news reader can lose credibility: “and you were so kind in that Teleexpress/and you were talking in such a sweet way, that I wanted to puke/now you’re sitting on my face and I can hardly breathe/I choke, I suffocate, when I drink your juices.” While Rusin has never read Teleexpress news, the song shows the possible confusion of celebrities as for viewers they are all the same. In an interview Masłowska argues:

On the surface, this text is about nothing. But when you go deeper, it is very meaningful: celebrities cheat us, it does not matter if our IQ is 200 or 20. And this is a lie that we allow to happen every day. (...) They have plastic surgery and photoshop pictures for the cover of “Viva” where they talk about their happiness, even when they are divorcing or addicted to heroin. (...) They wear clothes which are not theirs, drive test cars, and I see that when I’m having my hair done and I wonder why I’m so miserable, old, ugly, or poor. Or I take a credit from a bank they promote in order to pay off the one they have at another bank. The world of celebrities is a phantasmagoria (...) it has a bigger influence on us than we think (Łupak 2014).

A different take on consumerism can be found in “Zapach Boga” (The Smell of God), where Mister D. focuses on the overlapping nature of spirituality, going to church, and shopping. God is synonymous with the church: “the smell of churches is so weird - mold, naphthalene, some stones/ but also chrysanthemums, perfumes, maybe <sup>15</sup>/ it’s the smell of you, God.” The narrator compares it to the beauty of the smell in a shopping mall: “beautiful is the smell of freshly-baked rolls in Carrefour/sprayed by the staff between the aisles/ beautiful is the smell in Arkadia Mall,/smell of perfumes and new clothes,/flowers, lemons, and pine/mixed with the tempting smell of KFC chicken”. The simple music video, directed by Milena Korolczuk, further explores this theme. It starts with a box of chocolates looking like a Gothic church; the interior of the church is made

<sup>14</sup> A Polish vehicle named after polonaise, produced from 1978 to 2002.

<sup>15</sup> In Polish *być może* – an obvious reference to “Być może”, a Polish perfume introduced in the 1970s and still popular with elderly women.



of a carton decorated with a package of M&M's candies looking like fake stained-glass windows.

The most-successful, and arguably the best song on the album, is "Chleb" (Bread), narrated from the perspective of a young girl living in a typical Polish neighborhood consisting of large, socialist-realist apartment buildings. The narrator leaves her apartment in late winter/early spring in order to buy some bread in "Żabka"<sup>16</sup>, a popular corner store where one can collect special stickers in order to receive a free mascot – "there's never a line there./ maybe it's far, but they give you these stickers./For 500 you get a little mascot,/at least I think they're super cute", she says. On her way back home, she meets a *dresiarz* who is sitting on a bench drinking a budget energy drink<sup>17</sup>. He approaches her and tells her about his mother who used to be an alcoholic but now no longer drinks or buys bread because she has a breadmaker: "she used to be all fucked up,/ but now she's got a smile on her face./ The bread is baking and she no longer dreams of death.", he says. The girl starts to fall in love while the boy tells her that his mother is terminally ill and "the breadmaker's gotten all dusty" so he offers to sell it "I would've sold it for cheap,/thrown in a sticker and a recipe book for free./You could bake bread and in general/you wouldn't have to go to the store so often." The enchanted girl eventually buys the breadmaker but remains lonely – the man seems not to care about her or his dying mother. In the music video, directed by Krzysztof Skonieczny, Masłowska is accompanied by top model Anja Rubik, cross-dressed Maciej Nowak as the mother of *dresiarz*, as well as musicians Kuba Wandachowicz and Jakub Żulczyk. There are two worlds – the gloomy reality of a dirty Polish urban tower blocks neighborhood, and the colorful dream vision of the narrator in which she becomes *princess dresiara* (played by Anja Rubik) who meets *super dresiarz* (Karol Niezwiastny). Together, they ride an enormous dachshund. The color scheme in the former is reduced to monochromatic, *nostalgic* tones, while the dream sequence is dominated by bright, *modern* colors. This portrays a sense of disengagement and purposelessness. "Chleb" quickly went viral, getting more than 7,5 million YouTube views. The 7000 comments are even more mixed than those regarding the first single. Even though some dismiss the video and call it trashy, others manage to see its sadness and depth, both in the lyrics and the visuals. Many professional critics praise the song and the video, with some comparing it to "Rich bitch" by Die Antwoord (Tracewicz 2014). The appearance of Anja Rubik was reported in the media, leading to the video's further exposure.

In "Chleb", which is the heart of "Społeczeństwo jest niemiłe", Masłowska depicts the Polish working-class society with all of their dreams and nightmares, people disenchanting with the present and suffering from nostalgia. Masłowska's Poland has not changed that much visually in the last thirty years; the neighborhood in the video looks just like the ones in the 1980s or early 1990s (both outside and inside); children attend

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<sup>16</sup> In English "Little Frog." The omnipresent chain is the Polish equivalent of American 7-eleven.

<sup>17</sup> *Dresiarz* (sometimes *bloker* or *kark*) is a pejorative term, similar to British *chav* or Eastern-European *gopnik*, used in Poland to describe a specific type of young men, usually unemployed, undereducated, and anti-social. Silny, the protagonist of Masłowska's *Wojna Polsko-Ruska*, is usually referred to as an example of this subculture. A typical *dresiarz* listens to disco polo or techno, wears a tracksuit, has a shaved head, is obsessed with the gym and cars, and keeps aggressive dogs, such as American Staffordshire Terriers, as pets. The female version of *dresiarz* is *dresiara* or *blachara*, a tanned woman with bleached blonde or pitch-black hair, usually wearing pink and white mini-skirts and colorful artificial nails.

the same school; people pray in the same church, spend their free time in the same vegetable gardens, and die in the same hospital. The main change is consumerism represented by the omnipresent billboards, trash, and the mascots<sup>18</sup>, as well as globalization symbolized by Kebab bars. The society has not changed much, either: people in “Chleb” seem grey, disappointed with the present, and numb. Some YouTubers called the video “cheap” and “kitschy”; yet others managed to see it as a successful representation of contemporary Poland. “Chleb” is socially conscious and political; it is not a simple mockery which makes fun of the “rude society,” but it demonstrates how sad and disenchanting many people are. Just like in her novels, in “Chleb” Masłowska manages to depict the underprivileged members of the Polish society, and despite some of her critics, I would like to argue that, similarly to her literary works, she does it without giving the impressions of “the elite playing an elite cultural discourse.”

### Conclusions

When the cover of the first issue of Polish “Vogue” featuring Anja Rubik and Małgorzata Bela was released, it caused controversy, a somewhat reverse response to the one “Mydelko FA” received almost thirty years before. This time intelligentsia and critics praised the originality and lack of glamour of the photo shoot staged by Jürgen Teller. Yet most online commentators criticized it for the same reasons – the lack of glamour of the models wearing black and standing next to the black Volga in front of the Stalinist-era Palace of Culture and Science in the heart of smoggy and grey Warsaw (Vogue Poland). Four years earlier Anja Rubik appeared in Mister D.’s “Chleb” music video. With her bleached platinum blonde hair, heavy make-up, a tiara, white boots and a mini-skirt, she represented glamour dismissed by the intelligentsia, but one most Poles would have been more pleased to find on the cover of a glossy magazine synonymous with luxury.

Instead of following *Kochanie, zabiłam nasze koty* with a socially conscious novel, Masłowska released “Społeczeństwo jest niemiłe.” I would like to argue that this choice made her work more comprehensible and accessible. With her thought-provocative music videos, she makes people not only listen but also look and think. Many YouTube comments and reviews prove her point – the society is rude. Masłowska manages to blur the lines between high literature and popular/trash culture, which she had already been pushing with her novels. Likewise, she gained new fans (yet not always potential readers), more haters, and probably inspired other Polish writers to experiment with trash culture, such as Michał Witkowski, who became a fashion blogger and a soap opera actor. As Linda Hutcheon once claimed, postmodern film “does not deny that it is implicated in capitalist modes of production, because it knows it cannot. Instead it exploits its ‘insider’ position in order to begin a subversion from within, to talk to consumers in a capitalist society in a way that will get us where we live, so to speak” (Hutcheon 1989: 114). This can also be said about Mister D. “Społeczeństwo jest niemiłe” and its music videos show that Masłowska is a modern-day dandy able to enjoy trash culture and yet critical of the society of blind consumers fed by the celebrity culture, a theme she further develops in her recent collection of essays *Jak przejąć kontrolę nad światem, nie wychodząc z domu* (How to take control over the world without leaving home, 2017).

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<sup>18</sup> In one of the most disturbing scenes, the narrator is given toys (presumably mascots from “Żabka”) by children dressed-up as strawberries, who jump from a trash container.

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**MATEUSZ ŚWIETLICKI**

**HIGH, POP, OR TRASH? MISTER D.'S RUDE SOCIETY OF SUBMISSIVE CONSUMERS**

Contemporary Polish culture is filled with popcultural phenomena which cannot be easily defined. Top model Anja Rubik, who recently appeared on the thought-provoking cover of the first issue of Polish “Vogue,” had made her music debut in Mister D.’s 2014 “Chleb” video. It quickly went viral, but many YouTubers called it “trash,” probably not knowing that Mister D. is Dorota Masłowska, the critically-acclaimed author of *Snow White and Russian Red* which she published at the age of nineteen and later starred in its movie adaptation. The author of this article shows that by combining literature with music and visuals arts, Masłowska not only crossed the line between high and low culture but also reached new audiences.