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Review of the doctoral dissertation by  
Dominik Bartek-Świątek, M.A.

titled **Nordic Lite. *Constructing the Nordic Region and Nordicness  
in Polish and French Women`s Magazines in the XXI Century***  
written under the direction of Dr. habil. Kazimierz Musiał, prof. at the University of Gdańsk

The dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters divided into subchapters, the final of which subchapters, the most extensive and analytical one, is further subdivided into six thematic sections. These are followed by conclusions, a diligently prepared bibliography and an inventory of illustrations (taken mainly from the primary sources analysed) together with an appendix, which includes the framework analysis coding scheme. The text is approximately 200 pages in length, which have been intensively utilised; the contents of the text are not superfluous, nor is it in any respect incomplete. In general, one-fourth of the text presents the essentials of the concept for the study, the theory, and the method, which only serves to attest to the doctoral title applicant's workshop preparedness. The research workshop has been constructed by the applicant independently, with extensive theoretical awareness and humanistic sensibility, instead of being borrowed from others' books or readily available methodical propositions.

In the Introduction, the author presents the research objectives in a clear manner. The premise of the research is that Polish and French women's magazines are not exclusively a neutral medium for information about the Nordic social and cultural area, but they, first and foremost, participate in the societal construction of reality and create links to numerous varied discourses. This premise directly influences the formulation of the objectives of the author's research on the fertile point of contact of Scandinavian, media, and cultural studies, as well as reflexive sociology. The objective is clearly presented: it is not to establish whether colourful magazines present material truth, as the sphere of facts is called by the lawyers, but rather to present, using a comparative perspective, how women's press writes about Nordic specificity and what discourses it employs to that end.

The source base, as the reviewed thesis as such, is well balanced, not overfull with subjects, and skilfully collected. It includes articles published over the span of a decade up to

the year 2018 and includes a total of 423 press articles gathered from representative titles such as *Zwierciadło*, *Claudia*, *Twój Styl* (Polish periodicals), as well as *Le Figaro Madame*, *Femme Actuelle*, and *Elle* (French periodicals). It needs to be underscored that the author used electronic editions of the periodicals. A more old-school researcher, not necessarily a historian or a philologist, could raise doubts over omitting paper editions, the medium of print, and not conducting library research on physical copies of the periodicals. In my opinion, however, the choice of Internet editions is a deliberate and poignant indication of the contemporarily most important channel for constructing societal imaginings of the Nordic countries and Nordicism. On the web, professional journalists compete, collaborate, and overlap with influencers.

The theoretical profile of the dissertation is broad and varied. The researcher went to work with a plethora of theories in hand. It can easily be stated that there is a long series of cultural turns behind the author, which are reflected in the theory cultivated in academia. Most likely due to convergence, as his name is not listed in the bibliography, Dominika Bartnik-Świątek positively verifies the view of Terry Eagleton (taken from his *After Theory* book), according to which we can never truly be “after theory”, as, without theory, self-reflective human life does not exist at all. The most important sources of Dominika Bartnik-Świątek’s theoretical inspiration include the theory of discourse, the theory of representation, the anthropology of space, and humanistic geography; furthermore, she displays orientation in the fields of semiotics, visual studies, communication studies, and journalism. All these theoretical tropes are cemented by the socio-anthropological theory of Pierre Bourdieu. Today, citing Bourdieu does not appear to be particularly original or ingenious although it still remains indispensable and interpretatively effective. As it is done here in chapter four. But aside from Bourdieu, here and there it cites the neopragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty and even Edward Soja, who declares himself an urbanist. I consider such a wide collection of names as proof of the author’s erudition. It is apparent, that Dominika Bartnik-Świątek has thoroughly acquainted herself with the known works on the topic of cultural turns, and what is more, she creatively supplements the horizons of Doris Bachmann-Medick’s deliberations on her own. She does not summarise, she does not shuffle theoretical references as a deck of cards in order to meet her academic leanings, but she fits others’ theories to her own tasks and analytic needs.

As for the method employed, it is easy to identify the dominant. It is the framework analysis, which, by its very nature, focuses on the content of media communication. An eminent position here is occupied by Robert Entman, whose reading of the idea of framing is

based on the conviction that “the process of selecting news coverage is intentional”; therefore it follows, that it is socially significant, serves the selection and featuring specific cultural patterns. Following Stephen D. Reese, the author notices two variations of the process of creating frameworks, cognitive and cultural, and she combines them. At the same time, it is worthwhile to underscore that the quantitative dimension, i.e. the frequency of a given type of publications on a given topic, turns out to be merely a step toward a developed qualitative analysis in the reviewed dissertation. In other words, in “frequencies and patterns”, the researcher looks for regularities pertaining to representation and societal imaginings.

At least three big advantages of the doctoral thesis of Dominika Bartnik-Świątek can be easily identified.

First and foremost, no similar comparative work has, to the best of my knowledge, been written, albeit I cannot speak for the French scholars of Scandinavian studies. It is appropriate for doctoral dissertations to be written in a field that is entirely barren, thereby filling the gaps in the research, which in turn increases their cognitive value and attractiveness. I have read the text by Dominika Bartnik-Świątek with satisfaction, curiosity, and pleasure. It allowed me to realise, again, with the caveat that I do not know French, that the increase of cultural interest in Norden in the early decade of the 21st century is not some peculiarly Polish phenomenon. Rather, it belongs to the traits of the modern culture of the Western world, therefore it is also present in France. In this respect, it is no longer surprising that those participating in French culture, which, after all deservedly, and not just stereotypically, claims the status of a culinary powerhouse, open themselves to Nordic experiments represented by the Noma restaurant, as well as everyday recipes and flavours of the North. I perceive viewing the exceptionality of the Scandinavians through a Romance lens as refreshing, particularly when presented side by side with the lens of Polish culture.

I highly value situations, in which a researcher highly qualified in Scandinavian studies, especially a Polish researcher, boldly goes beyond the traditional research area of philology, seeking to find tools in social sciences and other disciplines of the humanities. This criterion is also met by Bartnik-Świątek’s doctoral thesis. As a researcher of culture, whose masters and oldest teachers began their careers mostly in the field of Polish studies, I perfectly understand that it is not easy to entirely escape beyond the acquired linguistic knowledge. Nevertheless, linguistic competencies can be used, as attested to by this dissertation, as an additional asset,

that is filter it through the soft concept of social sciences or combine them with such methods as critical discourse analysis. At this point, it is worthwhile to note that the researcher has successfully combined her fluency in Scandinavian culture with her French language and culture competency, as well as the English language, although it was used instrumentally, as the language in which the dissertation was written. A large amount of work during the writing of the doctorate must have been dedicated by the author to translating quotes necessary to construct the argumentation from Polish and French into English. Especially that, in the second, empirical part of the dissertation, the quotations from the source material are, out of understandable necessity, very numerous.

Secondly, this dissertation fits into the area studies, a kind of reflection we still need; seeing issues of particular Scandinavian countries through the lens of an integrated region and cultural community. I will add, we need it here in Poland, regardless of the international nature of the text written in the contemporary *lingua franca*, English. The thesis title (more memorable thanks to the use of “Nordic Lite” turn of phrase!) therefore adequately foreshadows the issue discussed within and is entirely in line with the contents of the work. The regional approach instead of a particular one, work on data relating to Norden instead of one selected culture of the North, fully corresponds to the nature of the phenomenon that is being researched. Although women’s magazines capture moments specific to particular countries (i.e. *hygge* is Danish, *sisu* Finnish, etc.), however implicitly they relate to the separateness of the entire bloc of countries, cultures, and societies. The author of the dissertation assesses to what kind of discourse above do all the representations of this exceptionality belong to and reaches clear and sufficiently supported conclusions: both in French as well as in Polish women’s magazines we are dealing with the exotification of Norden combined with admiration, not to use a stronger term, idealisation of the civilisational achievements of the Scandinavians, which women’s magazines consider the Nordic lifestyle, boiled down to benchmark embodiment of the “work-life balance” principle, to be. This mix of exotification and admiration particularly applies to food, leisure time, aesthetic taste, design, fashion, and especially casual fashion. The fourth chapter is a monographical inventory of these derivatives, with added in-depth compact descriptions based on instructive quotes from the periodicals.

Thirdly, the author’s direct comparison of media messaging in Polish and French magazines produces immensely interesting results. Although the importance of these results is seen not so much in the comments of the author, who is constrained by the selected method,

but rather it can be implicitly perceived. If the selectiveness of the Polish and French articles is uniform, similar to how Poland and France are linked by the utopian way of writing about the Nordic sphere, which results in the superficiality of the bulk of the representations, it turns out, however, that Polish periodicals tackle significantly fewer societal topics. French articles are more often set in the societal context. A virtual French reader appears in the light of research done by Bartnik-Świątek to be more keenly interested in the avant-garde character of the Nordic society in the fields of societal norms and customs. Polish women's magazines, in turn, limit themselves to lifestyle topics, retaining a safe distance from the issues of Nordic modernisation and progressivism. Norden's level of exoticism turns out to be subjective and in the eye of the beholder. For the French, the exceptionalism appears to be somehow less pronounced; Nordic societies seen through the lens of women's magazines are both geographically more proximate and very exotic.

Although Bartnik-Świątek avoids delving into strictly socio-political matters, I do understand the results of framework analysis as a voice in the ongoing reflection of political scientists "can the so-called Scandinavian model be transplanted onto Polish ground?", which theme is present, among others, in the publications of Włodzimierz Anioł, e.g. in the Scandinavian chapter of his book *Trzecia Rzeczpospolita w trzech odsłonach* (The Third [Polish] Republic in three scenes). It is therefore hard to imagine comprehensive Nordicness in a Polish version, if popular culture promotes an interest in a way of life detached from social context which made that way of life possible in the North. At best, we observe cultural practices stemming from imitation fuelled by texts and mental imaginings moulded by them instead of empirical experience. It is enough to note that a fashion outlet using Icelandic names employs stereotypical elderly Polish seamstresses, who have never been to Iceland or Reykjavik. In this respect, Bartnik-Świątek's dissertation documents the fact that the phenomenon of Nordicism spiking in popularity, be it in Poland, France, or anywhere else, is purely discursive in nature but is devoid of any phenomenological depth.

It is not just the fact of the doctoral thesis being written in language that predestines it to be published as a monographical work by one of the foreign publishing houses, but first and foremost its high scholarly level. Therefore, I vehemently advise against the text being broken up into articles for the purpose of being published in journals on account of the compositional precision and cohesiveness of it as a whole. The publishing of this doctoral thesis would also

be of high archivist value, i.e. such a publication will become a record of a certain Nordic Lite turn in the popular culture of early 21st-century Europe.

In spite of the high assessment of Dominika Bartnik-Świątek's work, I must now share several reservations and doubts. I present them in the form of points to consider, whether during the discussion during the defence of the doctoral thesis, or during later work on the book. I am trying to use that opportunity to give helpful recommendations regarding sources, for the purpose of more profoundly exploring or appending what has either been thoroughly covered or in some way suggested.

The reduction of the political dimension to the necessary minimum, or to be more precise, to the political history, one shaped by events and facts, carries with it certain interpretative consequences. On the one hand, the author boldly refuses to submit to tend toward synchrony, easily imposed by referring to theories set in social sciences, although with strong linguistic foundations. The author's argumentation includes, therefore, accurate and substantive passages on the history of the Nordic community. This narration features pan-Scandinavism, but also, validly treads back to the Kalmar Union and the process of its dissolution, supported at that by references to the works of many important Scandinavian researchers or, to put it somewhat generally, theoreticians of Norden. On the other hand, however, while reading one might get a strong impression that the Nordic regional integration is first and foremost rooted in contemporary symbolic power and linguistic reproduction. I would strongly argue that it was the region that first came to be politically ready, and only then did the representations proliferate, including those particularly based on stereotypes. Just to give an example: experimenting with Møntunionen (monetary union) in the regional economy came well ahead of the term "stereotype" popularised by Walter Lippmann (in his 1922 book), which was borrowed from typography. Following this lead, what the reviewed dissertation was lacking, was the projection of the issue of the representation of Nordicness against the background of the history of culture understood as the history of media of culture, such as writing, print, and post-typography, according to the categories laid out by Walter Ong. The political process of Nordic integration, the construct of Nordicness is only an outcome of, was parallel and simultaneous to the historical and cultural process of the transformation of the media. And, as it follows, was parallel and simultaneous to the transformation of press genres. Bartnik-Świątek's dissertation pertains to the post-typographic model, and it would be good to at least have a greater awareness of that.

Bourdieu's theory imposes a strictly defined understanding of popular culture, one that is quite rigid and dogmatic, as it is essentially class-based. In brief: popular culture is practised by lower and dominated classes. In the meantime, as the author notes, women's periodicals do not show a tendency to directly legitimise elite culture. It is true, that they intend to shape the tastes of the readers as consumers, but at the same time, they also make this good taste a standard that is, in a way, for the entire social ladder. Therefore it is worthwhile to point out that in the broadly understood cultural disciplines, the notion of popular culture chronologically comes as immediately following the notion of mass culture. Popular culture as a construct, unlike mass culture, has from the start been not based on differentiating between "high" and "low". Everyone, democratically, has become its user and consumer who, what is more, can make their own creative use of the provided cultural products. Such an approach to popular culture as something that brings down barriers has been adopted, i.a. by British cultural studies, of which works of e.g. John Fiske are an example to be recommended. Perhaps that is wherein lies the success of describing Nordicism as a source of prescriptions for a different, better life. In its classlessness, even if simulated, its universality, and its unrestricted adaptability.

The use of the word "philosophy" in reference to such Nordic metaphors of culture as *hygge* or *lagom* requires a separate evaluation. It is impossible not to agree that language always precedes thinking, as Gadamer used to say, however in spite of everything, as a researcher of culture I would insist that speaking is preceded by a cultural experience. Contemporarily, an important part of this experience is the formatting of everyday life, colonising it with prescriptions for happiness in the form of such popular "philosophies" promoted by media. Roch Sulima writes about it in his book *Powidoki codzienności* (Afterimages of everyday) in which, not without a reason, the theme of escaping from the lifestyle pressure in the media and various forms of public life is part of the societal diacrisis. May it be the case that the similarities in the analysed Polish and French articles stem from the cultural commonality of searching for prescriptions for happiness? In such a context, it becomes justified to ask: what is it that is actually important as the cognitive subject? Nordicness in itself, or harnessing it into the process of formatting everyday life? If it is the latter, then the otherness of the Nordic sphere would turn out to be merely new packaging for the pressure to pick a lifestyle, following the notion that one either has or does not have a choice, as indicated by Anthony Giddens, whose *Modernity and Self-Identity* I recommend as supplementary reading.

Piotr Sztompka's work *Socjologia wizualna* (Visual sociology) helps the author's thesis successfully tackle the problem of illustrations in women's magazines and of the social-cultural functions of photography. It would have, however, been good to somehow note in the text, that in the broadly understood field of visual studies, Professor Sztompka's work can be considered merely a small part of the extensive literature on the subject. Besides, against the background of the large oeuvre of the professor from Krakow and his main scholarly interests, it is merely a digression, and a private one to that, associated with his hobbyist interest in photography. Bartnik-Świątek lists all the turns in humanities, including the "pictorial turn", but without mentioning its main architect, William J.T. Mitchell. I think that it would be useful to also become acquainted with the works of Sarah Pink, who identifies with visual ethnography.

Having written all that, I wish to state, that the doctoral dissertation submitted to me for review more than meets the statutory requirements. Herewith I express my very positive opinion of it as a testament to the author's skill in conducting scholarly research which makes for a substantive input both into the international circulation of the field of Scandinavian Studies, as well as the Polish discipline called culture and religion studies. Therefore, I argue in favour of allowing Dominika Bartnik-Świątek, M.A., to be cleared for further stages of the procedure of granting her a doctoral degree.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Włodzisław Jęszel". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial 'W'.