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Central European Narratives

On 20th and 21st Century Non-Fiction in the Region

Edited by
György Túry · Robert Alexander

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Editors

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ISSN 2731-9539

ISSN 2731-9547 (electronic)

Palgrave Studies in Literary Journalism

ISBN 978-3-032-32528-0

ISBN 978-3-032-32529-7 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-32529-7>

This work was supported by Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Constantine the Philosopher University, Corvinus University of Budapest and Vilnius University.

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*I dedicate this book to my dear colleague, mentor, and friend of 25 years,
Vincent B. Leitch, who taught me everything I know about academic work,
good wine, the blues, and why it's great to body surf in Florida.*

György Túry

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

György Túry and Robert Alexander

“The Big Three couldn’t have been the only ones”—writes one of the undisputed authorities on creative non-fiction, John Hartsock,¹ referring to Svetlana Alexievich, Ryszard Kapuściński, and Egon Erwin Kisch. Nobel laureate Alexievich is from Belarus; Kapuściński, recognized globally as one of the best-known practitioners of the genre, was from Poland; and Kisch, one of the founding fathers of this kind of writing, was from the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy. We, as the editors of this book had the same feeling as Hartsock: there must have been others, and there must be others today as well. And there are. The essays in the book cover topics pertaining to nine countries, all of which are to be found in East-Central Europe: Bosnia–Herzegovina, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine. The fact that the vast majority of

¹E-mail communication with editors of this volume (2024).

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G. Túry, R. Alexander (eds.), *Central European Narratives*,
Palgrave Studies in Literary Journalism,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-32529-7_1

the authors of the book and one of the two editors are also from East-Central Europe speaks volumes about the efforts of this collection to contribute to the de-Westernization of the global academic discourse in relevant disciplines and to address global inequities in contemporary knowledge production.

The volume takes as its central concern the current shapes and forms of what is variously called non-fiction narrative, creative non-fiction, creative documentary narrative, literary journalism, or reportage (among other terms) in the region. Geographically we define East-Central Europe as the area that lies between Germany and Russia, south of Scandinavia and north of Greece and Turkey. Many of the countries in the region are now full members of the European Union and NATO, some are candidate countries, and *all* share the common heritage of once belonging to the communist world during the second half of the twentieth century. (This fact explains why certain countries, such as Austria or Germany, are not represented in the volume.)

In the post-1945 period it was Milan Kundera's well-known essay² "Un Occident kidnappé, la tragédie de l'Europe centrale" (The Tragedy of Central Europe) that re-established the notion of Central Europe (as opposed to Eastern Europe). Originally published in French in 1983, the English translation followed a year later and conquered the intellectual landscape of the contemporary world, not only in the liberal democratic West, but also in the very region it talks about (for example, it was translated into Hungarian, and published as *samizdat*³ as early as May 1984—barely weeks after the English text appeared and only a few months after the original, French version came out).

Jacob Mikanowski's book about the same region, Central Europe, was published exactly forty years after Kundera's essay (in 2024) and its first sentence, quite unlike the vision proposed by Kundera, states that "this is a history of a place that doesn't exist."⁴ The back cover of Mikanowski's book sounds a little bit more permissive in claiming that it "is a place that

² Milan Kundera, "Un Occident kidnappé, la tragédie de l'Europe centrale," *Le Débat*, November 1983. In English: "The Tragedy of Central Europe," *The New York Review of Books*, April 1984.

³ *AB Hírmondó*, 6–7 (May–June 1984).

⁴ Jacob Mikanowski, *Goodbye, Eastern Europe: An Intimate History of a Divided Land* (New York: Vintage Books, 2024), xv. (As the author himself makes clear, by "Eastern Europe" he means what Kundera [and many others] calls "Central Europe." See, for example, on p. 318).

barely exists outside of cultural memory.” For the authors of the present volume (and for tens of millions in the region) that *cultural memory* is more than enough of a rock-solid ground on which to base their (East-) Central European identity. This region has almost always found itself either between or belonging to much more powerful empires (Ottoman, Habsburg, Russian/Soviet, etc.). It is part of neither Western, nor Eastern Europe: it has almost always been in between (often longing for belonging to the former, and more often dragged back by the latter). It is a region comprising relatively small nations, with a turbulent history more than a thousand-years long, where dozens of languages are spoken by peoples practicing numerous religions, all sharing common ways of living and seeing the world.

Such a rich but complex and conflict-riven multicultural heritage would not seem to offer a promising basis for the emergence of a homogeneous genre, particularly a hybrid genre combining the journalistic methods of fact-gathering with the techniques of literature. And to be sure, the diversity expresses itself dazzlingly in the many non-fiction forms writers from this region have adopted—and created—to tell its stories. In this book, you will find a stunning array of non-fiction types: profile, oral history, travelogue, investigative reportage, documentary, memoir, cultural writing, Gonzo, testimonial, ethnographic, sociographic, poetic and more, as well as the various hybridizations among them. With the title *Central European Narratives: On 20th and 21st Century Non-fiction in the Region* we wanted to signal the unique and largely independent nature of the non-fiction traditions in this region while also avoiding the potentially distorting effects which arise from the imposition of a single term for such a diverse body of work. Indeed, the historical, not to mention the literary and journalistic matrices from which these works have emerged, are as particular, as vital, and as dynamic as the region itself. But as many of the works examined in this volume suggest, contemporary writers and filmmakers from this region are also driven by an urgent need to correct the distortions and silences of a political, literary, and journalistic heritage disfigured by the forces of censorship and coercion which characterized the long years of communist control.

Diverse as the peoples and the history of this region may be, something this collection makes clear is that the works it spotlights are motivated by two common objectives, both rooted in modern Western conceptions of the function of journalism, on the one hand, and literature on the other. Journalistically, these works conform vigorously—particularly in their

quest for justice—to the quality Mark Kramer describes as essential to both journalism and its literary counterpart: the desire “to pierce to the quick of what’s happening.”⁵ But hunger for reality is a compelling stimulus in literature as well. As Svetlana Alexievich said in an interview:

I’ve been searching for a literary method that would allow the closest possible approximation to real life. Reality has always attracted me like a magnet, it tortured and hypnotized me, I wanted to capture it on paper. So I immediately appropriated this genre of actual human voices and confessions, witness evidence, and documents. This is how I hear and see the world—as a chorus of individual voices and a collage of everyday details. This is how my eye and ear function.⁶

Alexievich’s works such as *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*, and *Boys in Zinc* suggest, though, that the “reality” of the post-communist world is quite different, in Russia but even more pointedly in the formerly communist countries of East-Central Europe, particularly in its temporal orientation, from the reality which attracted many other canonical figures of the genre, globally. The journalistic news value of timeliness exerts a persistent influence over the subjects many of these writers focus on. As a result, the temporal horizon of such work does not frequently extend far beyond the present. What Barbie Zelizer says of journalism generally is often true of its literary manifestations: “Journalists’ investment in topicality, recency, novelty, proximity and instantaneity [...] caters to the here-and-now and makes the there-and-then seem like it resides on another planet.”⁷ The result, particularly in the literary journalism of the English-speaking world, is a journalistic version of recency bias, a foreshortened historical perspective privileging “current events” over the *longue durée* from which such events emerge. (Even a work of partially retrospective narration like Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* is still largely preoccupied with the contemporary American scene.)

⁵ Kramer, Mark. “Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists,” in *Literary Journalism: A New Collection of the Best American Nonfiction*, ed. Mark Kramer and Norman Sims (New York: Ballantine, 1995), 33.

⁶ Svetlana Alexievich, “Biographical,” [NobelPrize.org](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2015/alexievich/biographical/). Nobel Prize Outreach <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2015/alexievich/biographical/>.

⁷ Zelizer, Barbie. “Why Journalism’s Default Neglect of Temporality Is a Problem.” *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 7 (2021): 1213–29, 10.1177/01634437211015846.

Journalism's formal amnesia, however, finds a curious counterpart in the explicit repression of truths which occurred throughout East-Central Europe in the latter half of the twentieth century. But unlike the victims in Capote's non-fiction novel, the bodies in that world were never properly laid to rest by way of the acknowledgement public narratives (such as those described in this book) might provide. Rather, their ghosts haunt the region's present with stories that could not and had not been told, at least until these writers gave them voice. These artists write against the grain of long decades of official misdeeds, authoritarian muzzling, and silence. The reality they represent is, to use Alexievich's expression, one of "second-hand time"—of a present lacking the pure punctuality assumed by the typical journalistic focus on the here-and-now but one instead pervaded by the specters of the past. As with any unresolved death, the circumstances and guilt surrounding such untold stories along with the oppressive atmosphere of the world in which their characters lived and their events occurred, linger hauntingly in memory—as present as the pre-fabricated housing estates which sprawl across the urban landscapes of the region. So powerful was this silencing, so deeply did it engrain its habits and affects in the people of this region, that a writer like Wojciech Tochman is able to use silence in *Like Eating A Stone: Surviving The Past In Bosnia*—the elisions and absences in his texts—as a powerfully pathetic narrative device to trigger knowledge and emotions of a traumatic historical moment still not fully past.

The works discussed in this book contain many such bulwarks against silence and forgetting, but also contain prompts for future memory. Among the proliferation of non-fiction writing to come out of Ukraine since its brutal invasion by Russia in February 2022 are works which memorialize those lost in the war, or record unflinchingly its current horrors, but also, looking to the future, works which provide testimony for future memory when the aggressors will be held to account.⁸

Less than two months after the outbreak of the current Russian–Ukrainian war, in April 2022, “the Belarusian intellectual Ihar Babkou described the [...] conflict as ‘a war for diversity. A war between Central

⁸In such works, it is possible to recognize an analogy to Latin American *testimonio*. As Pablo Calvi notes, “Testimonio in Latin America emerged precisely as the means to re-create a political memory that had been challenged, silenced, annulled, and often deleted from official records by a long series of authoritarian, anti-democratic governments.” Pablo Calvi, *Latin American Adventures in Literary Journalism* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/49/monograph/book/66108>.

Europe and Eastern Europe.”⁹ We could not agree more and with this volume we would like to show some aspects of this diversity and distinctiveness. True, the world changed dramatically after the *annus mirabilis*, 1989, but cultural changes never happen as fast as political or economic ones. As is evident from the chapters in this volume, the cultural identity of the region is intact: its roots are deep and strong.

Chronologically, the chapters focus on the 20th century and contemporary, 21st century developments, motifs, and trends, but there are also contributions that provide a somewhat broader historical context for specific works, authors, and the genealogy of national genres. The volume hopes to make a significant contribution to current global research in non-fiction narrative and creative non-fiction, literary journalism, Slavic and East-Central European Studies, Area Studies, Cold War Studies, contemporary history, sociology, anthropology, journalism, media, and cultural studies. As of today, no such book exists in English (or, to the best of our knowledge, in any other language): in this sense what the authors and the editors are trying to accomplish with this book is nothing less than *canonizing* a very important dimension of the genre, i.e., the East-Central European tradition.

We argue that the region we identify as East-Central Europe has made a significant contribution to these genres; but, while the “big three” Hartsock identified are widely acknowledged as leading figures globally, there has been a general neglect in the English-speaking world of the essential place this genre has played in the literary and political cultures of these countries in the 20th and 21st centuries. Of crucial interest here is the variety of ways the genre adapted itself to the radically altered contexts of its production before, during, and after the decades of communist rule. No less compelling, however, is the ample evidence the chapters in this volume provide that East-Central Europe is home to a distinctive set of traditions in this genre, including a preoccupation with justice and freedom, and an intense curiosity both about their own national histories and identities but also those of their neighboring countries, and further regions of the world. Examples of this curiosity abound, starting as early as the 19th century and the turn of the 20th century: from travelogues such as Slovakian Martin Kukučín’s *Prechádzky po Patagónii* (Walks in Patagonia) to Bulgarian Marko Semov’s *Za Japóniia kato za Japóniia* (Japan as about Japan, 1984); from Kapuściński’s well-known

⁹Quoted in Mikanowski, *Goodbye, Eastern Europe*, 318.

works to younger generation Polish author Witold Szablowski's books published in the 2010s and 2020s.

In the monumental, multi-volume book, *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, there is a chapter entitled "Literary Reportage: Between and Beyond Art and Fact."¹⁰ To the best of our knowledge, this is the only piece of scholarly writing ever published in English, that discusses (or, rather, claims to discuss) the genre in the East-Central European *regional* context.¹¹ The author asks, but does not really answer—*cannot* really answer—the question "How, then, can the various twentieth-century incarnations of literary reportage in East-Central Europe be defined, situated, and described?"¹² Practically all her references are to Polish authors (truth be told, though, Egon Erwin Kisch is also mentioned and quoted a few times). Without any doubt: in East-Central Europe the genre is, and has been, the most robust, visible, and globally significant in Poland. We also agree with this. However, this does not mean that the dozen or so other regional countries and cultures have not produced works of equal quality. The past two decades have prompted the publication of dozens of volumes from a global community of scholars, establishing the study of the genre as a rich and expanding field. Clear evidence of this fact is to be found in the 2023 publication of *The Routledge Companion to World Literary Journalism*,¹³ an ambitious and admirable volume; despite its strengths, however, this volume also contains only two chapters (out of the total of 38) on East-Central Europe—*both* on Polish literary journalism. These two chapters do not and cannot reflect the rich and vibrant history—and present—of the genre in East-Central Europe.¹⁴

¹⁰ Diana Kuprel, "Literary Reportage: Between and Beyond Art and Fact," in *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, vol. 1, ed. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004), 375–85.

¹¹ For a good example of how to present a regional tradition as complementary to national traditions, see, for example, Pablo Calvi, *Latin American Adventures in Literary Journalism* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh Press, 2019). (One must note, though, that Calvi could work with only one language, Spanish, in covering that tradition, an option that is unavailable in our context, given the fact of language diversity in the Central European region.)

¹² Kuprel, "Literary Reportage," 381.

¹³ John S. Bak and Bill Reynolds, eds., *The Routledge Companion to World Literary Journalism* (London: Routledge, 2023).

¹⁴ In very limited number, book-length studies of the national traditions of the genre exist, both in regional languages and in English. Examples include František Schildberger's *Podoby české literární reportáže* [Images of Czech Literary Reportage], 2020 (in Czech); Sonja

Out of the eleven chapters in the book, the reader will find three or four (depending on the way one counts) that focus on the Polish tradition; the majority of the chapters investigate other national, cultural, and linguistic traditions (Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Moldovan, Romanian, Slovakian, Ukrainian, and so on). Similarly, out of the seventeen authors of the book, only three are from Poland. The Polish tradition is not only the most visible globally, but it is clearly the one that is the best known and influential *within* the region as well. As it is beautifully detailed in our Ukrainian chapter, for example, it is mostly contemporary Polish authors who lent a helping hand to their colleagues in the war-torn country to document what is going on there (with significant financial and institutional help also coming from Scandinavian countries and the European Union). The Czech, Romanian, Slovakian, and Ukrainian publishing houses specializing in the translation and publication of works written in the genre also significantly contribute to this process—rightly so! In Hungary, where there is no one single publishing house that would specialize in the genre, the reception of Polish *reportage* is also tremendously strong (and not only in terms of translation of primary sources, but also in producing original academic and popular secondary literature, in the form of monographs, book chapters, journal special issues, journal articles, events, readings, theatrical performances, and talks with authors).

Kisch's 1923 *Klassischer Journalismus* is said to have "set the direction for the future evolution of reportage."¹⁵ It may be true in the German language tradition of Central Europe (mostly in the former states of Austro-Hungary and Germany), but there have clearly been other traditions as well, as our authors demonstrate. One can think of relevant works of Romanian authors Filip Brunea-Fox and Geo Bogza (both born before World War I); or Slovakian travelogues by Ján Kollár or Jozef Miloslav Hurban from the nineteenth century; or newly re-evaluated and republished reportages of Ukrainian Geo Shkurupiy and Valerian Polishchuk; or

Merljak Zdovec's *Literary Journalism in the United States of America and Slovenia*, 2008 (in English); Orsolya Németh's *Poszt-szovjet non-fiction: A volt Szovjetunió országai és a lengyel tényirodalom* [Post-Soviet Non-Fiction: The Ex-Republics of the USSR in Polish Reportage], 2019 (in Hungarian); Adrian Hazaparu's *Viața secretă a reportajului: alegorie, magie și carnaval* [The Secret Life of the Reportage: Allegory, Magic, and Carnival], 2024 (in Romanian), and Liliia Shutiak's "Novyy zhurnalizm' u mediynomu diskursi Ukrayiny: geneza ta zhanrovo-stylistychni oznaky" [New Journalism in the Media Discourse of Ukraine: Genesis, Genre, and Stylistic Features], Ph.D. dissertation (manuscript), 2015.

¹⁵ Kuprel, "Literary Reportage," 375.

the “visual journalism” tradition in Soviet time Latvia and Lithuania; or the whole so-called *sociographical* writing tradition in interwar Hungary, with such figures as Gyula Illyés and Zoltán Szabó.¹⁶ This is still a practically uncharted, but potentially extremely rich territory in English language scholarship (and often in the respective national languages as well, by the way). Our book, as stated earlier, focuses on more contemporary writers and developments, but the authors always provide a wider context and a short national genealogy of the genre.¹⁷ Apart from these, another unique and strong aspect of the present collection, we think, is the extensive use not only of primary, but secondary sources as well that have never been featured in English language scholarship. As one of the most distinct aspects of twenty-first century global knowledge production is the attempt to de-Westernize the process, we think that the importance of this aspect of the book cannot be overemphasized. With this editorial decision we also challenge the mainstream center-periphery knowledge production models, and claim that this is not an exclusively East-Central Europe focused project, rather one that shows how the global rules, practices, and concepts of scholarship are changing.¹⁸

It is also worth noting that most of the chapters in the book are multi-focused and multi-layered. It is not only the previously mentioned national genre genealogies that help readers better contextualize analyses of works, *oeuvres*, and textual, political, and cultural issues, but further elaborated topics such as socialist and post-socialist architecture, narratology, research and publication financing models, the representation of emotions in non-fiction narratives, the epistemological turn in journalism, and many others. This way, our authors successfully tackle and present often complex issues that point far beyond their textual (and, in certain cases, visual) representations.

¹⁶ More on all the figures, schools, and traditions mentioned here in the relevant chapters.

¹⁷ Comparative studies are still waiting to be written.

¹⁸ In this fashion, we intend to present this collection as a “contribution to global academic knowledge production and [to show] the way in which semi-peripheral academic institutions [and researchers] can navigate global academic hierarchies, achieve greater visibility, and foster equitable knowledge production.” György Túry, Demeter Márton, and Pelsőci Balázs, “Building Bridges in Academic Publishing and Research: A Study of the Corvinus Institute for Advanced Studies.” *KOME: An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry* 13, no. 1 (2025): 143 (1). For a much more detailed account of this and related issues, see, for example, the works by Hungarian scholar Márton Demeter (including his 2020 monograph *Academic Knowledge Production and the Global South: Questioning Inequality and Underrepresentation*) or those by Polish science studies scholar Marek Kwiek.

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PART I

Historical, Genre-Specific, and
Identity Transformations: East-Central
European Perspectives from the 1960s
to the Present



CHAPTER 2

Giving Voice to the Voiceless, Literally: The Political Poetics of Empowerment in Zsolt Csalog's Docu-Portraits in Hungary

Miklós Sükösd

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the narrative non-fiction of Hungarian writer, oral historian, sociologist, ethnographer, and human rights activist Zsolt Csalog (pronounced as “Zholt Chah-log,” 1935–1997). His work, characterized by a blend of documentary realism and literary narrative, chronicles the lives of those neglected, disenfranchised, and excluded by mainstream Hungarian society in the second half of the 20th century. Csalog's life displays a deep commitment to social justice, particularly concerning the marginalized Hungarian Roma community. The narrative non-fiction working methods of Csalog are close to those of Belarusian Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich, as both typically create their texts from edited transcripts of recorded personal interviews. However, while Alexievich usually combines excerpts from many oral history interviews in her textual collages, Csalog's non-fiction books feature theme-oriented collections of life history interviews or, in some cases, even book-length

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G. Túry, R. Alexander (eds.), *Central European Narratives*,
Palgrave Studies in Literary Journalism,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-32529-7_2

life histories. Unlike Alexievich, who originally trained as a journalist, Csalog created his narrative non-fiction as an author with an academic background in ethnography and sociology.

This chapter delves into the poetics and creative methodologies of Csalog, providing an introduction to his artistic *credo* and practical procedures, followed by a concise biography with historical contextualization and an exploration of the central themes in his oeuvre. The thematic analysis is grounded in a review of his major narrative non-fiction books. In the conclusion I locate Csalog in the Hungarian tradition of narrative literary journalism and compare his interview-based methods to those of Svetlana Alexievich.

DOCU-PORTRAITS: THE POLITICAL POETICS OF EMPOWERMENT BY PUBLISHING LIFE HISTORY INTERVIEWS

Using his own term, Csalog's work typically features a specific genre, "*documentary portraits*," or "*docu-portraits*," i.e., highly edited life interviews with members of diverse marginalized social groups. Csalog edited out his own questions from the interview transcripts and arranged the parts of the text chronologically and around major life themes. He also made the text more dense by removing repetitions. Csalog rarely added his own words; even the speaking styles or dialects of the subjects were left unchanged and indicated by the spelling in the published text. The thematic collections of docu-portraits include life histories of diverse marginalized and lower-class groups, including members of the ethnic Roma minority, blue-collar workers, former wards of the state, homeless people, petty criminals, and an old peasant woman. Csalog also created docu-portraits from life-histories of political actors and political victims. These included, for example, a survivor of the Soviet Gulag and participants of the 1956 democratic revolution in Hungary¹ as well as former hardline communist party officials (including retired low-level members of the political police from the Stalinist era). Csalog's docu-portraits even feature a rare and

¹The 1956 Hungarian Revolution was a nationwide uprising against Soviet-imposed communist rule which briefly succeeded in establishing a democratic political order before being violently suppressed by Soviet military intervention in November 1956. Its aftermath saw widespread political reprisals, including imprisonments, executions, and the long-term marginalization of many participants.

invaluable documentation of sexual minorities, a group that faced criminalization during the communist period.

I argue that a *political poetics of empowerment* is at the heart of Csalog's creative non-fiction. This poetics involves giving voice to voiceless, powerless social groups, allowing their discourses to be heard by and thus made available to academic and mainstream middle-class readers. This approach inherently aims at creating a public sphere (social discussions, debates, various interpretations) around the life-texts of the downtrodden with the goal of critically reflecting on and transcending exclusion, inequalities, and disenfranchisement. Csalog's creative non-fiction constituted a form of symbolic engagement with free speech and the public sphere, challenging the ideological constraints of the socialist regime. In many cases his volumes, filled with the life stories of victims of exclusion, powerlessness, suffering, and even crime, implicitly called on policymakers to create, expand, and implement empowering social policies. Theoretically, the public discussion of the life stories repeatedly presented in Csalog's publications (books and articles in intellectual journals) could have involved politicians and spurred social reforms. While his efforts were significantly curtailed by state censorship before 1988, the political liberalization after 1989 enabled a partial realization of his emancipatory project, particularly through his founding and active participation in human rights NGOs.

Csalog interviewed real life, flesh-and-blood people as representatives of disempowered and excluded groups, bringing them closer to the reader as human beings—sometimes with their full names, sometimes with abbreviations, but mostly anonymously to ensure the privacy of the subjects. But even when his protagonists remained anonymous, their honesty, openness (sharing their innermost secrets, private convictions, personal wisdom and life strategies) as well as vivid storytelling (a result of Csalog's empathetic questioning strategy and artful editing) make their self-presentations deeply dramatic—and often unforgettable. Csalog's docu-portraits present unique, emotional—often lovable or sometimes ugly—human faces with strong personal emotions, authentic family histories, and detailed work experiences. They also recount stories of social marginalization, trauma, oppression, and even persecution or tragedy. Yet, despite all these hardships, the subjects of his docu-portraits often display a remarkable resilience, an enduring optimism, and a strong determination to embrace life in its entirety, with all its suffering and joy.

As a member of the Hungarian democratic opposition under communism, Csalog faced severe forms of censorship during the long decades of

one-party dictatorship under János Kádár. The Kádár regime lasted from 1956 to 1990, with significant liberalization occurring between 1988 and 1990.² During the 1970s and 1980s, Csalog's books were published by official, communist party-controlled publishing houses only after prolonged delays, often in heavily censored forms and consistently in limited print runs. These restrictions aimed to prevent the development of a wider readership, minimize active audience engagement, and reduce the political risk of significant social impact. Reflecting on the artificially low circulation numbers of his books, Csalog sadly remarked, "I am already forgotten" at the time of publication.³

In response to communist censorship, Csalog turned to *samizdat* strategies, employing illegal, underground publishing networks to disseminate his work beyond state control. Among these acts of cultural resistance was the underground publication of one of his major books, *Lajos M., 42 Years Old*, which first appeared clandestinely in 1982.⁴ It covered the life history of a Hungarian survivor of the Soviet Gulag, a politically sensitive, mostly taboo topic. Many of Csalog's other major works could only appear in print after 1989. During and after the democratic transformation in Hungary and the entire Central and Eastern European region in 1989–90, many of Csalog's previously abridged, unpublished, or *samizdat* works as well as his new books were published in complete and uncensored versions.

In the period of democratization after 1989 the political context changed radically. The newly opened, post-communist democratic scene of press freedom offered new opportunities to Csalog. Besides his continued literary efforts to bring to light the emotive personal testimonies of the downtrodden, he also engaged in press debates, wrote opinion pieces, and turned to social activism. During the 1990s, he served as president of the Wallenberg Society (an anti-racist human rights organization) and co-founded the Roma Press Center, the Roma Civil Rights Foundation, and Radio C (a Roma minority radio station), organizations that performed historically significant human rights work for the Roma community in Hungary.

² Miklós Sükösd, "Democratic Transformation and the Mass Media in Hungary: From Stalinism to Democratic Consolidation," in *Democracy and the Media: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Richard Gunther and Anthony Mughan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 122–64.

³ Márton Soltész, *Csalog Zsolt* (Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó, 2015).

⁴ Zsolt Csalog, *M. Lajos, 42 éves / Lajos M., Aged 42*, translated by István Csicsery-Rónay and Agi Clark (Budapest: Maccenas Könyvkiadó, 1989, bilingual edition.)

Csalog is an important author of nearly 20 original volumes. However, he is virtually unknown to the English-speaking world (one of the rare exceptions is *Lajos M, 42 Years Old*). This chapter explores and interprets Csalog's oeuvre in two contexts. On the one hand, I emphasize the social, political, and cultural contexts of his work, as his publishing opportunities and strategies were very different before and after the period of democratic transition (they were severely limited by censorship before 1989 but enabled after that). As Csalog's writing engaged with sensitive social issues, the contrasting political conditions created fundamentally different horizons of reception for his readership and critics.

On the other hand, in the context of literary traditions, Csalog's work is part of the Hungarian creative non-fiction genre called "*sociography*" (in Hungarian, "*szociográfia*"). This literary tradition originated in the 1930s and survives to the present day. The first "sociographers" (i.e., authors of narrative non-fiction) emerged as progressive young writers during the interwar period. In influential books and journal articles, they documented the late-feudal, inhumane, and unjust working conditions, as well as the everyday lives of poor peasants, farmers, and other village-dwellers in the Hungarian countryside. Sociography blends ethnographic methods of investigation with literary style in long form investigative pieces.⁵ The sociography genre was revived in the 1960s, alongside related developments in documentary filmmaking and photography, and has continued into the 21st century in Hungarian literature, cinema, and journalism. Csalog is considered one of the leading representatives of this genre.

Next, I present a brief biography of Zsolt Csalog, followed by an exploration of seven key themes in his oeuvre. This analysis is followed by a discussion of the aesthetic dimensions of his creative non-fiction, situating it within the broader tradition of Hungarian sociography and related documentary filmmaking. Finally, I compare his creative methods with those of Svetlana Alexievich which serves as the concluding section.

⁵ Éva Ale, "The Peculiarity of Sociographic Knowledge in Hungary," *Acta Univ. Sapientiae Social Analysis* 13, no. 1 (2023): 79–97; Pál Péter Tóth, ed., *A magyar szociográfia a 20–21. században* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 2018).

A SHORT BIO: FROM NARRATIVE NON-FICTION TO HUMAN RIGHT ACTIVIST

During his working life Csalog progressed from ethnography, life history interviews, and literary journalism to a profound engagement with human rights activism. His early life was marked by the turbulent political environment in post-war Hungary. He was born in 1935 in the small town of Szekszárd into an intellectual middle-class family. (His father was an established archaeologist, and his mother, originally trained as a classical music singer, a housewife.) After the war, the Csalog family was forced to relocate to southern Hungary (Baranya County), where he spent his early teenage years among elderly working class locals from a brick factory and sawmills. This experience deeply influenced him, as he lived alongside working-class families, shaping his understanding of their everyday struggles, a theme that would later resonate throughout his writing.

In 1947, at the age of 12, Csalog enrolled in a Jesuit school, an experience that deeply shaped his belief in quality education, intellectual resilience, and political resistance to communist rule. During his high school years, he spent summers with the underground Catholic youth movement at Lake Balaton. He studied ethnography, history, and archaeology at Eötvös University (the leading national university) in Budapest from the mid-1950s. His involvement as a student in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution included, among other actions, participation in the armed storming of the Radio building in Budapest. From 1960, Csalog pursued an academic career in museums and ethnographic research. First, he served as a museologist in the museum of the small town of Szolnok, then he moved to Budapest, where he joined the Museum of Ethnography. It was during this period that Csalog began writing, producing both short stories (from 1966) and his first non-fiction docu-portraits. His first book, *Tavasza minden rendben lesz* (Everything Will Be Alright by Spring; 1971),⁶ was heavily censored: the docu-portrait of a Gulag survivor, *M. Lajos, 42 éves* (Lajos M., Aged 42), was omitted by the publisher due to its politically taboo content.

A life-changing moment in Csalog's career came in 1970, when the outstanding sociologist István Kemény (1925–2008) invited him to collaborate on a groundbreaking empirical study of Hungary's minority

⁶Zsolt Csalog, *Tavasza minden rendben lesz* (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1971). All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

Roma population. This marked the beginning of Csalog's lifelong commitment to documenting the life histories of the Roma. His first book in this area, *Kilenc cigány* (Nine Gypsies; 1976),⁷ provided a rare and honest documentation of Roma life in Hungary at a time when the topic, and especially his interview-based genre, were largely taboo. In their first-person life stories, Csalog's marginalized subjects expressed themselves authentically, using their own everyday language and honest understandings of their lives, rather than repeating official political rhetoric. Kemény's research project was eventually banned by the communist authorities due to its independent research agenda and sensitive approach to real social inequalities in actually existing socialism (another taboo in the communist era). However, Csalog's engagement with Roma issues continued throughout his career, culminating after 1990 in his founding involvement in Roma human rights organizations.

Csalog's activism extended beyond his writing as early as the 1970s. In 1977, he signed the Charta '77 Declaration, a democratic opposition statement in solidarity with Václav Havel and Czechoslovak dissidents against the communist regime, an act which further marginalized him. Csalog continued to write, though official publication remained slow and difficult. When his works were eventually published, they were not only always printed in artificially limited numbers, but also often rejected by official critics. Csalog's political and social views often put him at odds with János Kádár's repressive "goulash communist" regime, a system that combined authoritarian political control with limited economic reforms and material concessions that left the Hungarian population relatively better off than those in other communist countries. As a result, Csalog struggled financially and professionally until the democratic transition began in 1989. Nevertheless, his sense of moral integrity and commitment to creating communicative spaces for the downtrodden never wavered. During the 1970s and part of the 1980s, he supported himself as a graphic artist, illustrating ethnographic books.⁸

Csalog divorced his first wife, ethnographer Éva Pócs (with whom he had three children), and later married actress Anna Károlyi. Between 1985 and 1989, Csalog lived in the United States, joining his third wife, the

⁷ Zsolt Csalog, *Kilenc cigány* (Budapest: Kozmosz Könyvek, 1976).

⁸ Soltész, *Csalog Zsolt*. Mikós Sükösd, "Maga a társadalom beszél sok hangon át: Csalog Zsolt dokuportréi máig hatnak" [Society itself speaks through many voices: Zsolt Csalog's docu-portraits still have an impact today]. *Hvg.hu*, December 29, 2024.

Hungarian-American Ági Clark, with whom he shared a close and affectionate relationship. He had previously spent time in the U.S. on a Soros Fellowship in 1982.

After permanently returning to Hungary in 1989 at the time of the epochal political changes in Eastern Europe, Csalog continued his work on social issues, including homelessness, poverty, and crime in the new capitalist environment, creating docu-portraits of homeless people and publishing them in collections like *Csendet akarok!* (I Want Silence!; 1999).⁹

From 1989 and during the early years of post-communist democracy, Csalog became involved with the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats but soon left in 1993 after disagreements over the party's political direction, particularly regarding Roma policy issues. In his final years, despite battling illness, Csalog remained active as a public intellectual (a human rights activist and social commentator in several new, democratic newspapers), and found solace in his second home in rural Hungary. He passed away in 1997 in Budapest, leaving a legacy as a writer who documented the human stories neglected by mainstream society both in the communist and post-communist periods.

Three of his books were published posthumously: a pornographic novel¹⁰ and two life history interviews—one with a former government member of the 1956 Hungarian revolution¹¹ and the other with a female Holocaust survivor who later became a leading literary editor.¹² A partial English language book manuscript entitled *Budapest People* (a selection of his docu-portraits) remains unpublished.¹³

THE OEUVRE: SEVEN THEMES IN CSALOG'S DOCU-PORTRAITS

Csalog's oeuvre addresses several themes in various literary and social science genres. In this section I explore seven key themes in his creative non-fiction, all involving docu-portraits based on extensive life interviews. Other significant aspects of Csalog's career—including his work as an

⁹ Zsolt Csalog, *Csendet akarok!* (Budapest: Ant-Ko Kiadó, 1999).

¹⁰ Zsolt Csalog, *Krisztina* (Dr. Bognár Éva és Tsa Kft, 2008).

¹¹ Zsolt Csalog and György Heltai, *Hogyan kell forradalmat csinálni? Heltai György portréja*. Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 2018.

¹² Judit Márványi, *Kapaszkodók: Egy szerkesztő emlékei; Esszék és beszélgetések* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 2017).

¹³ Soltész, *Csalog Zsolt*.

academic, human rights and democratic party activist, fiction writer, graphic artist, and opinion journalist—fall outside the scope of this chapter.¹⁴

It should be noted that Csalog primarily conducted *life history* interviews, occasionally incorporating elements of *oral history* to create his literary docu-portraits. However, these two types of long-format interviews are not exactly the same, even though the two terms are often used interchangeably in everyday parlance. On the one hand, *life history* refers to an in-depth, biographical account of an individual's life as told by the individuals themselves. Life history interviews cover personal family, education, work and partnership experiences, life stages and milestones, often including reflections on cultural, historical, and social contexts. Just like in an autobiography, subjects recount their entire life journey from childhood to adulthood or even old age, discussing emotions and personal struggles in the context of societal changes.

On the other hand, *oral history* is a method of gathering, preserving, and interpreting firsthand accounts of well-defined past events from individuals who experienced them. It focuses on specific historical events or periods, often to document experiences and collect data from the perspective of ordinary people or historical actors. The purpose of oral history is to collect diverse voices and experiences that may not be found in written historical records. In general, oral history may be more focused and oriented towards particular historical events. Csalog as an interviewer and writer sometimes mixed the two genres in various ways e.g., in his docu-portraits of a Gulag survivor, a communist era trade union leader, or a leader of the 1956 Hungarian revolution.¹⁵

¹⁴For a detailed discussion of these areas, see Miklós Sükösd, “Hangot ad a néma tömegeknek: Csalog Zsolt dokuportréi hajléktalanokat, gulág-túlélőket, csalódott munkásokat mutattak be a Kádár-korban” [He gives a voice to the silent masses: Zsolt Csalog's docu-portraits represented the homeless, gulag survivors, and disillusioned workers during the Kádár era], *Hvg.hu*, https://m.hvg.hu/360/20241227_Hangot-ad-a-nema-tomegeknek-Csalog-Zsolt-dokuportrei, December 27, 2024; and Sükösd, “Maga a társadalom beszél sok hangon át.”

¹⁵Csalog, *M. Lajos, 42 éves*; Zsolt Csalog, *Börtön volt a hazám: Hosszú István beszél* (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó–Hungarian Human Rights Foundation, 1989); Csalog and Heltai, *Hogyan kell forradalmat csinálni?*

(1) Docu-Portraits of the Roma Minority

Roma people are at the heart of Csalog's lifework, including his narrative non-fiction. As the Roma minority community (and especially its recent history in Central and Eastern Europe) is not very well known in the English-speaking world, a brief social historical contextualization is relevant here. The Roma, also known as Romani or Gypsies, are a historically nomadic ethnic group that originally migrated from northern India to Europe between the 9th and 14th centuries. Throughout their history in Europe they have faced discrimination, marginalization, and persecution. As nomadic people with darker skin and local varieties of the Romani language, some maintaining their nomadic lifestyle into the late 20th century, they were regarded as outsiders and viewed with suspicion for centuries. This pattern of exclusion and persecution continued into modern times. Under Nazi policies during World War II, an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 Roma were systematically murdered in the Romani genocide (*Porajmos*), which has historically received far less recognition than other aspects of the Holocaust.

Following World War II, in the Eastern Bloc countries, efforts were made to assimilate the Roma through forced settlement policies, school and work integration programs, and in some cases, even the forced sterilization of Roma women, all aimed at curbing their nomadic lifestyles. Though these policies were intended to "modernize" Roma communities, they often disregarded the group's cultural identity, and many Roma remained on the fringes of society. Discrimination in housing, education, and employment still limit their access to social services and legal protections. Widespread unemployment, poverty, low rates of literacy and upward social mobility, cultural differences, social exclusion and crime remain pervasive problems for Roma minorities. Deep-seated prejudice against the Roma persists and they are frequently scapegoated for societal problems, subjected to hate speech, and in some cases become victims of racially motivated violence.

As the Roma continue to face barriers in accessing equal rights and opportunities, some Roma activists and civil society groups have called for stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, better-targeted social policies, and more meaningful engagement with Roma communities to

design solutions that respect their culture and identity. However, the Roma minority remains one of the most marginalized in Europe.¹⁶

It is not easy to estimate the number of Roma people in Hungary and in Europe at large. Although the Hungarian census acknowledges the status of Roma as a distinct ethnic group, many Roma people do not indicate their ethnic belonging for fear of discrimination. With a population estimated to be between 750,000 and 1,000,000, Roma comprise approximately 8 to 10 percent of Hungary's population of about 10 million.¹⁷ Historically Roma birth rates have been much higher than those of ethnic Hungarians. Patterns of cross-marriage, children from mixed ethnic backgrounds, varieties of linguistic and ethnic assimilation, as well as diverse communities within the Roma minority further complicate the scene.

From 1970 until his death, Csalog's most consistent and significant thematic focus was the Hungarian Roma minority. In his collection *Kilenc cigány* (Nine Gypsies),¹⁸ he presents nine life stories. Despite the diversity of these personal narratives, some recurring themes emerge: marginalization, deep poverty, prejudice, and systemic discrimination—yet alongside these aspects, the lived experience of everyday freedom also emerges. These *docu-portraits* highlight not only the resilience of the protagonists, but also their diverse minority identities and individual expressions. Each subject speaks in their authentic voice, preserving their dialect, slang, distinctive syntax, and vocabulary. Notably, Csalog includes a criminal among the nine interview subjects, fully aware of the controversial nature of this choice. In the book's afterword, he defends his position in a debate with a (perhaps fictional) Roma intellectual, asserting that confronting prejudice requires not denial or the establishment of taboos, but rather an authentic understanding of reality and an exploration of the social causes of crime.

Cigányon nem fog az átok (The Curse Does Not Befall the Gypsy; 1988),¹⁹ a remarkable and unforgettable pocket-sized red book, recounts the life and wisdom of Károlyi Lászlóné Julis (Mrs. László Károlyi, b. Julis), a 70-year-old Roma woman with extensive life experience, whose vivid storytelling includes frequent, colorful curses and candid

¹⁶ Balázs Majtényi and György Majtényi, *A Contemporary History of Exclusion: The Roma Issue in Hungary from 1945 to 2015* (Budapest: Central University Press, 2015).

¹⁷ "A Diaspora of 11 Million: Estimates of Roma populations vary," *New York Times*, October 19, 2013, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/10/20/sunday-review/a-diaspora-of-11-million.html>.

¹⁸ Csalog, *Kilenc cigány*.

¹⁹ Zsolt Csalog, *Cigányon nem fog az átok* (Budapest: Maecenas Könyvkiadó, 1988).

expressions. Through her narrative (recorded between 1982 and 1983), readers are transported into the everyday world of interwar Roma communities, where families survived through activities like collecting wild herbs (in Hungarian, *típpanfi*). The text also exposes the collective tragedy of the *Porajmos* in which Julis' beloved relatives, both close and distant, were brutally murdered, often machine-gunned in mass executions. Following these harrowing accounts, Julis' narrative shifts to the post-1945 period. She covers the Soviet occupation (which she portrays positively as a liberation from Hungarian Nazi rule), the post-war famine, and ultimately the more consolidated Kádár era, during which she becomes a janitor in a Budapest hospital.

These two books were later republished together in 2001 under the title *Romakönyv* (Roma Book),²⁰ cementing their place in Hungarian culture as essential testimonies of Roma life and history.

***(2) In the Shadow of Communism: A Soviet Gulag Survivor
in Hungary and an Independent Labor Leader in Romania***

Several of Csalog's *docu-portraits* focus on the victims and resisters of Soviet-style communism. His most renowned work, *M. Lajos, 42 éves*—translated into English as *Lajos M., Aged 42*—tells the excruciating story of a survivor of a Soviet forced labor camp (Gulag).²¹ Lajos Mikluszko, a Hungarian soldier, was captured in 1943 following the near-annihilation of the Hungarian forces by the Soviet counterattack along the Don River after the battle of Voronezh. He spent thirteen years in a Stalinist forced labor camp in the Soviet Union. The Gulag camp where he was imprisoned lay on Novaya Zemlya, an archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, beyond the northeastern edge of Europe, within the Arctic Circle. (This archipelago is located further north of the Arctic Circle than the corrective colony in Yamalia where Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was incarcerated and died in 2024.) Extreme hunger, inhumane cold, and the guards' brutality created an environment of constant mortal danger, where the quest for survival sometimes drove prisoners to cannibalism. The

²⁰ Zsolt Csalog, *Romakönyv* (Budapest: Ant-ko Kiadó, 2001).

²¹ Csalog, *M. Lajos, 42 éves*.

majority, however, perished in these unbearable conditions. Lajos was one of few who survived and was released in 1955.²²

Given its sensitive content regarding Soviet communism, it is unsurprising that Csalog could initially only publish this docu-portrait in *samizdat*. The same Gulag text had been censored from his earlier officially published volume, *Tavasza minden rendben lesz* (Everything Will Be Alright by Spring).²³ The brutal reality of the Gulag and politically unfiltered testimonies of Hungarian survivors remained a taboo in the official media of the Kádár regime, which sought to suppress narratives that undermined the communist state's legitimacy by exposing crimes against humanity committed in the Stalinist period.

A related book-length docu-portrait is presented in *Börtön volt a hazám* (My Homeland Was a Prison, 1989).²⁴ In this work, István Hosszú, a Romanian Hungarian miner, recounts the daily realities of workers' lives under the Ceaușescu regime. Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule in Romania (1965–1989) was marked by an increasingly authoritarian and nationalist form of communism, characterized by severe repression, a cult of personality, and widespread economic hardship. Through Hosszú's testimony, the book exposes the stark contrast between the regime's official communist-nationalist propaganda and the harsh, exploitative conditions faced by ordinary laborers.

Born in Szováta, Transylvania to an ethnic Hungarian family, Hosszú worked as a miner in the Zhil Valley during the 1970s. His detailed account highlights various forms of the workers' semi-organized resistance, particularly the 1977 Zhil Valley miners' strike, a pivotal moment that shook the Ceaușescu regime. As a leader of the anti-communist labor resistance, Hosszú could have emerged as a Romanian counterpart to Poland's Lech Wałęsa, had structural political conditions permitted. Instead, he was forced into exile in the United States, narrowly avoiding imprisonment by the Securitate, Romania's widely feared secret police.

My Homeland Was a Prison was published in Hungary in 1989, the symbolic year marking the collapse of Soviet style communism in East Central Europe. Coincidentally, this was also the year when *Lajos M., Aged 42* was legally published for the first time in Hungary. Even today, both

²² See the biographical documentary by Zsolt Csalog and István Jávör, dirs., *Rossz helyen, rossz időben: M. Lajos* [At the wrong place, at the wrong time: Lajos M.], (6:19 min.), 1991.

²³ Csalog, *Tavasza minden rendben lesz*.

²⁴ Csalog, *Börtön volt a hazám*.

texts exude the tension and intrigue of political thrillers, with every line conveying the chilling and authentic realities of survival and resistance under harsh communist rule.

(3) *Peasant Prose: A Narrative of Women's, Family,
and Village History*

Csalog's *Parasztregény* (Peasant Novel; 1978; 1985) is a 500-page *magnum opus* and one of his seminal works.²⁵ The book documents the life of Muka Eszter Mohácsi Bálintné (Mrs. Bálint Mohácsi, née Eszter Muka), a 61-year-old peasant woman whom Csalog met in 1970. Aunt Eszter (as Csalog refers to her), who harbored literary and intellectual aspirations in her youth, found a collaborative author in Csalog to tell her life story. However, the book not only recounts Aunt Eszter's story, including her youth and tragic marriage, but also extends to the history of generations of her sprawling family and even a detailed chronicle of her village. It provides a vivid account of the transformations in Hungarian post-feudal peasant life and culture from the 19th to the 20th century.

This rural docu-portrait is based not only on a multi-year series of interviews, but also on participant observation. Csalog recorded the lively conversations at informal local gatherings, often hosted by Aunt Eszter in her house, capturing the oral narratives and communal storytelling central to the village's social memory. In these settings, Aunt Eszter served as a custodian of collective knowledge, much like a "nótafa," the traditional village ballad singer who preserves and shares folk songs—although her medium was prose. Her role, rooted in oral culture, was vital for preserving the historical memory of the village community. In a similar vein, Csalog's role as recorder and publisher of Aunt Eszter's peasant stories parallels the folk-song collecting activities of the world-famous early 20th-century Hungarian composers and founding fathers of ethnomusicology, Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály.²⁶

As a trained ethnographer, Csalog excelled in capturing and curating these oral village narratives. According to folklorist Éva Pócs (Csalog's first wife), *Peasant Novel* offers an exceptional ethnographic perspective

²⁵ Zsolt Csalog, *Parasztregény* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1978; 1985).

²⁶ Cf., Béla Bartók, *Studies in Ethnomusicology*, select. and ed. Benjamin Suchoff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); and David Taylor Nelson, "Béla Bartók: The Father of Ethnomusicology." *Musical Offerings* 3, no. 2 (2012): 75–91.

on the culture of 1960s–70s village life, surpassing traditional ethnographic accounts.²⁷ In the book’s more than 100-page afterword, Csalog reflects on his methods and the challenges of authorship, such as his choice of removing racist remarks from Aunt Eszter’s narrative. He recorded over 90 hours of taped interviews with her between 1971 and 1974. Csalog considered the work a joint creation and wished to credit Aunt Eszter accordingly as a co-author of the book. However, she requested anonymity and a fictionalized village name to avoid potential backlash from locals, which Csalog agreed to. Ultimately, the pseudonymous book resonated well with most villagers, garnering their acceptance and appreciation.

(4) *Participants in the 1956 Revolution*

Several of Csalog’s docu-portraits feature the voices of participants in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, a theme likely inspired by his own involvement, including his armed participation in the uprising. Rather than portraying distant, idealized political heroes, these narratives present the lived experiences of ordinary individuals who often paid a high private price for their courage and life choices. His *Doku 56* (Docu 56; 1990) compiles five extensive interviews conducted with former 1956 revolutionaries during the era of communist censorship: with Sándor Erdei in 1982; Géza Katona and Livia Jancsó in Washington in 1984; Péter Földes in 1986; and Judit Maléterné Gyenes in 1985.²⁸

“I do not intend to document historical ‘facts’ with these writings but to present human faces,” Csalog explains. “People who lived through and, to some extent, participated in history—more specifically, the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. I have curated lives where the revolution shines as a central experience. I, too, am a witness to the revolution, and my testimony deeply aligns with theirs. We stood on the same side then, and we do so today. I stand by them.”²⁹

In the same spirit, Csalog also conducted a life history interview in the United States with György Heltai, deputy foreign minister in Imre Nagy’s

²⁷ Éva Pócs, “A néprajzkutató Csalog Zsolt,” in *Csalog Zsolt: Egy nyughatatlan lélek krónikája*, ed. K. Gulyás, Gy. Kaposvári, A. Kelemen, and J. Tárnoki (Szolnok: Damjanich János Múzeum, 2023), 41–55.

²⁸ Zsolt Csalog, *Doku 56: Öt portré a forradalomból* (Budapest: Unió Lap- és Könyvkiadó, 1990).

²⁹ Csalog, *Doku 56*, text on back cover.

1956 revolutionary government. Heltai played a pivotal role in the revolution, including drafting the declaration of Hungary's official withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact.³⁰ Following the Soviet invasion, he fled to Vienna in late November 1956 with his family, later establishing and directing the Imre Nagy Institute in Brussels and working as a professor of history in the United States. Their collaborative book-length interview, *Hogyan kell forradalmat csinálni?* (How to Make a Revolution?) was posthumously published in 2018 by Márton Soltész.³¹

*(5) On the Margins of Society: From Former State Orphanage
Children to Petty Criminals, Sex Workers, LGBTQ Individuals,
and the Homeless*

Csalog's work consistently focuses on marginalized individuals, amplifying their private voices and bringing their stories into the public sphere. Even György Heltai, one of the few intellectuals Csalog interviewed, was forced to live on the periphery of (Hungarian) society, in exile, to escape a death sentence. In his collection *Fel a kezekkel!* (Hands Up!; 1989), Csalog conducted interviews with 13 people living on the margins of late state-socialist Hungary, grappling with severe societal issues.³² The compelling book features life stories of individuals who grew up in state child-care institutions (state orphanages) and struggled to integrate into society: drug users, prostitutes, pimps, petty criminals spiraling into more severe offenses, and even a satanist and a Jehovah's Witness.

In the book's afterword, renowned child protection lawyer and social policy expert Szabolcs Bognár paints a grim picture of state care institutions.³³ These establishments, marked by a lack of love, care, security, and opportunities, coupled with harsh beatings and bureaucratic obstacles, pushed children toward criminality, alcoholism, drug use, and prostitution—what were then termed “social deviations.” Bognár described youth care homes as “the pigsties of child protection,” institutions often run by burned-out, frustrated, and poorly selected staff who were often aggressive and sometimes outright abusive. His critique of Hungary's child

³⁰The Warsaw Pact, a military alliance formed in 1955 to solidify Soviet control over Eastern Europe in response to NATO, was formally dissolved only in 1991.

³¹Csalog and Heltai, *Hogyan kell forradalmat csinálni?*

³²Zsolt Csalog, *Fel a kezekkel!* (Budapest: Maecenas Könyvkiadó, 1989).

³³In Csalog, *Fel a kezekkel!*, 391–403.

protection system from 1989 remains chillingly relevant today, as highlighted by recent scandals involving institutional abuse in state care homes and the 2024 clemency controversy.³⁴

Csalog's posthumous collection, *Csendet akarok!* (I Want Silence!), features dramatic life interviews with homeless individuals comprising a series of narratives cataloging the fates of former state wards.³⁵ The title piece of the book was adapted into a stage production by leading director Gábor Zsámbéki at the Katona József Theater in Budapest in 1996. Well-known actor Andrea Fullajtár played the homeless protagonist and gained direct inspiration for her performance by meeting the woman she portrayed during rehearsals. The production was revived in 2010–11, including post-performance discussions with the audience, one of which featured twelve homeless individuals in attendance. A unique aspect of the production's history is that one of its reviews was written by a homeless person, whose insights highlighted the authenticity and emotional depth of the performance.

Csalog's docu-portraits, through careful editing and compression, are in fact powerful monologues. These monologues position the subjects to present their life stories in a dramatic, dense, and compelling way, making the texts particularly effective on stage. Csalog's editorial work, unifying and refining the texts of the original interviews, resembles that of a dramaturg, who prepares drama texts for theater performance. His docu-portraits lend themselves naturally to theatrical adaptation, calling for communal engagement and a broader social dialogue through their staged interpretations.

A standout docu-portrait in the collection, "I Want to Win" documents an exceptionally uplifting life story. It opens the volume with the account of a young Roma man who spent his entire childhood in state care institutions. Despite systemic discrimination—such as being placed unlawfully in a special education school for mentally ill children after kindergarten—his

³⁴In early 2024, Hungary faced a major political scandal when it was revealed that President Katalin Novák had granted a presidential pardon to Endre Kónya, a former deputy director of a state-run children's home convicted of covering up child sexual abuse. The ensuing public outcry led to Novák's resignation in February 2024, followed by the resignation of Justice Minister Judit Varga. The case weakened the legitimacy of the Orbán regime and contributed to the rise of Péter Magyar as a democratic challenger to the government. See Andrew Higgins, "Hungary's President Resigns Amid Outcry Over Sex Abuse Case Pardon," *New York Times*, February 10, 2024.

³⁵Csalog, *Csendet akarok!*

extraordinary, decade-long determination to learn eventually earned him a place at the University of Szeged to study philosophy.

Csalog's docu-portraits offer a rich repository for gender history, particularly the history of women and LGBTQ individuals. Two of his masterpieces, *Peasant Novel* and *The Curse Does Not Befall the Gypsy*, feature elderly female protagonists (an ethnic Hungarian and an ethnic Roma, respectively) whose life stories resonate with each other. The themed collection *Hands Up!* also includes five in-depth interviews with young women—Katalin Nyíri, Rozi Rácz, Piroska Kovács, Fruzsina Bogyay, and Éva Szabó—who recount the coercive circumstances that pushed them into prostitution. Using the real names of these women at the beginning of each narrative serves to humanize their stories and give them an additional emotional depth. Other docu-portraits, such as “How Gay People Came to Be” by 20-year-old Tibi Lévárdi, detail the oppression faced by young LGBTQ individuals in the communist period in heart-wrenching detail. Despite the significance of the gender dimensions in Csalog's oeuvre, this aspect of his work has received no scholarly or public attention.

(6) *The Great Taboo: Workers in the “Workers’ State”*

Csalog had a profound sensitivity for documenting the lives of the working class. One of his early books, *A tengert akartam látni: Négy munkásportré* (I Wanted to See the Sea: Four Worker Portraits; 1981) portrays the lives of Hungarian industrial workers in the 1970s.³⁶ Through candid interviews, a lathe operator, a foreman, and other factory workers speak openly about their daily lives, hardships, and both private and professional aspirations. The “sea” in the book's title symbolizes one worker's dream—a simple yet unrealized longing that encapsulates the quiet frustrations of the working class. The text highlights the contradictions of the state-socialist system, revealing the gap between the official propaganda about the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the everyday realities of blue-collar workers.

Csalog himself reflected on the motivation behind this project, noting the growing social divides in Hungarian society: “In the last ten years, the distances between social strata have alarmingly increased, and the channels of communication [between them] have narrowed. My goal with this

³⁶Zsolt Csalog, *A tengert akartam látni: Négy munkásportré* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1981).

book was to bridge or at least reduce these distances.”³⁷ This acknowledgment reveals the challenges of publishing workers’ authentic narratives in a regime that idealized the working class but suppressed genuine portrayals of their struggles. The book was released in 1981, a year of significant tension in the Soviet-dominated Central and East European socialist bloc, with Poland’s Solidarity movement openly challenging the ruling communist party. Though the communist parties claimed to govern in the name of the working class, physical laborers never truly held power—a glaring contradiction that Hungarian party leadership observed uneasily as Solidarity gained momentum in Poland in 1980–81.³⁸

In a contemporary review of Csalog’s book, writer Dénes Csengey highlighted this “dangerous contradiction” within the socialist regime, observing that the ideologically charged and idealized image of workers—presented as a directive—was increasingly detached from social reality.³⁹ Csengey warned of the potential consequences: the working class might fail to see themselves reflected in the image the communist system held up to them, leading to a widening gulf between workers and the political elite that claimed to rule on their behalf. Csalog’s documentation and storytelling make *I Wanted to See the Sea* a nuanced exploration of this dissonance between ideology and lived reality in a so-called “workers’ state.”

The book’s four docu-portraits seem far removed from overt political critique. The polyphonic structure juxtaposes diverse life stories and perspectives, immersing readers in the confessions of four ambitious and diligent industrial workers. The protagonist of the first docu-portrait, who Csalog nicknames “Iron Man,” epitomizes this ethos. The moniker reflects both the grueling volume of work he performs and the resilience required to endure it:

³⁷ Csalog, *A tengert akartam látni*, text on dust jacket.

³⁸ The Solidarity trade union, founded in 1980 by Lech Wałęsa and other workers at the Gdańsk shipyard, quickly grew into a broad-based social movement advocating for workers’ rights, political freedoms, and an end to Soviet occupation of Poland. Despite the regime’s efforts to suppress it through martial law in December 1981, Solidarity persisted as a powerful underground resistance movement, ultimately leading to significant political changes and the eventual collapse of communist rule in Poland by the late 1980s. The Hungarian communist leadership, wary of the potential for Solidarity’s success to inspire similar movements within Hungary, feared that the spread of worker resistance could undermine their own control and stability in the Soviet sphere.

³⁹ Dénes Csengey, “Csalog Zsolt: A tengert akartam látni.” *Jelenkor* 25, no. 5 (1982): 475–77.

I stand at the workbench, working. I've been at this factory for 17 years, going on 18. Not eight hours a day, but twelve—because there's endless work and no workers. Twelve hours of work, then washing, changing, this and that—nearly 13 hours a day spent here, often even on Sundays. But I'm not complaining—it's double the reward! First, I earn more money ... and second, I don't have to be alone at home.⁴⁰

Csalog first published *Iron Man* (*Vasember*) in a Hungarian journal in 1977, and it was republished in 1981 in Csalog's volume containing four workers' docu-portraits. In an interesting coincidence, that same year saw the release of Polish director Wajda's film *Człowiek z żelaza* (*Man of Iron*), a powerful dramatization of the emergence and success of the Solidarity labor movement in Poland.⁴¹

Wajda's film follows the story of Maciej Tomczyk, a young worker and key figure in the Lenin shipyard strike in Gdańsk, whose struggles are emblematic of the broader anti-communist labor movement. Tomczyk's character draws clear parallels with Lech Wałęsa, who even appears in the film as himself, adding to its historical authenticity. In fact, the title of Wajda's film "Iron Man" was suggested by the Gdańsk shipyard workers themselves to the director, asking him to make a film about them. The two factory workers—one in Csalog's book in Hungary and one in Wajda's film in Poland—both called "Iron Man," implicitly point to the Polish context, where intellectuals and workers joined forces in oppositional alliances such as the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR, 1976–77), which paved the way for Solidarity.

Csalog's *Iron Man* does not explicitly engage in political activism, but the context suggests the latent potential for Hungary to develop similar worker-intellectual alliances. As a critical intellectual and a former armed revolutionary in 1956, Csalog's connection with workers carried the implicit threat of sparking civil dissent, much like the developments in Poland. Hungary's communist leadership, wary of the Polish example, steered workers toward individual economic ventures rather than collective advocacy. The "second economy" of the 1980s—comprising informal and semi-legal activities like side jobs, small-scale private farming and business as well as moonlighting work—not only offered opportunities for private profit and economic enrichment, but also served to diffuse

⁴⁰ Csalog, *A tengert akartam látni*, 7.

⁴¹ Andrzej Wajda, dir., *Człowiek z żelaza* [Man of Iron], 1981.

collective dissatisfaction.⁴² In this way, entrepreneurial workers became increasingly focused on individual profit-making, instead of collective actions by independent unions like those that Solidarity had achieved.

The sensitivity of addressing workers' realities is underscored by the fate of opposition activist Miklós Haraszti's first-person narrative non-fiction *Darabbér* (in English translation, *A Worker in a Workers' State*), which also documented the experiences of industrial laborers.⁴³ Written during Haraszti's time as a machine operator in Budapest's Red Star Tractor Factory in 1970–71, the book provided a raw and unflinching account of the working-class experience in socialist Hungary. The manuscript was confiscated in 1973, and Haraszti was prosecuted for inciting anti-state propaganda, and received a suspended prison sentence. Although *A Worker in a Workers' State* was translated into eleven languages, it was not legally published in Hungary until 1989.⁴⁴

Csalog's *I Wanted to See the Sea* fits into a broader cultural wave of interest in workers' lives during the early 1980s, seen in other artistic productions such as the rock song about a worker's life *Kőbánya Blues* by Hobo Blues Band (1981) and Béla Tarr's early cult film *Panelkapcsolat* (*The Prefab People*; 1982).⁴⁵ Yet, revisiting Csalog's portraits today reveals a stark historical shift: the relative stability and security of Hungary's industrial working class under state socialism has largely disappeared. Automation and economic restructuring have led to the decline of factory labor, largely replacing the classic proletariat with an unstable precariat. Against this backdrop, Csalog's worker portraits serve as a vivid chronicle of a bygone era—while the systemic struggles of marginalized groups, such as former state wards, persist largely unchanged.

(7) *Docu-Portraits of Communist Party-State Cadres*

From a contemporary political perspective, Csalog's *Egy téglát én is letettem* (I Also Laid a Brick; 1989) stands out as one of his most

⁴² Cf., István Kemény, "The Second Economy in Hungary," in *The Second Economy in Marxist States*, ed. Maria Łoś (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), 50–68.

⁴³ Miklós Haraszti, *A Worker in a Worker's State: Piece-Rates in Hungary*, trans. Michael Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

⁴⁴ Miklós Haraszti, *Darabbér: Egy munkás a munkásállamban* (Budapest: Téka Könyvkiadó, 1989).

⁴⁵ See Hobo Blues Band, *Kőbánya Blues* (Music video, 3:31 min., 1981), and Béla Tarr, dir., *Panelkapcsolat* [The Prefab People] 1982.

compelling collections.⁴⁶ In this book, Csalog traces the lives of five members of the communist cadre—three men and two women—from 1945 through the Kádár era, presenting a detailed first-person narrative of their personal and ideological journeys. What makes this exploration particularly significant is its focus on the human faces behind the abstract machinery of dictatorship. By engaging with these individuals' lives, Csalog illuminates the human dimensions of the harsh Stalinist and softer post-Stalinist dictatorship, offering a nuanced understanding of the motives and circumstances that sustained the communist party-state.

While post-1990 critical discussions of communist and other authoritarian regimes often focus on the systemic level, Csalog delves into the motivations of individuals who built and maintained the Hungarian communist regime at the grassroots. These were not the cynical beneficiaries of the later stages of authoritarian rule, but the idealistic founders who believed in the system and worked for its establishment. The book poses the questions: Who were these individuals, and what motivated them to serve the communist cause so fervently?

In his review essay about *I Also Laid a Brick*, sociologist Gábor Vági offers valuable insights into the psychological and social foundations of these individuals' loyalty.⁴⁷ As Vági explains, many of these early communist comrades came from poor and uneducated backgrounds. The opportunity for rapid education and upward social mobility—offered through crash courses and access to minor but locally meaningful positions of power—gave them a sense of personal and professional advancement. Their identification with the new regime was rooted in gratitude and the tangible benefits they received. However, their loyalty was further reinforced by their participation in significant post-war policies, such as urban reconstruction and land distribution to peasants in rural areas. These early experiences gave them a sense of purpose and validation, as they felt they were performing essential and popular work.

Csalog's historical portraits reveal the complexities of these individuals' life trajectories. Their initial belief in the system and their commitment to its social slogans were genuine, fueled by a combination of ideological conviction, a desire for personal advancement, and the fulfillment of what they saw as meaningful work for social progress. These experiences

⁴⁶ Zsolt Csalog, *Egy téglát én is letettem: Öt kis történelmi portré* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1989).

⁴⁷ Gábor Vági, "Szochaza nélkül," *Holmi* 2, no. 7 (1990): 815–17.

provided them with the internal security and the drive to persist in their roles, even as the system evolved into a rigid and repressive Stalinist form beginning in 1948.

One of the most striking narratives in *I Also Laid a Brick* is the docu-portrait of Ferenc Kis, an ÁVH (State Protection Authority, the feared Stalinist political police) officer operating in a small Hungarian town. Kis' early life in the interwar period was marked by severe hardship. His father died when he was 11, he worked as a domestic servant and later as a cobbler's apprentice while also doing agricultural labor in the summers. His mother earned a living as a washerwoman and day laborer. Kis joined the illegal Hungarian Communist Party in 1928 at a young age. After 1945, his rhetoric became steeped in dehumanizing and clichéd communist ideological phrases, with references to "class enemies" and "kulaks" (independent farmers characterized as class enemies), reflecting his uncritical adherence to the party's discursive directives. Questioning the party's orders never became part of his worldview.

Despite having only a primary education, Kis rose to the rank of lieutenant in the ÁVH between 1945 and 1948, leveraging his position to transition into a career in local council administration. His sole focus remained the ruthless use and retention of power, embodied in a perpetual struggle that ultimately targeted society itself. Kis dismissed postwar democratic pluralism and parties as meaningless, and shunned any reference to democratic values or legality. As a fervent authoritarian figure, Kis and his accomplices frequently resorted to physical violence against political opponents during his ÁVH tenure. Even after 1956 he used intimidation to suppress dissent, including brutal beatings of individuals who requested the return of farmland forcibly collectivized under the regime. While he denied torturing detainees, his actions painted a chilling picture of systemic physical abuse.

Kis' authoritarianism extended into his personal life. In one harrowing account, he admitted to savagely beating his son, leaving the boy bleeding profusely. He recalled the incident with chilling nonchalance: "I remember—I beat him so badly once I thought he wouldn't get up. I had just come back from militia duty, took off my belt—you know, the thick Workers' Militia belt—and used it. Held it in both hands. But blood came pouring out of his mouth and nose. I beat him so much! But even that didn't help."⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Csalog, *Egy téglát én is letettem*, 63.

Csalog conducted the interviews for these docu-portraits between 1978 and 1982, but only got the green light to publish the book in 1989. While historically significant, the book could also be read as a potent and timely allegory for contemporary East European authoritarian regimes.

CSALOG AND THE HUNGARIAN CREATIVE NON-FICTION TRADITION: “SOCIOGRAPHY” AND DOCUMENTARY FILM

By recording their life histories, Csalog granted enduring textual life to the subjects of his docu-portraits. Operating as a one-person creative institution, he assembled a vast historical tableau, capturing narratives from society's most excluded and dispossessed groups—the marginalized, disenfranchised, humiliated, and suffering. His work aligns with a Hungarian tradition of creative non-fiction called “sociography” (*szociográfia*). This genre blends literary narrative with social scientific inquiry to document and analyze the lives, struggles, and environments of marginalized or underrepresented social groups. Emerging in the interwar period and flourishing in the work of authors like Gyula Illyés (*Puszták népe*, 1936; in English translation, *People of the Puszta*, 1979) and Zoltán Szabó (*A tardi helyet* [The Situation in Tard], 1936; *Cifra nyomorúság* [Splendid Misery] 1938), sociography first aimed to provide a vivid, empathetic portrayal of the social realities of poor peasants while simultaneously serving as a tool for social critique and reform.⁴⁹ Sociography as a genre situates itself at the intersection of literature, public sociology,⁵⁰ and journalism, offering detailed ethnographic accounts while maintaining artistic quality, rhetorical power, as well as social scientific relevance. From 1960 to the present day, the sociography genre has extended to cover urban groups and subcultures in a way somewhat similar to American long-form literary journalism.

However, unlike most sociographers, Csalog did not author his texts in his own words but served as a medium, enabling his subjects to narrate their lives and social experiences directly. Csalog's methodology ensured

⁴⁹ Gyula *Puszták népe* (Budapest: Nyugat, 1936); in English: Gyula Illyés, *People of the Puszta*, trans. G. F. Cushing (Budapest: Corvina Kiadó, 1979). The classic sociographies of Zoltán Szabó are only available in Hungarian: Zoltán Szabó, *A tardi helyzet* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi Könyviadó, 1936); Zoltán Szabó, *Cifra nyomorúság: A Cserhát, Mátra, Bükk földje és népe* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi Könyviadó, 1938).

⁵⁰ Cf., Michael Burawoy, “For Public Sociology,” *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 1 (2005): 4–28.

that *society itself* “spoke” through many of its own diverse voices. He carefully selected representative individuals, recorded their stories, and transformed their speech into structured, written narratives that preserved their essence while achieving artistic intensity. Csalog’s oeuvre is a testament to his endeavor in literally amplifying the voices of the voiceless, bringing the discourses of silenced social groups to the attention of intellectuals, the middle class, and policymakers. By creating a critical literary and sociological public sphere where these marginalized histories could be presented and debated, Csalog aimed to address systemic social injustices and foster empowerment—providing not just legal emancipation but social strengthening and substantial enfranchisement.

Csalog’s work also resonates deeply with a Hungarian tradition of documentary filmmaking called “sociofilm” (*szociofilm*). Sociofilm, a term rooted in creative and academic film discourses in Hungary, refers to a sub-genre of documentary or semi-documentary filmmaking that combines visual storytelling with sociological inquiry to depict the lives and struggles of marginalized or underrepresented groups. Sociofilm, characterized by its commitment to social realism and the detailed depiction of everyday life under socialism, was developed by the Budapest School of filmmakers, in association with the Balázs Béla Studio in the late 1960s and 1970s. Influenced by *cinéma vérité* and observational documentary techniques, it often combined dramatized elements and poetic cinematography with authentic interviews, focusing on the experiences of marginalized communities such as workers, Roma, and rural populations. Sociofilm sought to critique social inequalities while navigating the constraints of communist state censorship during the Kádár regime.

Serving both as a medium for social critique and as a tool for raising awareness of systemic inequalities, Csalog’s docu-portraits align thematically and generically with the masterpieces of documentary film directors like Pál Schiffer, the Gulyás brothers (Gyula Gulyás and János Gulyás), Judit Ember, Tamás Almási, and Sándor Sára. Particularly, Sára’s portrait films about the experiences of former Hungarian World War II rank-and-file soldiers stand out as kindred creations.⁵¹ Together, these films shed light on the “faceless,” giving visibility and voice to those silenced by mainstream narratives.

⁵¹ Sándor Sára, dir., *Krónika: A második magyar hadsereg a Donnál*. [Chronicles: The 2nd Hungarian Army at the Don River] (TV Series, 25 episodes, 1982).

The simultaneous rise of postwar Hungarian sociography and sociofilm genres is no coincidence. Starting in the 1960s, the Balázs Béla Studio in Budapest provided a platform for sociofilm. At the same time, from 1970, an important sociographical book series, *Magyarország felfedezése* (Discovering Hungary), offered a literary counterpart.⁵² These platforms, despite the limitations of censorship, fostered cross-disciplinary collaboration between critical sociologists and documentary filmmakers. Director Pál Schiffer, for instance, worked extensively with sociologists like István Kemény (Csalog's sociologist mentor) on his seminal films *What Do Gypsy Children Do?* (dir. Pál Schiffer 1973) and *Houses on the Outskirts of the Village* (dir. Schiffer 1973). Similarly, the 1978 docu-fiction film *Cséplő Gyuri*, about a young Roma man's attempts to escape rural poverty, benefited from Kemény's collaboration as a co-writer (dir. Schiffer 1978).⁵³

Csalog's work also shares affinities with Péter Forgács's *Private Hungary* documentary film series (1988–2008), which reconstructs family and historical narratives from amateur home movies spanning the 1930s to the 1950s.⁵⁴ These visual self-documentations parallel, but are also distinct from, the self-representation of Csalog's interview subjects as the home movies were created mostly as urban middle-class family memoirs.

THE SOURCES OF THE DOCU-PORTRAIT GENRE

Zsolt Csalog's collaboration with sociologist István Kemény in the 1970s was transformative. On the one hand, Csalog's interview methodology sprang from deep sociological life-history interviews, aiming to immerse the researcher in the interviewees' worldviews and ways of life. In Hungary, sociologists Kemény and Ágnes Losonczy pioneered this technique as a qualitative research tool, and as part of the methodology for investigating lifestyles and social group dynamics.

⁵²The book series *Magyarország felfedezése* (Discovering Hungary) remains active, with the most recent volume published in 2024, according to the series website (<https://magyarorszagfelfedezese.hu/konyvek/>).

⁵³Cf., Pál Schiffer, dir., *Mit csinálnak a cigánygyerekek?* [What Do Gypsy Children Do?] (Documentary, 48 min., 1973); Pál Schiffer, dir., *Faluszéli házak* [Houses on the Outskirts of the Village] (Documentary, 38 min., 1973); Pál Schiffer, dir., *Cséplő Gyuri* (Drama documentary, 1h 43 min., 1978).

⁵⁴Péter Forgács, dir., *Privát Magyarország* [Private Hungary] (Documentary series, 14 films, 1988–2008).

During the preparatory phase of Kemény's groundbreaking Roma research project, Csalog played an instrumental role as Kemény's sole full-time collaborator. He conducted pilot interviews in regions such as Somogy, Szolnok, and Békés counties, drawing insights that shaped the methodological foundation of his docu-portraits. Discussions in Kemény's seminars further refined these techniques, creating fertile ground for Csalog's own contributions to the genre.⁵⁵

Csalog's other influence came from American cultural anthropologist Oscar Lewis. Lewis' book, *Children of Sanchez* (1961), published in Hungarian in 1968, became popular among Hungarian intellectuals and widely discussed by Csalog and his circle of researchers.⁵⁶ Lewis' anthropological research and creative method in *Children of Sanchez* exemplifies his pioneering work. Based on extensive interviews with members of a single family in Mexico City, Lewis employs a polyphonic narrative structure where each family member's voice is presented in their own words, revealing individual perspectives, emotions, and experiences. Lewis interviewed each family member and meticulously edited their oral testimonies into a cohesive narrative that maintains the authenticity of speech patterns and the socio-cultural context. He succeeded in creating a compelling literary form, blending public anthropology and storytelling, ethnographic rigor, and narrative innovation.

As the explanation of his methodological sources indicate, Csalog's work belongs not only to the narrative non-fiction tradition of Hungarian literature but also to the history of Hungarian sociology—and was also inspired by American cultural anthropology. Csalog's high-quality, nuanced interview techniques remain a valuable methodological technique in the social sciences. His docu-portrait series, focusing on marginalized individuals and communities, could be also seen and used as a historical sociology and oral history database.

⁵⁵ Sükösd, "Maga a társadalom beszél sok hangon át."

⁵⁶ Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican family* (New York: Random House, 1961); in Hungarian, Oscar Lewis, *Sanchez gyermekei*, trans. Tibor Bartos (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1968).

LITERARY MONTAGE VS. DOCU-PORTRAITS BASED
ON INTERVIEWS: COMPARING NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES
OF CSALOG AND ALEXIEVICH

From a methodological perspective, Zsolt Csalog's work aligns most closely with that of Svetlana Alexievich, the Belarusian writer awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015. Alexievich, known for her "documentary literature" or "documentary novel" approach, blends oral history interviews into literary narratives. Her intention is to create a form of literature as close to real life as possible. Like Csalog, Alexievich also adds her own text sparingly in her works, allowing her interviewees—mothers, widows, soldiers, workers, children, and scientists—to narrate their personal histories.

Alexievich focuses on the lived experiences of ordinary people during extraordinary historical events, such as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster (*Voices from Chernobyl*, 2005), the Soviet-Afghan War (*Zinky Boys*, 1992), the collapse of the Soviet Union (*Second-Hand Time*, 2016), or World War II (*Last Witnesses*, 2019).⁵⁷ Her goal is to reveal the invisible stories and overlooked groups absent from official Soviet and Russian historical narratives, constructing a more truthful and comprehensive collective memory from individual testimonies. This naturally steers her work toward social critique and active political engagement, especially in opposition to authoritarian regimes like that of Belorussian president Alexander Lukashenko.

Although Alexievich and Csalog share a commitment to preserving the cadence and immediacy of spoken language in their texts, their narrative techniques diverge. Alexievich employs a montage approach, crafting collective narratives from fragmented monologues and shorter interview excerpts. For instance, in *Voices from Chernobyl* she weaves together survivor accounts, scientists' perspectives, and government testimonies to explore the nuclear disaster's individual and societal impact. By interweaving these disparate voices, Alexievich constructs a multi-sourced, poetic

⁵⁷ Cf., Svetlana Alexievich, *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*, trans. Julia and Robin Whitby (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992); Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, trans. Keith Gessen (Dalkey Archive Press, 2005); Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, trans. Bela Shayevich (New York: Random House, 2016); Svetlana Alexievich, *Last Witnesses: An Oral History of the Children of World War II*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Random House, 2019).

and emotionally resonant macro-narrative that captures the complexity of major historical events.

In contrast, Csalog provides an intimate representation of a single subject to create an extended life-history portrait. His docu-portraits delve into the intricacies of individual lives and fates, enabling a detailed exploration of personal experiences and broader social realities unfolding over years or even decades. While Alexievich weaves expansive, collective tapestries of memory, Csalog homes in on the transformative power of singular protagonists' deeply realized life narratives. Both, however, share a commitment to literally amplifying the voices of those marginalized in their respective societies.

Alexievich's works have received broader international attention than Csalog's, largely due to their focus on the Soviet Union and Russia—countries of enduring global interest. The global visibility of her oeuvre was also amplified when she received the Nobel Prize in Literature. Her training as an investigative journalist and editor informs her accessible, dynamic and popular style, which contrasts with Csalog's social science background and slower pace—yet both are emotionally engaging. Both authors transcend mere documentation.

Alexievich creates literary montages about key historical events that resonate globally, while Csalog performs a kind of textual alchemy, transmuting raw interviews into enduring and shining portraits. Together, they demonstrate the profound potential of narrative non-fiction to preserve and interrogate collective memory through personal interviews.

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“A Historical Process Like Any Other”: Ziemowit Szczerek’s Liberal Historiosophy in the Ukrainian Context

Aleksandra Konarzewska

INTRODUCTION

Ziemowit Szczerek (born in 1978) is a multifaceted Polish author whose contributions to literature and journalism are diverse and influential. He is renowned as a novelist, reporter, opinion journalist, and social media personality, maintaining a significant presence on platforms such as Facebook and X. His body of work spans both non-fiction and fiction, with notable titles including *Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje, czyli tajna historia Słowian* (Mordor’s Coming To Eat us Up, or The Secret History of Slavs, 2013),¹

¹Ziemowit Szczerek, *Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje, czyli tajna historia Słowian* (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2013). All translations, including book titles, are my own.

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Tatuaż z tryzubem (A Tattoo with a Trident, 2015),² *Międzymorze* (Intermarium, 2017),³ and *Wymyślone miasto Lwów* (The Made-Up City of Lviv, 2022).⁴ His novels, such as *Siódemka* (Seven, 2014), *Siny dym* (Ashen Smoke, 2018), and *Cham z kulą w głowie* (A Lout with a Bullet in His Head, 2020) further highlight his literary versatility.⁵ Szczerek keenly and openly experiments with the poetics of gonzo journalism.⁶ He is considered the most prominent representative of gonzo in Poland,⁷ and, moreover, his translation of works such as Hunter S. Thompson's seminal reportage "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" (1970) has contributed to the introduction and popularization of gonzo journalism within Polish literary circles.⁸ In his works, Szczerek delves into the meanings of history of the "small nations" of East-Central Europe,

² Ziemowit Szczerek, *Tatuaż z tryzubem* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2019 [2015]).

³ Ziemowit Szczerek, *Międzymorze: Podróże przez prawdziwą i wyobrażoną Europę środkową* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2017).

⁴ Ziemowit Szczerek, *Wymyślone miasto Lwów* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2022).

⁵ Ziemowit Szczerek, *Siódemka* (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2014); Ziemowit Szczerek, *Siny dym, Albo Pięć Cywilizowanych Plemion* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2018); Ziemowit Szczerek, *Cham z kulą w głowie* (Kraków: Znak Litera Nova, 2020).

⁶ Gonzo non-fiction, which emerged from the New Journalism movement of the 1960s and 1970s, is distinguished by its use of humor, sarcasm, first-person narrative, colloquial language, and subjective perspective. Today, gonzo stylistics are employed to address critical issues in American society, including urban decay, opiate addiction, rising inequalities, and poverty (cf. the work of Charlie LeDuff).

⁷ Mariusz Szczygieł, *Fakty muszą zatańczyć* (Warszawa: Dowody na Istnienie, 2022); Agnieszka Janiec-Nyitrai, "Cienka błona między faktem a wyobrażeniem, czyli o strategiach narracyjnych Ziemowita Szczereka w kontekście poetyki dziennikarstwa gonzo," in *Velencétől Dubrovnikig: Köszöntő kötet Vig István tiszteletére*, ed. Mária Dudás and Előd Dudás, Opera Slavica Budapestinensia. Symposia Slavica (Budapest: ELTE BTK Szlav Filológiai Tanszék, 2018), 101–17; Mateusz Zimnoch, "Cultural Insight by Way of Distortion: Ziemowit Szczerek's Introduction and Immediate Deconstruction of Gonzo in Poland," in *Fear and Loathing Worldwide: Gonzo Journalism Beyond Hunter S. Thompson*, ed. Robert Alexander and Christine Isager (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 267–81. On other Polish writers and journalists whose work can be to some extent paralleled with gonzo, see Jan Bińczycki, "Sporysz zamiast pejotlu," *Ha!art* 41, no. 1 (2013): 62–65; Grzegorz Kopeć, "Kiszone Frukta Z Miodem," *Ha!art* 41, no. 1 (2013); Andrzej Kaliszewski, "Polski reportaż gonzo na tle historii i teorii podgatunku," in *Literatura polska w świecie: Reportaż w świecie światowość reportażu*, vol. 7, ed. Katarzyna Frukacz (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2019), 215–29.

⁸ Hunter S. Thompson, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," *Scanlan's Monthly* 1, no. 4 (1970), accessed August 12, 2023, <http://brianb.freeshell.org/a/kddd.pdf>; Hunter S. Thompson, "Upadek i demoralizacja na derby w Kentucky," trans. Ziemowit Szczerek, *Ha!art* 41 (2013): 12–30. The entire issue of the literary magazine *Ha!art*, in

examining their traces through local curiosities, monuments, gadgets, and the often "formless" or "post-apocalyptic" landscapes.

In exploring the shifting identities and historical dynamics of East-Central Europe, Szczerek reframes cultural and political development as a process "like any other," i.e., driven by "natural" socio-cultural forces. His liberal approach offers an alternative to both the conventional conservative and progressive outlooks, which frequently view cultures and civilizations as locked in a cycle of rivalry and oppression.⁹ Instead, Szczerek suggests that societal evolution is more hopeful, rooted in cultural attraction, material development, and individual freedoms rather than coercion or colonial ambitions. At the heart of Szczerek's view is a belief in progress through economic prosperity and personal freedoms, as it is precisely these factors that make one culture more appealing and enduring than another, as exemplified by Ukraine's complex but determined shift toward "Western" values.

SZCZEREK'S LIBERAL HISTORIOSOPHY

Szczerek's oeuvre is deeply rooted in the exploration of the cultural and geopolitical complexities of East-Central Europe, particularly in regions such as Poland, the Polish-German borderlands, Hungary, and Ukraine. A significant aspect of his work remains his curiosity about the historical processes of cultural and political nation-building, the question of identity formation in time, and an attempt to distinguish certain patterns and more general rules within such processes. I thus describe this approach as "historiosophy,"¹⁰ and I label this historiosophy as "liberal," since, in Szczerek's view, I argue, the influence of one culture over another is more

which this translation appeared, was devoted to gonzo, its impact on Polish literary journalism, and its variations in different parts of the world.

⁹ In the following paper, I follow Szczerek's lack of terminological consistency and use the terms "culture" and "civilization" synonymously. In Polish, both terms (*kultura*, *cywilizacja*) refer to the shared practices, values, artistic expressions, and intellectual achievements that define a society or community; the semantic differences between them resemble the differences between German *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*.

¹⁰ Historiosophy is the philosophical interpretation of history, concerned with uncovering alleged underlying patterns, purposes, or meanings in historical events. Originating with thinkers like Giambattista Vico, Immanuel Kant, or Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in the 18th and 19th centuries, it seeks to explain history as guided by overarching principles. It contrasts with more fact-based approaches by exploring the "why" of history on a deeper, often metaphysical level. Today, historiosophy engages with questions about whether history

closely linked to economic prosperity, personal freedoms, and the appeal of popular culture than to mere force, competition, or imperialist policies. In other words, Szczerek avoids analyzing intercultural dependencies and civilizational processes in a way typical for normative discourses focused on power relations, whether progressive or conservative. In this sense too, his historiosophy is “liberal,” as it is teleologically optimistic. Conservative views on historical patterns are generally pessimistic; they hold, for instance, that the ultimate decay of each civilization is unavoidable, or, as Feliks Koneczny argued, that the “less sophisticated” civilizations always embrace and ultimately destroy the finer ones.¹¹ In Szczerek’s vision of history, on the contrary, it is the actual progress and development (material, but also in the sphere of the rights of the individual) that will ultimately decide whether one culture will be considered more attractive, stronger, and thus more influential than others, Ukraine’s slow and turbulent yet persistent civilizational move towards “the West” being the best example.¹²

Furthermore, Szczerek frequently uses “naturalistic” logic and vocabulary while discussing and depicting historical social processes, for instance acculturation or the rise of national or ethnic identity. They are mostly compared to biological processes (such as osmosis) and weather conditions that are to be acknowledged and, if necessary, explored, but not to be taken personally or subjected to moral judgment. And since there is no use in criticizing “the natural,” the way in which Szczerek describes various curiosities resulting from social processes (e.g., kitschy “patriotic”

follows discernible laws or cycles (cf. macroeconomics), influencing fields like political sciences, cultural studies, and historiography.

¹¹ Feliks Koneczny (1862–1949) was a Polish historian and philosopher of history known for his theory of civilizations (*On the Plurality of Civilizations*, 1935). Contrary to such thinkers as Giambattista Vico or Oswald Spengler, Koneczny rejected “biologistic” accounts of cultures and civilizations according to which they follow a pattern similar to a cycle of life: growth–peak–decay. Instead, Koneczny emphasized the distinctiveness of each civilizational system. Despite his scholarly contributions, Koneczny’s work remained relatively obscure until after World War II. Feliks Koneczny, *O Wielości Cywilizacji* (2019 [1935]), accessed October 22, 2024, <https://cbmn.pl/uploads/ebooks/Feliks%20Koneczny%20-%20O%20wielosc%20Cywilizacji.pdf>. Cf. Anton Hilckman, “Feliks Koneczny und die vergleichende Kulturwissenschaft,” *Saeculum* 3, no. 1 (1952): 571–602, 10.7788/saeculum-1952-0130.

¹² Interestingly, Szczerek shares with Koneczny the conviction that the division between material and spiritual life is artificial, as these spheres are deeply intertwined.

artifacts) is ironically humorous, not ironically judgmental.¹³ This is also a reason to label Szczerek's historiosophy "liberal," as it is mostly liberal-conservative discourse that similarly tends to present certain concepts and norms as unavoidable and thus as "natural" rules that are inherent to social life, paralleling them with, for instance, the laws of physics.¹⁴

Finally, the general conviction that ultimately, it is "the West" (despite its various failings and hypocrisy) that offers inhabitants of Eastern and Central Europe the better civilizational option in the sphere of personal and political freedoms and material stability, accords with Szczerek's conviction that it is the urban middle class (Polish: *mieszczaństwo*) that truly embodies the "Western" civilizational model. In his non-fiction, Szczerek devotes much of his attention to the urban public sphere, as well as to urban lifestyle—city nightlife, advertisements, cafés, monuments, public transport, infrastructure, cultural and gastronomic highlights—and does not hide his genuine (but not uncritical) appreciation for the culture-building impact of *mieszczaństwo* in Eastern and Central Europe—regions of peripheral capitalism, where the bourgeoisie as a class was historically much weaker than in the Netherlands or Italy, and where it was nationally and ethnically heterogeneous, with a high percentage of Germans, Austrians, and Jews, among others.¹⁵ Szczerek's appreciation of the urban middle class results also from the fact that the identity of city dwellers is much more cosmopolitan and inclusive than the (ethno)national one, and that, furthermore, it offers a pattern that allows someone coming from another European city—Berlin, Warsaw, Milan—not to feel like a foreigner, the Ukrainian city of Lviv being a prime example.

¹³ Cf. the very first chapter of *Tatuaż z tryzubem*.

¹⁴ I am following the classical Marxist critique here, i.e., the belief that hegemonic discourses are disguised as "obvious" or "natural," and thus questioning them requires a readiness to question the established "common sense."

¹⁵ Ziemowit Szczerek, "Niemiecka Republika Samochodowa," *Wyborcza.pl*, October 5, 2019, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,25271518,niemiecka-republika-samochodowa.html>; Szczerek, *Wymyślone miasto Lwów*.

SZCZEREK'S LITERARY NON-FICTION: DIRECT EXPERIENCE MEETS POPULAR CULTURE

Through his works, Szczerek's historiosophy is shaped not by theoretical frameworks (though readers may detect his affinity with prominent contemporary thinkers in the field, such as Immanuel Wallerstein),¹⁶ but rather by two key stimuli: first, popular culture, both local, drawn from various Eastern European countries, and global (primarily Anglo- and Francophone); and, second, his direct experience as a traveler in the countries and regions he describes, for example Hungary in *Via Carpathia*.

The choice of popular culture as a framework should come as no surprise, as pop cultural codes reveal how certain concepts and phenomena are collectively understood and expressed. Today, "serious" academic studies on historical patterns and civilizational interactions must be conceptually rigorous and self-aware, or they risk becoming examples of simplistic essentialism and cultural bias—a criticism that applies even to classical authors from Immanuel Kant through Karl Marx to Feliks Koneczny and Samuel Huntington.¹⁷ Consequently, academic analyses tend to remain intellectually cautious. Popular culture, by contrast, does not claim to answer fundamental questions with professional authority, allowing room for both playful speculation and dilettantism. This flexibility enables engagement with factually unsupported theories and politically sensitive notions like "historical processes," "civilization," and "culture." In other words, using popular culture as a lens allows for bolder historiosophical ideas, as its inherent "unseriousness" deflects potential accusations of essentialism or cultural stereotyping.¹⁸

It should thus not be surprising that historiosophical questions are explored through such pop culture phenomena as video games. One of the most iconic examples is the "Sid Meier's Civilization" series, along

¹⁶ Ziemowit Szczerek, *Via Carpatia: Podróże po Węgrzech i Basenie Karpackim*, Sulina (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2020), 227.

¹⁷ In Polish mainstream discourses, Koneczny's concept of the "Latin civilization" (the cultural system rooted in the synthesis of Roman law, Greek philosophy, and Christian ethics) has been often reduced to a cliché justifying contempt for other cultures. In his *Przyjdzie Mordor...*, Szczerek alludes to this concept in its vulgarized version. Szczerek, *Przyjdzie Mordor*, 148.

¹⁸ In video games, the question of authenticity is complex; players of historical games often expect rigor, and excessive liberties may provoke significant backlash, as seen in the debate surrounding *Atomic Heart*.

with "Total War," "Crusader Kings," "Age of Empires" and "Europa Universalis," the turn-based strategy games in which players oversee how civilizations (empires, kingdoms, modern states) expand, evolve, and interact with one another as they guide their chosen unit through different historical periods. These kinds of games allow players to explore "what if" scenarios—how history might have unfolded differently if certain key events (e.g., battles) had turned out another way. When Szczerek considers alternative histories of Poland and Eastern and Central Europe in his works (or even writes entire books adopting the speculative fiction genre of alternative history/counterhistory),¹⁹ he does so in a way that urges the reader to think of planning a scenario for a video game.²⁰ Likewise, one of Szczerek's favorite methods of narration involves imagining how historical figures might have felt during significant events (e.g., young Polish soldiers entering Kyiv in 1920 and being confronted with the splendor of the city, incomparable with anything they could have seen before).²¹ This immersive approach, which places the narrator (and thus the reader) in the mindset of individuals from the past, closely parallels techniques used in video games, where players are encouraged to adopt the perspectives of characters to deepen engagement.²²

Furthermore, global popular culture (literature, comics, film, video games) has long used imaginary Eastern European settings to represent a kind of "exotic otherness" without having to directly engage with real-world politics or actual "memory wars," i.e., conflicts over how historical events are interpreted and commemorated. The fictional locations of

¹⁹ Ziemowit Szczerek, *Kolejna Alternatywna Historia Polski* (s.l.: Fundacja Nowoczesna Polska, 2021), <http://wolnelektury.pl/katalog/lektura/szczerek-kolejna-alternatywna-historia-polski/>; Ziemowit Szczerek, *Rzeczpospolita zwycięska: Alternatywna historia Polski* (Kraków: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, 2013).

²⁰ This characteristic of Szczerek's writing requires further investigation, as hitherto it has been absent in the scholarly contributions on his speculative fiction. Cf. Justyna Tabaszewska's analysis of *Rzeczpospolita zwycięska*. Justyna Tabaszewska, "Future in Memory Studies and Functions of Alternative Histories," in *Voicing Memories, Unearthing Identities: Studies in the Twenty-First-Century Literatures of Eastern and East-Central Europe*, ed. Aleksandra Konarzewska and Anna Nakai (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2023), 3–23.

²¹ Szczerek, *Tatuaż z tryzubem*, 30–32.

²² Cf. Ryszard Kupidura, "Gonzo uwikłane, przemoc przedstawienia oraz mozaika fantazmatów narodowych, czyli o 'Ukraińskiej Trylogii' Ziemowita Szczereka," *Porównania* 24 (2020): 61, 10.14746/por.2019.1.6. Kupidura notices this characteristic of Szczerek's non-fiction but fails to notice the resemblance to video gaming.

“Ruritania,”²³ “Syldavia,” “Borduria,”²⁴ “Latveria,”²⁵ or “Zubrovka”²⁶ blend elements of Eastern European culture, politics, and history into a generalized, sometimes exaggerated, setting which reflects a composite image of Eastern Europe in the global (or “Western”) imagination, drawing on stereotypes of poverty, conflict, and dictatorship but also mystery and exoticism. Szczerek’s references to these cultural productions (sometimes explicitly, as in the book *Międzymorze*)²⁷ are one of the key features of his writing, which allows him to reconsider sensitive historical topics (political and cultural influence, cultural hegemony, commemoration narratives) in a distanced, humorous, and self-ironical way.

Szczerek’s direct experience of Eastern and Central Europe, particularly Poland, the eastern parts of Germany, Ukraine, Slovakia, Czechia, and Hungary derives from his travels; these travels also constitute the content of his most important works. In particular, his interactions with local people and his observations of their material culture allow him to draw broader conclusions about historical processes such as acculturation, political adaptation, and collective identity formation. This is why so much of Szczerek’s attention is focused on outdoor and public spaces: advertisements, shop windows, bus stops, monuments, and even the way people decorate their homes. With this approach, he follows to some extent in the footsteps of Andrzej Stasiuk, a prominent Polish writer known for his poetic travelogues from the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Turkey.²⁸ However, unlike Stasiuk, Szczerek pays much more attention to local

²³ Ruritania is a fictional East-Central European country in Anthony Hope’s *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894). Thanks to the popularity of the book, “Ruritania” became a placeholder name for unspecified Eastern European countries both in scholarly and pop cultural discourses.

²⁴ Syldavia and Borduria are fictional Southeastern European countries in the comics series *The Adventures of Tintin* by Hergé. They were depicted for the first time in 1938.

²⁵ Latveria (capital: Doomstadt) is a fictional Southeastern European country from the Marvel universe (first appearing in a comic book story in 1964). The ruler of Latveria is Marvel’s supervillain Dr. Victor von Doom.

²⁶ Zubrovka is the fictional Central European country in Wes Anderson’s film *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014).

²⁷ Szczerek, *Międzymorze*, 337–39.

²⁸ Cf. Marta Cobel-Tokarska and Marcin Dębicki, “Idea wykuwana w ‘Mordorze’: Ziemowita Szczerka konceptualizacyjne ujęcie Europy Środkowej,” *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 62, no. 2 (2021): 155–83, 10.35757/KiS.2018.62.2.9; Arkadiusz Kalin, “Polska Szkoła Zmyślania—literacki reportaż podróżniczy: Podróże z Mordoru do Międzymorza Ziemowita Szczerka,” *Forum Poetyki/Forum of Poetics*, nos. 11–12 (2018): 82.

curiosities, such as unintentionally and humorously inept monuments of local national heroes. Szczerek also attempts to historically and culturally categorize the phenomena he observes, identifying their Ottoman, Habsburg, Polish, German, Soviet, or post-Soviet origins. He notes that certain cultural practices (in architecture, fashion, or behavior) originating from one nation are adopted in one region but not in others. Similarly, he observes that some "invented traditions" (to use Eric Hobsbawm's term) are seen as attractive and thus are easily integrated into local customs and practices, while others are not. (This is why he highlights the repetitive nature of nationalist-chauvinist frameworks across each country he visits.) This "from below" perspective, focused on actual cultural and social practices, captures surprising individual cases that might otherwise go unnoticed due to their misalignment with broader historical narratives.

Historiosophic questions concerning acculturation and whether it can be achieved "naturally" are distinctly visible in Szczerek's Ukrainian reportages *Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje*, *Tatuaż z tryzubem*, and *Wymyślone miasto Lwów*. In all three works, he subtly explores the question of cultural/civilizational attractiveness and the entanglements of the Polish, German, Scandinavian, and Russian influences in Ukraine.

It is important to stress that each of Szczerek's Ukrainian books, even if they all delve into the complexities of Ukrainian history and identity, was written in different geopolitical circumstances and thus cover very different moments from Ukraine's recent past. *Przyjdzie Mordor...* (published in 2013) predates the Revolution of Dignity, portraying a Ukraine still under Yanukovich's rule. The challenges of that time—such as visa requirements for entering the EU, corruption (*prodazhnist*), and the lack of civic agency—provide the backdrop for understanding the shifting dynamics between Poland and Ukraine during this period. The genre of the work is also significant: *Przyjdzie Mordor...* is a gonzo piece that employs exaggeration as a central poetic device while deliberately blending fact with fiction, formally situating itself on the side of the latter (formally, *Przyjdzie Mordor* is a first-person narrative novel). *Tatuaż z tryzubem* (year of publication: 2015) on the other hand, is a regular work of non-fiction that covers the Revolution of Dignity and its consequences in different regions of Ukraine, particularly the rise of the "Ukrainianess" as a civil-political force and the outbreak of the war in Donbas. Finally, *Wymyślone miasto Lwów* (literally: *The Made-Up City of Lviv*, year of publication: 2022) was written after the beginning of the full-scale Russian war of

aggression, and, as the title entails, is devoted to the city of Lviv in western Ukraine, famous for its rich historical heritage.

LONGING FOR “THE WEST”: *PRZYJJDZIE MORDOR I NAS ZJE* (2013)

The gonzo novel *Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje* explores one of Szczerek's favorite motifs, i.e., national (auto)stereotypes. The main axis of narration is the stereotypical Polish (and to some extent also German and American) imagination of Ukraine and Ukrainians (e.g., the author highlights “the Polish” pomposity and arrogance toward “the Ukrainian” down-to-earth attitude). However, it quickly becomes clear that through exploration of grotesque examples of “Ukrainianess” and “Polishness,” Szczerek is indirectly looking towards more universalistic inferences concerning cultural and historical processes, particularly the authentic and powerful attractiveness of “the West,” idealized as the best civilizational choice for its alleged respect for individual rights and freedoms.

The main hero of *Przyjdzie Mordor...*, Polish journalist Łukasz Ponczynski, travels through pre-Maidan Ukraine, noticing on the one hand numerous examples of Ukraine's multicultural heritage (including Jewish, Polish, Habsburg, and Russian influences), but at the same time the post-Soviet poverty and stagnation mixed with the sudden appearance of unregulated, “wild” capitalism with its cronyistic and illicit market practices. Historical entanglements of Ukraine are thus presented indirectly, through descriptions of what is visible—post-Habsburg or post-Soviet architecture, the organization of the public sphere, or human behavior in public places—which results in a post-apocalyptic aesthetics.²⁹ For instance, the landscape of western Ukraine is described as follows:

The Soviet Union slammed its scab-ridden carcass onto Galicia, and that carcass was still rotting there, because though it had died, there was no way to bury it. [...] Between the concrete housing blocks stood a small Eastern Christian church, the last trace of what had been here before. The blocks loomed over it like thugs over a victim they're about to beat the shit out of.

²⁹ Justyna E. Dąbrowska, “Obraz państwa postapokaliptycznego w prozie Ziemowita Szczereka,” *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska, sectio FF, Philologia* 34, no. 2 (2017): 187–99, 10.17951/ff.2016.34.2.187.

Firewood was stacked on their balconies, and chimneys from stoves jutted out of the windows.³⁰

What both nations, Poles and Ukrainians, are meant to have in common in *Przyjdzie Mordor*..., is a general conviction that "the West" is a more attractive civilizational choice than the "East." This is already indicated in the book's title—the reference to J. R. R. Tolkien's novel *The Lord of the Rings* implies that Europe, like Tolkien's Middle-earth, is constituted by the positive tribes in the West (the French being the Elves, the Germans being the Dwarves, and the British being the Humans) and the undefined, unsettling "Mordor" in the East.³¹ However, whereas for most Poles Ukraine already represents the uncanny "Eastern" exoticism (in Lviv, Ukrainians are derogatorily called *Ruscy* by Polish tourists and are expected to drink alcohol like stereotypical East Europeans),³² for many Ukrainians, Poles—despite being members of NATO and EU citizens—are viewed as impostors rather than as true members of the imagined and idealized "Western" civilizational sphere. One Ukrainian woman enlightens Łukasz:

— Let me tell you why [you Poles] come here—she ignored my question.— You come here because in other countries, people laugh at you. They see you the way you see us: as backward fuckers from some godforsaken shit-hole. A place where you can feel superior. [...] Because everyone thinks of you as poor, backward Eastern scum. Everyone thinks you're just a slightly different version of Russia. The third world. Only here can you act superior. Here, you can make up for the fact that everywhere else, people wipe their asses with you.³³

The fact that in Ukrainian eyes Poland does not deserve to belong to "the West" is yet further proof of how "the West" is idealized as an attractive civilizational choice, especially when compared with Russia (or "Slavs"

³⁰ Szczerek, *Przyjdzie Mordor*, 28.

³¹ Szczerek, *Przyjdzie Mordor*, 165–67. The question whether certain places from the *Lord of the Rings* series are to be identified with existing countries and regions (and if so, with which ones) is one of the favorite topics for discussion among the LOTR fandom. Cf. Ziemowit Szczerek, "Gdzie na mapie Europy wypada Mordor, a gdzie wiedźmińskie krainy," *Wyborcza.pl*, March 21, 2020, <https://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,25799541,jak-bardzo-nie-ma-polski-w-swiecie-tolkiena-i-jak-bardzo.html>.

³² See Cobel-Tokarska and Dębicki, "Idea wykuwana w 'Mordorze,'" 161–62.

³³ Szczerek, *Przyjdzie Mordor*, 37.

or “the East”). As one of Szczerek’s characters states, “Russian—or let’s say Slavic—civilization, he said, is a civilization that turns people into monsters and space into a shithole [*sracz*].”³⁴ This perspective, however, sometimes exposes a complex relationship: contempt for Russians does not exclude moments of genuine nostalgia for a romanticized Soviet past. This is exemplified by a Ukrainian man Łukasz encounters in Drohobycz in western Ukraine:

The thing is—explained a man with a 1970s-style haircut, resembling Kazimierz Deyna—that the wrong people took charge of communism. I mean, the Muscovites. Whatever they touch, they fuck up [...] If communism had been taken on by Germans, or even better, by the Swedes—Deyna continued—the whole world would be different. Everyone would understand it’s the best system possible.—Because, let me tell you—Deyna began counting on his fingers—you have work, you have a home, you have your peace of mind, vacation, you have everything. But [...] it was the *katsaps* [Russians] who took charge. And they fucked it up, like they fuck up everything. To fuck up such a beautiful idea!—he sighed with genuine regret, thus merging his Galician pro-Western sentiment with an inescapable recognition: that life was better under the Soviet Union.³⁵

As can be seen, another recurring motif in *Przyjdzie Mordor*... is a regular “gradation of despising” towards “the East,” exemplified by Poles looking down on Ukrainians, and Ukrainians in turn expressing similar disdain towards Russians (and by Germans looking down on all of them).³⁶ The gonzo novel genre allows Szczerek to make certain statements in a more flamboyant way than a regular non-fiction piece would. The most politically incorrect or offensive remarks about various social groups (mainly: Ukrainians, Poles, Russians, Muslims) in *Przyjdzie Mordor*... always take the form of dialogues and direct quotations. Examples of essentializing and blunt (sometimes disturbing) ways of reasoning are found solely in the statements of Łukasz’s interlocutors, mostly the

³⁴ Szczerek, *Przyjdzie Mordor*, 68.

³⁵ Szczerek, *Przyjdzie Mordor*, 27–28.

³⁶ See the dialogue between Łukasz and a German tourist visiting Crimea. Szczerek, *Przyjdzie Mordor*, 148. Cobel-Tokarska and Dębicki, “Idea wykuwana w ‘Mordorze’,” 161–62; Magdalena Baran-Szoltys, “Gonzo, Ironic Nostalgia, Magical Realism, or, How to Re-Narrate Traumatic Transnational Borderland Stories: Examples from the Twenty-First Century Polish(-German) Literature,” *PFLIT Prace Filologiczne. Literaturoznawstwo*, no. 9 (12), part 1 (2019): 75–77.

Ukrainians he meets in different situations. One such character is Taras, a proud *Halychanyn* (a native of Galicia, Ukraine) and a media worker at an internet portal with the politically telling name *Occidens.ua*. With him Łukasz has a conversation about the "West" and its alleged appeal and civilizational supremacy:

— Western societal systems are the best, period [— Taras said. —] Because in the West, individual humanity is most respected. And people need respect for themselves. And they need a state that takes care of them, not one that abuses them. Everyone needs that, regardless of culture. And yes, it's that fucking simple. [...]

— Maybe what you're saying fits with our culture — I said. — But, for example, Muslims aren't so keen on adopting Western systems.

— That's because Muslims are brain-fucked from birth — Taras shot back. — Exactly the same as those poor souls in North Korea. If, for instance, Muslim women are told their whole lives that parading around 24/7 in a cover is a privilege and not a handicap, they'll eventually believe it. Just like North Koreans believe that when the Great Leader walks through a park, the birds chirp the *Internationale* to him. All this talk about respecting cultural differences is bullshit. [...]

— Then why doesn't all of Russia choose the West? — I asked after a moment — if Western civilization is so appealing? [...]

— Because Russia is just as brain-fucked as Muslim women and North Koreans. The only difference is that Muslim women are brain-fucked by Muslim men, North Koreans by the Great Leader and his cronies, and Russia brain-fucks itself.³⁷

Despite his racism, Taras is the figure from the novel who formulates observations that remain in accordance with Szczerek's own views expressed in his other works, including reportages and opinion journalism. For instance, in various non-fiction pieces Szczerek argues that the national cultures of Central and East-Central Europe (such as the Slovenian, Czech, Polish, and Hungarian ones) are only variations of Germanic culture (which itself echoed culture from Italy and France).³⁸ In this interpretation of European history, there is nothing wrong with such

³⁷ Szczerek, *Przyjdzie Mordor*, 79–80.

³⁸ See, for instance, Szczerek, *Międzymorze*, 160–61; Szczerek, "Niemiecka Republika Samochodowa"; Ziemowit Szczerek, "Wandalowie na gruzach Rzymu, czyli Ruinenwert," Korporacja Ha!art, accessed October 10, 2024, <http://haart.e-kei.pl/felietony/2744-ziemowit-szczerek-wandalowie-na-gruzach-rzymu-czyli-ruinenwert.html>. Cf. Kamila Gieba,

“Germanization,” as local people have chosen the better cultural and intellectual achievements that were available, especially while contrasting them with those countries where civilization is seen as oppressing people rather than making their lives easier and better.

Civilization, which Central Europe aligns itself with, is simply the periphery of German civilization. [...] Everything that Central Europe is proud of comes from Germany: the architecture of cities and towns, art, law, philosophy, and so on. Of course, originally from Italy and France, but it still all passed through Germany. Because very little was actually invented locally. [...] But I don’t see anything wrong with this Germanization. [...] On the contrary, civilization [...] should serve people. That’s what it’s for. And not the other way around, as it is in the country that considers itself the ideal model for all Slavs—Russia.³⁹

This historiosophical trust in the general, common sense of humankind that allowed the inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe to make the rational civilizational choice again demonstrates Szczerek’s liberal approach and places him in opposition to those conservative thinkers who believe that the “higher” civilization must lose (i.e., become embraced) in the confrontation with the simpler/lower one. It also puts in question the conviction that processes of acculturation must be intertwined with coercion—an issue discussed in Szczerek’s next Ukrainian non-fiction piece, *Tatuaż z tryzubem*.

A NORMAL HISTORICAL PROCESS: *TATUAŻ Z TRYZUBEM* (2015)

Tatuaż z tryzubem presents a collection of non-fiction texts covering the Revolution of Dignity and delving into the complex question of Ukrainian identity and the nation’s (re)birth in the aftermath of the events of 2013–2014. The texts in *Tatuaż*... span various sites and cities across Ukraine, including Kharkiv, Dnipro, and Donbas, i.e., those parts of the country that before the Revolution felt an affinity with the post-Soviet *russkii mir* (Russian world) and treated the idea of “Europe,” “West,” and “Ukrainianess” with skepticism. The form balances between an essay and

“Karykaturalne pogranicze: ‘Poniemiecja’ w tekstach Ziemowita Szczerka,” *Postscriptum Polonistyczne*, no. 23 (2019): 105–18, 10.31261/PS_P.2019.23.08.

³⁹ Szczerek, *Przyjdzie Mordor*, 80–81.

a travelogue, with the clearly marked "I" of the author, who shares with his readers his impressions, but also his doubts and concerns. Being an experimental Polish writer, connected with the milieu of the independent, avant-garde publishing house and journal *Ha!art*, who in his works follows the Polish literary tradition of exposing and deriding nationalistic pompousness and—as a citizen—worried by the rising popularity of xenophobic, nationalist movements both in Poland and in Europe, Szczerek confronts in Ukraine his own preconceptions concerning notions that do not belong to the postmodern liberal vocabulary, such as "nation" or "patriotism." Quite tellingly, the book opens with a vivid description of post-Maidan Ukraine's urban and suburban landscapes, where blue and yellow (the national colors of Ukraine) suddenly predominate.

Everything was in blue and yellow. Bent guardrails along roads and bridges, bus stops. On the bus stops, Cossacks with sabers were painted, the Heavenly Hundred from the Maidan, tridents, UPA fighters, and portraits of Bandera. So no one would forget that Ukraine isn't dead yet, that it's still here. [...] Anything that could be was painted blue and yellow. A bench here, a gutter pipe there. Old socialist-era playgrounds. Tires repurposed as fences. I even saw an old delivery ZIL painted blue and yellow, living out its last days parked outside some shop.⁴⁰

Those descriptions, however, are neither judgmental nor aimed at mocking the freshly awakened feelings of national belonging, even if the writer's attention is focused on rustic whimsies. On the contrary, one can recognize the same cathartic, benevolent humor with which Szczerek likes to portray provincial Poland and its local curiosities.⁴¹

At the same time, Szczerek confronts his direct experience of Ukraine and Ukrainians with the vision of the country presented in works of Ukrainian intellectuals, scholars, and writers who gained esteem in the West (including Poland), such as Mykola Riabchuk. Szczerek's experience of the Maidan Ukraine (2013–2014) and Ukraine shortly after the Revolution of Dignity puts in question the sharp dichotomy epitomized by Riabchuk's thesis of "two Ukraines." In his essays, Riabchuk explores the stark contrasts between western and eastern Ukraine, using Lviv and Donetsk as symbols of "European" and "Soviet" influences, respectively. Lviv, with its Central European architecture and traditions, represents a

⁴⁰ Szczerek, *Tatuaż z tryzubem*, 6.

⁴¹ See the novel *Seven* and numerous shorter non-fiction pieces on Poland.

“bourgeois” society resistant to Soviet rule, while Donetsk embodies the Soviet-built, industrial, proletarian world. Politically, the West leans anti-communist, pro-European, and pro-democratic, whereas the East favors closer ties with Russia and Soviet-style governance. Despite these differences, the author argues that Ukraine cannot be simply split into two distinct halves, as most of the country is constituted by a “third Ukraine”—a vast, fluid space between Lviv and Donetsk that is ideologically uncertain and represents the true battleground in Ukraine’s political future.⁴² In *Tatoo...*, when Szczerek interviews different people with different backgrounds from different regions, the responses question the usual divisions between “pro-Western” and “pro-Russian” parts of Ukraine. For instance, in Dnipro (then still called Dnipropetrovsk and before 2014 consistently voting for Viktor Yanukovich and the Party of Regions), Ukrainian students ask why not all Poles choose to migrate to Germany, delighted by the opportunities of free movement that EU membership can give. In Kyiv, by contrast, at a market Szczerek listens to an EU-skeptical philippic held by a local man: “No corruption, sure, democracy, sure! Do you guys really believe in those fairy tales? Do you really believe there’s no corruption in the West; that there’s real democracy there? What are you guys, suckers [*frajerzy*]?”⁴³ On the other hand, in Kyiv the narrator also hears that the city itself had been established by Poles due to the presence of the Eastern Polans tribe.⁴⁴ In Central Ukraine, a Russophone Ukrainian is convinced that his country belongs to the West, since it was established by Vikings, exactly like Sweden and Norway. As Ryszard Kupidura writes, in *Tatoo...*, ordinary individuals Szczerek encounters at railway stations, border crossings, pubs, or bus stops become the self-proclaimed custodians of different collective memory narratives. These individuals deliver exaggerated speeches about a past golden age or Ukraine’s historical mission, becoming (to use Kupidura’s words) “post-apocalyptic historiosophists” who unintentionally reveal the compensatory function of the stories they tell.⁴⁵

⁴² Mykola Riabchuk, “Ukraine: One State, Two Countries?,” *Eurozine*, last modified September 16, 2002, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120419141945/http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2002-09-16-riabchuk-en.html>.

⁴³ Szczerek, *Tatuaż z tryzubem*, 18.

⁴⁴ The person the narrator has met conflates the Eastern Polans—an East Slavic tribe native to the territory of present-day Ukraine—with the Western Polans, a West Slavic (Lechitic) tribe who formed the nucleus of the early Polish state.

⁴⁵ Kupidura, “Gonzo uwikłane,” 63.

The picture of Ukraine in *Tatoo*... also questions the schema of “two Ukraines” because it refuses to conceptualize “Easternness” as negatively as Riabchuk proposes. One can even say that whereas Szczerek’s *Przyjdzie Mordor*... explores the framework of idealization of “the West” and despising of “the East,” one key theme investigated in *Tatoo*... is the diverse and ambivalent attitudes one can have towards “the East,” epitomized by Russia and/or the Soviet Union. In particular, Russification/Sovietization of eastern Ukraine reveals many paradoxes, and, as a civilizational phenomenon, presents itself ambivalently. Despite its authoritarian/totalitarian nature, it offered an alternative form of globalization, implementing a unique cultural and linguistic community among diverse national and ethnic groups. It influenced Ukraine’s architecture, political and social systems, culture, and language—and, most importantly, native Ukrainians actively and willingly participated in its growth. As such, concludes Szczerek, Russification/Sovietization represents a civilizational order that left a lasting and undeniable impact on Ukrainian identity and development; it thus cannot be simply dismissed as “non-Ukrainian” or “standing in opposition to Ukrainianess” (as many pro-Maidan or pro-Western Ukrainians would like it to be) or erased from the historical narrative. Such a step would be similar to denying the German and Austrian cultural and civilizational impact on western Ukraine, as well as on Poland, Czechia, or Hungary.

On the topic of independent Ukraine before the war (1991–2014), the “Russianness” (*russkii mir*), seen as the successor to the commonwealth of the Soviet Union, also had to be acknowledged at least as a legitimate civilizational option, if only due to simple pragmatism: why not speak Russian, the language that is spoken from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean? Why mark “Russianness” as a foreign civilization if from the Ukrainian city of Donetsk, it is closer to Russian cities like Rostov-on-Don, Voronezh, Krasnodar, and Volgograd than to Kyiv? Calmly considered, concludes Szczerek, the Revolution of Dignity and the triumph of pro-Western, but at the same time ethnonationalist “Ukrainianess” over the highly imperfect, yet comfortably domesticated “Russianness” was anything but self-evident. As he sincerely admits at one point, despite his wholehearted support for the Maidan revolutionaries and their agenda, if he were one of the proverbial Ukrainians from the East, he would observe the development of the events in Kyiv with similar fear and disgust as they did. These would be the same feelings he imagines he would have experienced while

watching the hypothetical success of uncontrolled nationalist forces in Poland.⁴⁶

In his reportage on the Maidan Revolution, which he observed first-hand, Szczerek revisits Riabchuk's essays to interrogate the notion of Russian/Soviet "colonialism" in Ukraine. While Szczerek acknowledges the coercive nature of colonialist practices—particularly in the case of the Kremlin's influence in East-Central Europe—he draws attention to a paradox in cultural assimilation. He argues that when acculturation occurs incrementally and achieves a high degree of success, over time, it usually ceases to be perceived negatively by the descendants of those who were ostensibly "victimized" by the process.

It's a historical process like any other [...]. The weaker ethnic groups seamlessly integrate with the stronger ones, one into another, gradually merging into each other; Moravians with the Czechs, Provençals with the French. I understood Riabchuk, I understood him well, I also wouldn't like Polishness to become a variant of Russianness. But I wasn't sure of this colonialism. It was difficult for me to believe in the malicious machinations that had gone on behind the back of the deluded, indifferent world. Ukraine has assimilated Transcarpathian Rusyns, and Russia has assimilated Ukraine. That's the process. It even appeared to me that those who are 'colonized' never seem to be particularly troubled by it.⁴⁷

Similar thoughts and comparisons to natural processes are to be found in other works by Szczerek. In the novel *Siódemka* (2014), two characters, Polish liberal journalist Paweł and Polish conservative small-town businessman Hieronim, explore themes of cultural assimilation and identity transformation across generations. Paweł suggests that if Poles had been thoroughly Germanized in the past, they would not have retained awareness of their Polish heritage and, upon realizing this, might in fact appreciate the assimilation of their ancestors. This leads to a comparison with the notion that Hieronim's alleged Ukrainian ancestors were Polonized historically, but he does not experience dissatisfaction or a sense of lost belonging; on the contrary, he confirms his genuine pride in and satisfaction with his Polish identity (In *Przyjdzie Mordor*..., an almost identical conversation is held between Łukasz and Taras).⁴⁸ Paweł then extends the

⁴⁶ Szczerek, *Tatuaż z tryzubem*, 162.

⁴⁷ Szczerek, *Tatuaż z tryzubem*, 161–62.

⁴⁸ Szczerek, *Przyjdzie Mordor*, 75–76.

analogy to imagine a Polish individual undergoing Germanization through gradual, context-driven adaptation to the surrounding state, likening this to a passive, "osmosis-like" process of assimilation.⁴⁹ In the novel *Siwy Dym* (2018), the main hero makes a more general statement about the prevalent mechanisms in a society, again comparing social developments to the laws of nature: "[S]ocial processes are like biological or climate processes. I mean, getting mad at a storm for being a storm? Telling off a tornado? Insulting a damn hurricane?"⁵⁰ In the reportage book on Hungary *Via Carpatia* (2019), this thought is expressed in an almost identical way: "Judging the mechanisms at play in communities is a bit like judging rain or a storm."⁵¹

These metaphors—such as osmosis and storm—highlight Szczerek's use of "naturalistic" reasoning and terminology typical of liberal discourse when discussing social and historical processes. But since this approach is applied consistently, Szczerek's view of the post-Maidan rise of "Ukrainianness" is non-judgmental. In such a perspective, Moscow's 2014 military intervention disrupted the peaceful, osmosis-like pathway through which "Russianness" could exert its influence in Ukraine; thus, the ensuing nationalist shift is unsurprising and "natural," even if its manifestations might seem, to an external observer, artificial, humorous, clumsy, or exaggerated (as exemplified by the titular tattoo featuring the Ukrainian trident, the national coat of arms). In other words, Szczerek posits that the nationalist transformation shaping Ukraine after 2014 is as "natural" as earlier processes of cultural influence or acculturation—whether German, Polish, Austrian, or Soviet—and that there is little reason to judge it otherwise.

THE URBAN MIDDLE CLASS AS A SOCIAL UPLIFTER: *WYMYŚLONE MIASTO LWÓW* (2022)

In *Wymyślone miasto Lwów*, Szczerek captures both the hopes and complexities inherent in Lviv's reinvention as a city bridging Eastern heritage and Western modernity. The book is a collection of essays and reportages that delve into the complex layers of history, culture, and modern transformation in the Ukrainian capital of Galicia. On the formal level,

⁴⁹ Szczerek, *Siódemka*, 133–36.

⁵⁰ Szczerek, *Siwy Dym*.

⁵¹ Szczerek, *Via Carpatia*, 153.

Wymyślone miasto... is unique within Szczerek's Ukrainian trilogy for its inclusion of a bibliography, emphasizing his commitment to grounding his exploration within a broader context. Szczerek references classical positions, but also some notable recent Polish translations, for instance works by Larry Wolff on Galicia, by Grzegorz Gauden on the great pogrom in 1918, and by Agnieszka Gajewska on the life of Polish philosopher and sci-fi writer Stanisław Lem, who was born in Lviv in 1920.⁵² By examining diverse city areas like the Old Town or Zamarstyniv district (but also some nearby regions), Szczerek invites readers to reflect on the city as an imaginative construct—a concept underscored by his title's acknowledgment of Lviv as a “fictional” space subject to interpretation.

The epistemological modesty suggested in the book's title (*The Made-Up City of Lviv*)⁵³ reflects Szczerek's approach to the narratives of Lviv, presenting them as partial, creative renderings rather than definitive accounts, and ultimately allowing him to compose his own vision of today's Lviv as a regular cosmopolitan “Western” city, with an energetic urban middle class (*mieszczaństwo*):

The city of Lviv has, for about a decade and a half now, been functioning much like the legendary old Lviv did—whether under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or the Habsburg Empire. The city that presented Polishness in a non-canonical form, offering a self-satisfied, comfortably well-off bourgeoisie, a notion previously absent from the Polish self-image. [...] The city that, before the Second World War, was described as entirely different from Warsaw, which, with its Russian influences, felt stiff and somewhat somber. A city that was looser, lively, and joyful.⁵⁴

Central to Szczerek's thesis is thus the notion of Lviv's gradual and persistent move to a European middle-class identity, a shift that aligns it more closely with “Western” norms, values, and cultural phenomena (e.g.,

⁵²Larry Wolff, *The Idea of Galicia: History and Fantasy in Habsburg Political Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Grzegorz Gauden, *Lwów—kres iluzji: Opowieść o pogromie listopadowym 1918* (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych “Universitas”, 2019); Agnieszka Gajewska, *Stanisław Lem: Wypędzony z Wysokiego Zamku* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2022).

⁵³I chose to translate *Wymyślone miasto Lwów* as *The Made-Up City of Lviv*, not *Imagined*, because the original Polish term *wymyślone*—unlike *wyobrażone*—emphasizes fabrication and reinvention, which aligns more closely with the book's focus on the protean, continually reshaped history of the city.

⁵⁴Szczerek, *Wymyślone miasto Lwów*, 21.

the rise of a hipster culture). The author highlights the symbolic role of Lviv's elegant restaurants, hipster pubs, and vibrant cafes, as well as well-preserved or newly built architecture, reflecting the post-Maidan surge of Ukraine's middle class. However, he does not overlook the drawbacks of this transformation; alongside economic growth and integration into the global economy, Lviv also faces challenges like gentrification and increasing social inequalities. ("When guys like him [a Lviv hipster] show up in any neighborhood,' someone at the table muttered after the mustachioed man stepped away for a moment, 'property values go up.'")⁵⁵

The romanticized view of the urban bourgeoisie enables a fresh perspective on the Polish–Ukrainian quarrel over which nation had a bigger historical impact on the city, as Szczerek argues that Lviv's original citizens were neither Polish nor Ukrainian, but rather—once we agree to apply today's understanding of nationhood to the realities half a millennium ago—Germans, as in any town in this part of Europe in the Early Modern era. Moreover, as Szczerek notices, whereas "Ukrainianness" (associated mostly with the rural heritage) itself is scarcely visible in Lviv's architecture, one can easily find examples of Italian influences that lend an air of cosmopolitanism that aligns with Western ideals of urban civilization. As Szczerek stresses, in the 20th century, the population of Lviv underwent significant demographic shifts, challenging rigid notions of Polish and Ukrainian ethnonationalisms.⁵⁶ Before World War II, the city's population primarily consisted of Poles and Jews (Lviv had been for centuries one of the most significant Jewish centers in the region). However, the war marked the beginning of a drastic population displacement: the initial Soviet occupation led to the deportation of many Polish residents to the East, followed by the German invasion, which resulted in the extermination of the Jewish population. After the war, further forced migrations occurred as remaining Polish residents were moved westward, while the Soviet regime resettled Russians and Russified Ukrainians from eastern Ukraine into Lviv. Only in the following decades did Ukrainians from the surrounding rural areas begin migrating to the city, further reshaping its demographic landscape. In Szczerek's vision, Lviv's history demonstrates that its *genius loci*—its unique spirit—thrives independently of one's

⁵⁵ Szczerek, *Wymyślone miasto Lwów*, 64.

⁵⁶ Chapter "Straszne miasto." Szczerek, *Wymyślone miasto Lwów*, 101–29.

national or ethnic background, flourishing most when the city is multicultural, relaxed, and supported by a robust urban middle class.⁵⁷

To some extent, Szczerek's narrative in *Wymyślone miasto...* deconstructs themes from his previous work, particularly *Przyjdzie Mordor...*, stripping away the "gonzo apocalypse" in favor of a more nuanced (and updated) portrayal of Ukraine and Polish-Ukrainian relations. For instance, he revisits the district of Zamarstyniv, previously depicted through a dystopian and postcolonial lens as the place of cheap bed-and-breakfasts run by Ukrainians for arrogant Polish tourists,⁵⁸ now exploring it as a more familiar setting for interactions typical of any big city, for instance, the presence of the groups of bored young adults prone to committing misdemeanors. In the same chapter, Szczerek deconstructs the romanticized myth of the Lviv *batiar*, a figure often likened to the Parisian *gavroche*—the charming street boy of 20th-century literature. Szczerek counters this idealized image by referencing prewar Galician criminal chronicles, where *batiar* had a far grittier connotation, signifying a petty thug rather than a lovable rogue. He further challenges the myth by recounting his experience in Lviv's Zamarstyniv district, where the term *batiar* is still in use but now denotes a figure closer to the *gopnik* of Soviet influence or the *dresiarz* in Polish slang, a street tough associated with petty crime and a characteristic outfit (in Polish, *dres* means tracksuit).⁵⁹ Through this lens, Szczerek situates Lviv within broader, universal urban phenomena, dispelling the idea of the *batiar* as a unique cultural archetype and instead revealing him as a version of the globally recognizable urban street character.

In this way, Szczerek's portrayal of Lviv AD 2022 becomes a picture of a "Western" city, casting the capital of Ukrainian Galicia as an entity embodying urban civilization and the multicultural, middle-class values often celebrated in liberal narratives. Szczerek presents Lviv as an emblem of a modern society rooted in a blend of cultural heritages, because, as he writes, "[c]ivilizations inspire one another. If we start finding value only in what is 'ours,' sooner or later, we'll become a stagnant relic (*skansen*)."⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Szczerek, *Wymyślone miasto Lwów*, 129.

⁵⁸ Szczerek, *Przyjdzie Mordor*, 14–17.

⁵⁹ Szczerek, *Wymyślone miasto Lwów*, 72–73.

⁶⁰ Szczerek, *Wymyślone miasto Lwów*, 169.

CLOSING REMARKS

As has been shown, Szczerek's "liberal historiosophy" frames the historical and cultural evolution of East-Central Europe, exemplified by Ukraine, as "a historical process like any other," driven by organic, socio-cultural forces rather than imperialist dynamics. In his non-fiction works on Ukraine, he portrays cultural appeal and civilizational influence as stemming chiefly from economic success, personal liberties, and mass culture, rather than from pure coercion. This stance is significant because it reframes power not as a matter of military or political dominance: it is an expression of belief that the growth of individual rights and material progress will ultimately indicate which civilizations have a greater tendency to succeed over others—a perspective evident in Ukraine's gradual embrace of "Western" ideals. The reverse side of that tendency, however, is the mechanism of transitive contempt toward "the East" that exists throughout Eastern and Central Europe. Importantly, the author refrains from judging either of those tendencies; instead, he portrays them in a witty and provocative way as unavoidable, inherent ("natural") features of peripheral societies.

Szczerek also adopts a similarly "naturalistic" approach to social processes like identity formation, likening them to organic phenomena such as biological or weather patterns. He views these developments as natural occurrences to be observed rather than condemned, often using humor to describe funny, grassroots displays without moral criticism. Finally, Szczerek sees the urban middle class (*mieszczaiństwo*) as a representative of Western civilization in East-Central Europe where a historically weaker bourgeoisie developed a cosmopolitan, inclusive identity. His appreciation of this class lies in its ability to cultivate urban culture across national lines, connecting cities like Lviv, Warsaw, and Berlin in a shared cultural experience that transcends strict national identities.

In other words, Szczerek's perspective reflects optimism in gradual progress and cosmopolitanism, suggesting that the appeal of "Western" values—especially urban, middle-class lifestyles—offers a compelling model for Ukraine's evolving identity within the broader European context.

Acknowledgments The following article was written as a part of the project "Historytelling: Narrating the Past in Contemporary Polish Gonzo Literature," funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation), project number 457886284. The author would like to thank Valentin Peschanskyi and Kai L. Freund for their constructive and helpful feedback.

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CHAPTER 4

“Super-Stories”: How Romanian Reportage Stands as a Truffle in the Fast-Food Journalism Chain

Marius-Adrian Hazaparu

IN SEARCH OF A SENSE OF PLACE IN THE CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

In reviewing a collection of reportages self-published by Romanian journalist Viorel Ilișoi, literary critic Bogdan Crețu expressed his discontent over the fate of Romanian reportage. According to Crețu, the genre has been removed from journalism, and, at the same time, has found no countervailing salvage within the literary field.¹ In this regard, after 1989, Romanian publishing houses did not cultivate a niche market for

¹Bogdan Crețu, “Cele mai frumoase reportaje strălucitoare,” *Observator cultural*, November 25, 2020, <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/cele-mai-frumoase-reportaje-stra%C8%86lucitoare/>.

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reportage books² as occurred in Poland, where reportage has become a “cultural phenomenon” and a label applied to nearly all non-fiction works.³ In Romania, reportages in book format remain relatively rare and typically consist of compilations of texts previously published in newspapers and magazines. These texts are, to some extent, stylistically and structurally refined, often to meet literary standards. Nonetheless, a central question remains: has contemporary Romanian reportage found a “place” to *live in* and *live on* following its seemingly unilateral repudiation, and how has this “relocation” affected the genre? Before delving into a detailed examination of this issue, it is in the second decade of the 21st century that we must look for answers. Following the economic downturn in 2009, reportage transitioned from mainstream media to a newly found haven where small teams of reporters embracing long-form, in-depth journalism strive to carry forward the legacy of renowned interwar and postwar Romanian reporters Filip Brunea-Fox (1898–1977) and Geo Bogza (1908–1993), as well as a handful of others who, during the communist era, experimented with the genre within the literary realm, such as Cornel Nistorescu (b. 1948). As young reporters eager for validation from the public and their peers as high-quality journalists, they left traditional newsrooms, dominated by fast-food journalism. Fed up with “stories prepared quickly but with artificial ingredients which just appear appealing,”⁴ sensational content, fake news, churned articles and other trivial material, they created small oases to practice their craft—free from political pressures and deadline constraints, and, most importantly, in the public interest.⁵

² Furthermore, two prominent Romanian publishing houses—Univers (Bucharest) and Junimea (Iași)—which were influential before 1989 subsequently removed reportage books from their portfolios, likely because many of these works, which had been part of distinct collections, had been promoting the socialist agenda and contributing to the construction of the myth of the communist regime’s superiority. In this regard, see Marius-Adrian Hazaparu, *Viața secretă a reportajului: alegorie, magie și carnaval* (Iași: Editura Universității “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași, 2024), 55–56.

³ Aleksandra Katarzyna Wiktorowska, “The Politics of Literary Journalism in the New Poland,” in *The Routledge Companion to World Literary Journalism*, ed. John S. Bak and Bill Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2023), 405.

⁴ Abit Honxa and Kenneth Andersen, “The Development of Roles in Kosovo: From Fixers to Journalists,” *Journalism Studies* 20, no. 12 (2019): 1742, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01461670X.2019.1639539>.

⁵ For a more detailed review of the work ethos of these journalists, see Adrian Hazaparu and Cătălina Dobroviccanu, “Observations on the Current State of the Romanian Reportage:

In this chapter, I examine the trajectory of contemporary Romanian reportage, which has developed from the aforementioned tradition. My focus is on the discursive transformations of a genre traditionally associated with literature and regarded as the highest professional aspiration—the necessary stepping stone for entering the literary scene.⁶ To this end, I have limited my study to 44 reportages awarded in the only major national competition with a distinct category for this genre.⁷ The “Superscrieri” (Super-Stories) competition, whose name alludes to the high quality of the works it honors, was established by Friends for Friends Foundation to reward journalistic content across various formats and genres produced by Romanian journalists. Launched in 2011 as a competition for narrative journalism, it has evolved into “an entire ecosystem of projects promoting the truth through exceptional storytelling.”⁸ Starting in 2016, the organizers have been accepting submissions from the neighboring country of Moldova, provided they are published in Romanian, a language shared by both nations. Since then, Moldovan reporters have won four awards, all on behalf of *Oameni și kilometri* (People and Kilometers), a platform for independent journalism embracing storytelling as its dominant reporting style.

For the 44 reportages analyzed, I employed a hybrid qualitative approach, drawing on research tools from critical discourse analysis, media theory and linguistics, stylistics, and rhetoric. While quantitative observations are also included, due to the small sample size, these should not be regarded as generalizations or predictions. Nevertheless, I believe they may hold a certain predictive value: the reportages in the corpus were deemed by the awarding committee—presumably through an objective process—to be works of the highest quality and could serve as models for journalists seeking similar professional validation. Through vicarious

An Analysis Based on In-Depth Interviews with Award-Winning Journalists.” *Studia UBB Ephemerides* 59, no. 2 (2014): 29–42, CEEOL, and Romina Surugiu, “‘Freelancing’ as Spectacular Free Labour: A Case Study on Independent Digital Journalists in Romania,” in *The Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital Capitalism*, ed. Marco Briziarelli and Emiliana Armano (London: University of Westminster Press, 2017): 183–95.

⁶This view was expressed by Cornel Nistorescu, one of the “masters” of the genre in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, as cited in Cecilia Caragea, *Dialog cu Cornel Nistorescu* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2000): 73–74.

⁷The judging panel includes renowned journalists, media experts and journalism professors.

⁸“Despre Superscrieri,” Fundația Friends For Friends, accessed June 16, 2024, <https://www.ffff.ro/superscrieri>.

learning, by “observing the behavior of others and by noting the consequences of that behavior for those being observed,”⁹ these reporters might engage in a sort of “intersubjective dialogue” to acquire the desired *know-how* they recognize in others.

There is little literature on contemporary Romanian reportage as a genre. In addition to my own contribution,¹⁰ other recent efforts include two chapters¹¹ published in 2019: one discussing the stylistic characteristics of contemporary Romanian reportage,¹² and the other examining the genre’s status within the free press environment following the fall of communism in Romania in 1989.¹³ Additionally, some scholars have studied reportage within the broader discussion of the relationship between journalism and literature. However, in doing so, they have largely revisited the works of key figures in Romanian reportage, especially those of F. Brunea-Fox¹⁴ and Geo Bogza.¹⁵ Drawing on my own teaching and research experience in the field of Journalism, I would suggest that a key explanation for the limited scholarly literature on contemporary forms of reportage lies in the national standards set by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, which places journalism studies within the “Social, Political and Communication Sciences” domain,¹⁶ rather than the humanities. In compliance with these standards, the academic staff from journalism departments and faculties in Romania tend to prioritize quantitative research over literary and linguistics analyses, which are better suited to

⁹J.T. Mayes, “Still to Learn from Vicarious Learning,” *E-Learning and Digital Media* 12, nos. 3–4 (2015): 362, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2042753015571839>.

¹⁰See Hazaparu and Dobrovicenu, “Observations,” 29–42.

¹¹These chapters are part of a volume comprising the proceedings of a conference held in 2018 in Oradea, Romania, on the intersections between literature and journalism: Ioan Laza and Florin Ardelean, eds., *Jurnalismul și literatura, similitudini și diferențe* (Bucharest: Tritonic, 2019).

¹²Elena Camelia Zăbavă, “Particularități stilistice în reportajul românesc actual,” in *Jurnalismul și literatura, similitudini și diferențe*, ed. Ioan Laza and Florin Ardelean (Bucharest: Tritonic, 2019), 191–206.

¹³Ștefana Ciortea-Neamțiu, “Reportajul românesc după 1989—o specie jurnalistică ‘cu acte în regulă,’” in *Jurnalismul și literatura, similitudini și diferențe*, ed. Ioan Laza and Florin Ardelean (Bucharest: Tritonic, 2019), 178–90.

¹⁴See Alexandru Gruian, *F. Brunea-Fox_ Reporterul cu ochi multipli* (Comunicare.ro, 2013).

¹⁵See Maria Barna, *Reportaj și literatură: Disocieri și interferențe în literatura română* (Alba Iulia: Altip, 2015).

¹⁶“Specialty Commissions,” Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, accessed March 14, 2025, <https://www.aracis.ro/en/specialty-commissions/>.

the study of reportage. At the same time, scholars in the humanities appear to engage only rarely with journalistic texts. Consequently, the study of reportage as a literary or narrative journalistic form has fallen to the periphery of the scope of both social scientists, and philologists. This current situation in Romania is aptly captured by John C. Hartsock in his 1998 essay on the marginalization of American Literary Journalism by scholars and critics from both literary and journalistic sectors, an exclusion which ultimately created the conditions for the scholarly study of literary journalism in the United States.¹⁷

I hope that my contribution to this volume will serve as a catalyst for a renewed discussion among Romanian researchers on the contemporary forms of this multifaceted and fascinating genre.

WALKING ON QUICKSAND WITH NARRATIVE JOURNALISTS

Following the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, the transition from state-controlled media to a free press quickly led to the proliferation of newspapers, licensed and unlicensed radio stations, and, by the late 1990s, commercial television channels.¹⁸ However, as numerous reports from media monitoring organizations¹⁹ have indicated over the past three decades, Romanian media has failed to develop into an independent watchdog. According to Mădălina Boţan’s 2024 study, the Romanian media landscape continues to be shaped by economic and political forces, with outlets heavily relying on advertising revenue—both commercial and political—that often curtails editorial independence.²⁰ Furthermore, journalists who strive to hold both political and media systems accountable, see their efforts fettered by challenges in using freedom of information

¹⁷ John C. Hartsock, “The Critical Marginalization of American Literary Journalism,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15, no. 1 (1998): 61–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039809367033>.

¹⁸ Ioana Coman and Peter Gross, “Uncommonly Common or Truly Exceptional? An Alternative to the Political System–Based Explanation of the Romanian Mass Media,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 17, no. 4 (2012): 459, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161212450562>.

¹⁹ Reporters Without Borders, Active Watch, Transparency International, Reuters Institute Digital News Report, The Center for Independent Journalism, Romania and others.

²⁰ Mădălina Boţan, “The Romanian Media System: Dynamics, Challenges, and Implications for Democracy,” *Media and Communication* 12 (2024): 1, <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.7847>.

laws and by smear campaigns orchestrated by political parties.²¹ As Boțan explains, “the root issue in the Romanian media system lies in the absence or inadequacy of essential institutions and mechanisms to nurture the development of free, independent journalism that prioritizes the public interest.”²² Given that ownership constraints, political interference, and market pressures leave little to no room for quality journalism within mainstream newsrooms, reporters committed to high professional standards have turned to crowdfunded projects—an endeavor worth pursuing, yet far from failproof. Although this situation is indicative of investigative reporting, considering its high production costs and political sensitivity,²³ the analysis of the corpus comprising texts published between 2011 and 2024 suggests a similar approach for narrative journalism: of the 44 award-winning reportages analyzed, 30 were published by independent—and largely crowdfunded—journalism platforms, such as *Decât o Revistă* (Just a Magazine), *Casa Jurnalistului* (House of the Journalist) or *Dela0* (From Scratch). Other award-winning media outlets operate under unconventional business models, such as the five-time winner *Scena9* (The New Scene), a cultural journalism project that benefits from the financial support of a bank that engages in corporate social responsibility²⁴ through this partnership.

The fact that the majority of winners come from independent journalism teams suggests that narrative journalists are committed to a *modus operandi* increasingly incompatible with mainstream media, which is unwilling to invest in time-and-money-consuming enterprises. In a 2014 case study based on in-depth interviews, reporters voiced concerns about Romania’s media ecosystem, which prioritizes speed over depth and ratings over public interest.²⁵ Within the corpus under discussion, most “Superscrieri” awards won by mainstream newspapers (national dailies) were claimed in the competition’s first two years, followed by a ten-year hiatus before another traditional newsroom received an award. Moreover,

²¹ Nic Newman et al., *Digital News Report 2023* (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023), 94, <https://doi.org/10.60625/risj-p6es-hb13>.

²² Boțan, “The Romanian Media System,” 11.

²³ Ioana Avădani, “Of Journalists and Money: The Employment of Journalists in Romania and its Influence on Media Freedom and Quality,” *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 1993, EBSCOhost.

²⁴ “Cultură,” BRD, accessed February 11, 2025, <https://www.brd.ro/despre-brd/responsabilitate/cultura>.

²⁵ Hazaparu and Dobrovicenu, “Observations,” 29–42.

an examination of the post-2013 professional trajectories of the six award-winning reporters from these established papers reveals that four continued their journalistic careers as freelancers or joined independent journalism teams, while the remaining two transitioned into civic activism. Beginning in 2013, the narrative journalism competition came to be dominated by reporters affiliated with self-described “independent” and “alternative” projects—identity markers signaling their commitment to freedom of expression, unbiased reporting, and to long-form, in-depth journalism as an alternative to the fast-food model prevalent in mainstream newsrooms. *Decât o Revistă*, launched in 2009, has garnered a total of nine awards, while *Casa Jurnalistului*, founded in 2013, has earned seven. Both platforms built a professional creed around in-depth quality journalism through storytelling and reportage, yet neither remains active today. *Decât o Revistă* operated until 2022 as an “independent publication focused on telling true stories from modern-day Romania.” Its reporters used “narrative journalism to build empathy, highlight solutions, give people agency, and remind them that no matter their struggles, they are not alone.”²⁶ *Casa Jurnalistului* still engages with the public on social media, but its website is now only accessible via the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine,²⁷ where the most recent article, a feature story, was published on May 31, 2022. *Dela0*, an alternative and independent journalistic project launched in 2011, with four award winners between 2015 and 2021, currently displays a beta version of its website and has not published any new material since March 12, 2023.²⁸ Furthermore, *Inclusiv* (Inclusive), another similar project, was active for only three years, from 2018 to 2021. Benefiting from the trust of its readers—as its three founders were well-known independent journalists with prior experience in crowdfunded media—the *Inclusiv* team managed to raise over 100,000 euros in donations before its official launch.²⁹ The platform promised to shed light on the “surrounding informational chaos” through a collaborative model, bringing together journalists, experts, and readers as part of a

²⁶ “Despre DoR,” *Decât o Revistă*, accessed October 4, 2024, <https://www.dor.ro>.

²⁷ “Casa Jurnalistului,” *Casa Jurnalistului*, archived March 8, 2024, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20240308173335/https://casajurnalistului.ro>.

²⁸ “Dela0.ro,” *Dela0.ro*, accessed October 4, 2024, <https://beta.dela0.ro>.

²⁹ Raul Bambu, “Adio, Inclusiv! S-a închis redacția care a strând 100.000 de euro din donații: ‘Inclusiv e un compromis pe care l-am făcut’,” *Pagina de media*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.paginamedia.ro/stiri-media/inclusiv-se-inchide-20439096>.

“community” dedicated to “grassroots journalism.”³⁰ Another noteworthy venture is *Snoop*, a newly launched media platform dedicated to explanatory and investigative journalism. It employs investigation and reportage as in-depth approaches to systemic problems of contemporary Romania. Founded in June 2024, *Snoop* emerged after a dispute over editorial independence and ethical standards between the journalists from two national newspapers owned by Ringier media group and the management.³¹ By the end of 2023, the “rebellious” journalists were dismissed. With “Journalism off the Leash” as its motto, the *Snoop* team has set ambitious goals: “We are interested in the extent to which the journalism [we practice] at Snoop turns into tangible changes in the real world.”³²

From an occupational perspective, narrative journalists in Romania are treading on quicksand, as the platforms they use to publish their work are mostly—some even exclusively—crowdfunded. Furthermore, “genuine freelance journalists have difficulty placing their independent work with established newsrooms and can barely earn a living if they do not work for international outlets.”³³ The volatility of such a work environment, coupled with the unpredictability of crowdfunding, pushes reporters toward third-party-funded projects that align both with their professional aspirations, and the informational needs of their readership. Within the corpus used for this chapter, between 2013 and 2023, seven awards were given to journalists who received financial support to document their stories, either through grants or fellowships initiated by independent journalism newsrooms or nongovernmental organizations supporting quality journalism. These projects were funded by the American government (through the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation and the U.S. Department of State), embassies (such as the French Embassy in Romania and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Romania), financial institutions (the Romanian branches of BRD and NN), or other NGOs and think tanks for journalists, such as the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, and the Erste Foundation.

³⁰ “Te punem în context,” *Inclusiv*, accessed October 4, 2024, <https://inclusiv.ro/despre/>.

³¹ Nic Newman et al., *Digital News Report 2024* (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2024): 100.

³² “Cine suntem,” *Snoop*, <https://snoop.ro/cine-suntem/>.

³³ Avāđani, “Of Journalists and Money,” 1982.

In these seven sponsored investigations, reporters uncovered corruption linked to post-communist mass privatization programs,³⁴ the torture of civilians by Transnistrian authorities,³⁵ the exploitation of Romanian and Bulgarian garment workers, underpaid and overworked by their employers, with the complicity of well-known European clothing brands,³⁶ the plight of Romanians living without identity cards and thus condemned to precariousness,³⁷ the socio-economic struggles of the residents of Romania's most isolated village,³⁸ child sex trafficking,³⁹ and the impact of domestic homicide on children.⁴⁰ As Ioana Avădani points out in her 2017 research, this project-based reporting model tends to prioritize topics that are not "appealing" to established media.⁴¹ However, these partnerships present ethical challenges. On the one hand, readers may perceive implicit pressure on the beneficiary journalists to conform to an agenda imposed by the sponsoring agencies, leading them to make moral judgements. On

³⁴Victor Ilie, "Parcul de distracții din fabrica de diamante" [The Amusement Park from the Diamonds Factory], *Casa Jurnalistului*, March 27, 2013, archived February 24, 2024, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20240224123736/https://casajurnalistului.ro/parcul-de-distracții-din-fabrica-de-diamante/>.

³⁵Lina Vdovii, "Transnistria: Republica Torturii" [Transnistria: The Republic of Torture], *Casa Jurnalistului*, November 21, 2013, archived September 28, 2024, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20230928004441/https://casajurnalistului.ro/transnistria-republica-torturii/>.

³⁶Laura Ștefănuț, "Fabricat în Europa" [Made in Europe], *Casa Jurnalistului*, February 9, 2016, archived February 12, 2024, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20240313082433/https://web.archive.org/web/20240304135234/https://casajurnalistului.ro/fabricat-in-europa/>.

³⁷Andrei Crăciun, "Mizerabilii 2015: Eduard vrea la școală" [Les Misérables 2015: Eduard Wants to Go to School], November 22, 2015, <http://www.dela0.ro/eduard-vrea-la-scoala>. The headline references the French novel *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, which is translated into Romanian as "Mizerabilii."

³⁸Vlad Odobescu, "Noi aici suntem universali" [We Are Universal Here], *Decât o Revistă*, June 15, 2017, <https://www.dor.ro/delta-dunarii-rosetti/>.

³⁹Diana Oncioiu, "Două mii de persoane s-au atins de mine" [Two Thousand People Have Touched Me], *Dela0*, October 14, 2020, <https://beta.dela0.ro/trafic-doua-mii-de-persoane-s-au-atins-de-mine/>, and Diana Oncioiu, "Bilet de voie de la stat: din orfelinat direct în garsoniera traficantului" [With the State's Approval: From the Orphanage Straight to the Trafficker's One-Room Apartment], *Dela0*, October 26, 2020, <https://beta.dela0.ro/din-orfelinat-direct-in-garsoniera-trafficantului/>.

⁴⁰Oana Sandu, "După o crimă în familie, ce se întâmplă cu copiii?" [What Will Become of the Children Affected by Domestic Homicide?], *Decât o Revistă*, November 23, 2022, <https://www.dor.ro/dupa-o-crima-in-familie-ce-se-intampla-cu-copiii/>.

⁴¹Avădani, "Of Journalists and Money," 1983.

the other hand, project-based reporting may raise ethical dilemmas for the reporters themselves, since such a practice could be seen as a departure from the editorial independence that drew their readers in the first place. Reporters are aware of the dangers associated with this type of funding, as one journalist from *Casa Jurnalistului* admitted in an interview with Romina Surugiu for her 2017 study on independent digital journalism in Romania: “Fellowships, journalism prizes... they are OK, but, in the long term, you risk slipping towards an agenda imposed by NGOs, towards topics that are not necessarily yours.”⁴² Beyond the legitimate questions about the extent to which this type of funding shapes the editorial agenda of independent journalists, my argument here is that project-based funding could undermine the generic integrity of reportage. This integrity is understood as “the product of conventional features of a specific genre construct ... that often constrain the use of linguistic resources (lexico-grammatical as well as discoursal).”⁴³ For example, although all 44 reportages were submitted to the “Superscrieri” competition under the “Reportage” category, an examination of the paratextual apparatus and meta-journalistic markers of the texts reveals a discrepancy between this categorization and the way reporters themselves define their own work. Of the total, only eight texts are explicitly labelled as “reportage.” *Decât o Revistă* favors the term “story,” a terminological choice aligned with the narrative journalism formula the magazine has promoted over the years. Other designations also appear, including “article,” “material,” “journalistic material,” “investigation,” “undercover investigation,” “journalistic inquiry,” “documentary piece,” and “press dossier.”⁴⁴ In some texts under these labels, reporters adopt a style of documenting and reporting that aligns more closely with investigative journalism than with reportage, reflecting their efforts to meet the expectations of the funding entities, which predominantly support investigative work.

These projects aside, the “fragility” of the genre’s identity becomes more noticeable from 2020 onward. Amid the COVID-19 lockdowns, narrative journalists had to rethink how they told their stories, as *in situ*

⁴² Surugiu, “‘Freelancing’ as Spectacular Free Labour,” 190.

⁴³ Vijay K. Bhatia, “The Power and Politics of Genre,” *World Englishes* 16, no. 3 (1997): 360, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-971X.00070>.

⁴⁴ In the Romanian media context, “press dossier” refers to an explanatory long-form journalistic genre which is neither a piece of news, nor an investigation. Currently, it is rather an infrequent term, being replaced with another with more appealing to the general public, “documentary.”

documenting—a traditional prerequisite for reportage that distinguishes it from other facts-based journalistic genres—was severely restricted during the pandemic. Although “it’s hard to imagine an idea more hostile to literary journalism than ‘physical distancing,’”⁴⁵ in some texts from the analyzed corpus, first-hand exploration of the surrounding environment and immersion in the life of a community or an individual were largely replaced by technology-mediated interactions (via Skype, Facebook Messenger, or other apps) and “immersion” in non-human sources, such as public data, official reports, legal texts or archival material. As a result, limited freedom of movement has led to an almost unlimited freedom to experiment with the form. For example, in a 2021 article,⁴⁶ journalist Delia Marinescu from *Scena9* narrates the story of a young Afghan female engineer whose opportunity to receive a Hubert H. Humphrey scholarship vanished as soon as Taliban forces retook full control of the country in August 2021. The reportage is built around several months of Facebook conversations and a video call between Marinescu and her subject. In 2023, journalist Andra Mureșan from *Hotnews* published her award-winning article about imprisoned women who murdered their partners, with the story angle made explicit in the headline: Romanian authorities’ failure to prevent domestic homicide.⁴⁷ In the reportage, she interviewed only one woman directly, while other case stories were narratively reconstructed from conviction orders available on the web portal of the Superior Council of Magistracy and court sentences, selected based on their extensive media coverage. Not long ago, neither of these two examples would have been easily accepted as “reportage” in traditional high-quality newsrooms. Nevertheless, my observation here should be understood in relation to various genre theories, which postulate that “there is nothing like a universal form of discourse for structuring knowledge.”⁴⁸ Hence, reportage,

⁴⁵ Robert Alexander, “Teaching in the time of Covid-19,” *Literary Journalism* 14, no. 2 (2020): 10, <https://s35767.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/IALJS-Literary-Journalism-Newsletter-October-20201.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Delia Marinescu, “Am devenit o prizonieră în propria casă” [I Became a Prisoner in My Own House], *Scena9*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.scena9.ro/article/femeie-afghanistan-talibani>.

⁴⁷ Andra Mureșan, “Femei care au omorât pentru viața lor—O investigație despre eșecul statului român de a preveni crimele conjugale” [Women Who Killed for Their Lives—An Investigation into the Romanian State’s Failure to Prevent Domestic Homicide], *Hotnews*, June 23, 2023, <https://hotnews.ro/femei-care-au-omort-pentru-viata-lor-o-investigatie-despre-esecul-statului-romn-de-a-preveni-crimele-conjugale-58727>.

⁴⁸ Bhatia, “The Power and Politics of Genre,” 359.

like any other form of discourse, is not immune to paradigmatic crises stemming from social changes and practices. These changes are reflected in discourse and undermine the generic integrity of reportage. However, within the analyzed corpus, many reportages still adhere to traditional methods of gathering information and narrating stories: journalists still spend significant time immersed in specific social milieus in order to decipher their complexities and convey them to the public. In “Noi aici suntem universali” (We Are Universal Here), journalist Vlad Odobescu portrays the everyday life of Romania’s most isolated community, located in the Danube Delta. Rather than relying on data, statistics, official documents, or statements, he dedicates his time and energy to listening to ordinary people facing extraordinary challenges. For instance, in winter, when the Danube freezes and the power goes out, the phone signal is also lost, leaving the Danube Delta residents completely isolated. As one of them explains, “we don’t even know what time it is.” Living near the Letea Forest Nature Reserve, they must abide by the specific legislation for protected areas. Odobescu manages to capture a striking image of the reality of living under such conditions: “We’re sitting under an EU flag chatting about their problems with jackals” which attack their livestock, leaving them with little to no solution, as the species is legally protected.⁴⁹ In “Bruce Lee, Regele Canalelor” (Bruce Lee, King of the Sewers), reporter Radu Ciorniciuc spent two months among Bucharest’s drug addicts, living in the capital’s sewer network. His goal was to meet and better understand the leader of this underground world, a man known as “Bruce Lee” and referred to by others as “father.” As “Bruce Lee” described himself, “I am the only one who managed to do something for the homeless. I made light out of the dark. Under my dominion, everybody has their money, everybody has something to eat. Somehow, either good or bad, they have everything they need—electric light, heat, a good word, appreciation.”⁵⁰ These narration-based reportages, masterfully blending vivid descriptions, organic conversations, portraits, and metaphors, are more effective at rendering the authorities’ incompetence than any data-driven interpretation. They offer multilayered meanings that

⁴⁹ Odobescu, “Noi aici suntem universali.”

⁵⁰ Radu Ciorniciuc, “Bruce Lee, Regele canalelor,” *Casa Jurnalistului*, June 2, 2014, archived February 24, 2024, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20240224131159/https://casajurnalistului.ro/bruce-lee-regele-canalelor/>.

invite readers to engage both emotionally and intellectually—something an analysis with a pre-established angle rarely achieves.

A key difference between traditional literary reportage and contemporary forms of the genre lies in how practitioners approach facts. While literary journalists prioritize the narrative construction over strict verifiability, modern reporters place greater emphasis on exhaustive documentation and fact-checking. This becomes particularly problematic in reportages which are investigative in their communicative intention, but employ a mode of discourse misaligned with that aim. In “Troleibuzul 21” (Trolleybus 21), journalist Liliana Botnariuc discusses the reforms introduced by the Traffic Police Directorate of the Moldovan Police to reduce fatalities and injuries on public roads. Botnariuc’s starting point is a car accident in Chişinău, in which a female driver and her partner died, while several trolleybus passengers and passersby were injured. Since more than half a year passed between the accident (October 2019) and the publication of the text (June 2020), the reportage provides a narrative reconstruction of the events—a meticulous process, yet a common method in storytelling-based reporting. Drawing on an overwhelming body of research to piece together a narrative from the collected data, the journalist sometimes struggles to distinguish between necessary, relevant information and extraneous details, falling into the trap of sensationalism—a practice that narrative journalists, paradoxically, strongly oppose. For instance, while gathering information about the driver and other injured persons, the reporter confesses she interviewed one victim on her hospital bed, and even attempted to speak with the mourning family of the driver. Furthermore, when documenting the deceased woman’s past, the reporter includes details from her private life that are unrelated to the investigation and lack newsworthiness: remarks about her romantic relationships and professional status appear tendentious, as they subtly guide the reader toward specific inferences about the woman. Aware of these ethical missteps, the journalist clarifies in a note accompanying the text that her article was not intended “to denigrate someone or to throw stones at somebody.”⁵¹ However, these overzealous and ethically problematic intrusions stem from what I would call the fetishization of facts, itself rooted in the growing dominance of fact-checking—a practice that has gained

⁵¹ Liliana Botnariuc, “Troleibuzul 21,” *Oameni şi kilometri*, June 19, 2020, <https://oamenisikilometri.md/troleibuzul-21/>.

prevalence in contemporary quality journalism,⁵² when the “truth” of almost every paragraph must be substantiated either by non-human sources or direct quotation. This rigid reliance on factual, verifiable information can, in a sense, “deprive” a reportage of its potential “artistic life,” making it less capable of transcending its immediate social, economic, and political context. In any case, the overburdening of reportage with numbers, statistics, quotes from official sources, and contextual digressions pushes the genre further away from the traditional concept of “literary reportage” or even from the more encompassing model of narrative journalism, replacing an intensive approach to reality—centered on the experiences of a community or individual—with an extensive one, drawing attention to the intricate and interconnected socio-political layers of the investigated phenomenon.

We are currently witnessing an epistemological turn in Romanian reportage, from literary cognition to journalistic cognition. While literary cognition is concerned with “the description of the group on the basis of a single biography,” journalistic cognition “aims at describing the reality with the use of statistical data, syntheses and generalizations as the tools which make the described phenomena more objective.”⁵³ Several interconnected factors contribute to this tendency. First, the corpus data reveal a prevalent orientation among journalists toward investigating and reporting on topics where the focus is on political corruption (8 reportages), authorities’ incompetence (13 reportages), or both (3 reportages), as well as fraudulent activities (2 reportages), and abuse of power (3 reportages). Selecting these angles for their stories, journalists rely more on investigation-based “tools,” which, in turn, will heavily influence the “packaging” of the final product, prompting reporters to use more argumentation schemes and fewer narrative schemes. Since argumentation schemes are tied to “a set of so-called *critical questions*, which represent standard ways of probing into an argument to find aspects of it that are open to criticism,”⁵⁴ journalists focus on providing indisputable

⁵² Oscar Barrera et al., “Facts, Alternative Facts, and Fact Checking in Times of Post-Truth Politics,” *Journal of Public Economics* 182 (2020): 104–23.

⁵³ Paweł Urbaniak, “The Features of Contemporary Polish Reportage as a Literary-Journalistic Genre,” *Sphera publica: revista de ciencias sociales y de la comunicación* 2, no. 14 (2014): 8.

⁵⁴ Elena Cabrio et al., “From Discourse Analysis to Argumentation Schemes and Back: Relations and Differences,” in *Computational Logic in Multi-Agent Systems*, ed. João Leite et al. (Springer, 2013), 3, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-40624-9>.

arguments—hence the extensive use of statistical data, public records, numerous quotes from authorities, and other textual or non-textual forms, such as charts, explanatory maps, and infographics. In these reportages, when narrative sequences appear (e.g., the story of a representative individual related to the topic), they serve the purpose of reinforcing the irrefutability of the story angle, as a well-documented and well-argued “case,” based on fact-checked information, creating the effect of a “scientifically” verifiable truth.

FROM A CROWDFUNDING COMMUNITY TO A DISCOURSE COMMUNITY

As early as 2001, James L. Aucoin warned that “using verification as a standard for literary journalism draws the boundaries too narrowly, leaving outside of the circle many writers who deal with real events.”⁵⁵ Since then, journalism has undergone many changes, and it took nearly a decade for Romanian journalists committed to high-quality long-form reporting to separate themselves from established media and build communities of readers around journalistic projects where the influence of political and economic sectors, as well as the advertising industry, is significantly lower—or even absent, in the case of those platforms exclusively crowd-funded. These readers, according to an interview from 2013 with the founders of *Casa Jurnalistului*, represent a “young and educated public that disdains politicians and the newspapers that serve them.”⁵⁶ More recently, *Scena9* revealed that seventy-four percent of its audience consists of university graduates, with 4 out of 10 under the age of 25.⁵⁷ Out of this “providential” encounter between journalists and readers who mistrust politicians and established media has emerged not only a community of individuals with a shared interest in social change, but also a “discourse

⁵⁵ James L. Aucoin, “Epistemic Responsibility and Narrative Theory: The Literary Journalism of Ryszard Kapuściński,” *Journalism* 2, no. 1 (2001): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1177/146488490100200101>.

⁵⁶ Oana Prisăcariu, “Publicul tinăr și educat respinge politicienii și ziarele aservite lor,” *Observator cultural*, November 20, 2013, <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/publicul-tinar-si-educat-respinge-politicienii-si-ziarele-aservite-lor-2/>.

⁵⁷ Daniel Samoilă, “Care este publicul platformelor Școala9, Scena 9 și MindCraft Stories? Mulți tineri. Femeile, cei mai loiali cititori,” *Pagina de media*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.paginademediei.ro/2021/02/care-este-publicul-platformelor-brd-scoala9-scena9-mindcraft-stories/>.

community” that has contributed to the evolution of reportage as a genre, adapting it to the specific rhetorical needs it now addresses.

Discussing the concept of discourse community, John Swales stresses that within such communities, people connect “in order to pursue objectives that are prior to those of socialization and solidarity [as occurs in sociolinguistic groupings], even if these latter should consequently occur,” and that “the communicative needs of the *group* tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discoursal characteristics.”⁵⁸ Examining this discourse community will provide a clearer understanding of the transformations that reportage as a genre has undergone in contemporary Romanian journalism.

The majority of “Superscrieri” winners come from independent and/or alternative journalism platforms, sharing common denominators such as investigating Romania’s (and Moldova’s) systemic problems, relying on crowdfunding as their primary (or sole) source of financing, opposing established media, prioritizing transparency, committing to high-quality journalism (demonstrated through fact-checking, in-depth and unbiased reporting), and collaborating with their readers and sponsors in order to enhance political accountability and promote social betterment. These characteristics, in fact, reflect the aspirations of the audience of these journalistic forums in a country where overall trust in the news has declined from 39 percent in 2017 to 27 percent in 2024,⁵⁹ and where confidence in the Government and Parliament remains below 20 percent—even lower than in 2013, as revealed by a national survey conducted between October and November 2023.⁶⁰ In independent, collaborative, and alternative journalism projects (as opposed to mainstream, established media), readers and journalists see themselves as part of the same mission, united by shared values, attitudes, and aspirations, as reflected in most self-descriptions of these initiatives. From a discourse analysis perspective, this implies that the “way of doing things,” including discursive performance, is also socialized within the community—positioning independent

⁵⁸ John Swales, “The Concept of Discourse Community,” in *Writing About Writing: A College Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011): 471.

⁵⁹ Newman et al., *Digital News Report 2024*, 100.

⁶⁰ Dan Popa, “Sondaj: Armata și Biserica- instituțiile în care românii au cea mai mare încredere. Guvernul și Parlamentul—pe ultimele poziții,” *Hotnews.ro*, November 14, 2023, <https://hotnews.ro/sondaj-armata-si-biserica-institutiile-n-care-romnii-au-cea-mai-mare-ncredere-guvernul-si-parlamentul-pe-ultimele-pozitii-1537851>.

journalism at the intersection of two of the four models of journalistic culture proposed by Thomas Hanitzsch et al.: the advocative and developmental models. While the advocative model is more typical of Eastern Europe’s post-communism transitional democracies, where “journalists—and their fellow citizens—may have developed high expectations of institutional performance as a result of the democratization process,” the development model is characterized by journalists who are “keenest to advocate for social change, set the political agenda, and support national development.” In this model, they assume the role of “agents of change” in societies marked by low human and economic development, as well as strong legal and institutional uncertainty.”⁶¹ By highlighting the fragility of Romania’s governing bodies and the corruptibility of politicians, narrative journalists take on an interventionist role—a characteristic of both models discussed—where journalism is viewed as the driving force behind social progress.

The corpus analyzed for this chapter reveals that a significant number of reportages explore themes rooted in progressivism. One example is healthcare: in her piece on a hospital built in Romania through civil society’s efforts, journalist Ruxandra Pătrașcu-Maian pleads for the reformation of the healthcare system: “We need new hospitals. But after documenting my story for six months, I understood that building new hospitals is not sufficient in the absence of a complementary medical and social infrastructure, and without rethinking the mode of funding the healthcare system, which favors ‘unnecessary hospitalization’ and limits the chances of adequate treatment for critically ill patients.”⁶² Other progressive themes are also explored in depth: Diana Oncioiu investigates human trafficking victims, advocating for social protection reform;⁶³ Vlad Stoicescu goes undercover to expose “the corruption pyramid” in the timber industry, calling for stricter forest policies to curb illegal logging and corruption.⁶⁴ In addition to these, flaws in Romania’s education system

⁶¹ Thomas Hanitzsch et al., eds., *Worlds of Journalism: Journalistic Cultures Around the Globe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 300–301.

⁶² Ruxandra Pătrașcu-Maian, “Spitalul uman” [The Humanitarian Hospital], *Inclusiv*, February 15, 2021, <https://inclusiv.ro/spitalul-uman/>.

⁶³ Oncioiu, “Două mii de persoane s-au atins de mine,” and Oncioiu, “Bilet de voie de la stat.”

⁶⁴ Vlad Stoicescu, “Regia Națională a Pădurii Lor” [The National Forest of Their Administration], *Dela0*, July 25, 2015, <https://beta.dela0.ro/regia-nationala-a-padurii-lor/>. The author enriches the original headline with a sarcastic layer, playing on the similar

and environmental policies are also among the key topics reporters bring to public attention in their work.

The new narrative journalists are also highly skilled investigative reporters. While they are gradually moving away from literary prose in favor of a more direct style of communication, they remain committed—just like their predecessors—to standing up for vulnerable, marginalized communities trapped in precarious conditions by the authorities and advocating for change in the name of social progress. For example, in an interview with a fellow reporter, F. Brunea-Fox (d. 1977)—dubbed the “prince of Romanian reportage” by his contemporaries—described himself as “an independent journalist” who consistently advocated for the underprivileged. He also rejected any association of his writings with a specific ideology or political doctrine: “When you take the side of the oppressed up against the oppressor, this means that your attitude is civic and moral.”⁶⁵ This same attitude is reflected in the work of today’s independent reporters. Equipped with a deep knowledge of the socio-political milieu and relying on the crowdfunding model to shield themselves from political and economic pressures, they criticize the establishment more often, more firmly and more openly than mainstream media, whose criticism is often shaped by a political clientelism. Clear ideological antagonism is evident in reportages that scrutinize communism. In 2010, refuting the possibility of a resurgent Communist party in Romania, reporters Iulian Andrei Crăciun and Cristian Delcea expressed no sympathy for the “pioneers” of the New Romanian Communist Party, with whom they met in a bar in Bucharest on November 7—just hours before their protest of “five, maybe six persons” demanding the reinstallation of Lenin’s statue in front of the “House of the Press” building. The journalists showcase their creativity through witty wordplay and irony to describe the members of the new political group. The vice-president of the Committee for the Reorganization of the

pronunciation of “Pădurilor” from the official name of the Romanian institution that manages the public forest domain (“Regia Națională a Pădurilor,” translated as “National Forest Administration”), and “Pădurii Lor” (translated as “Their Forest”), alluding to corruption within the administration. This is a syntactico-semantic creation made possible by the fact that in Romanian, “lor” is both a bound morpheme—an enclitic article attached to the root word—designating the genitive and dative of nouns in plural (“Pădurilor” in this case), and the genitive and dative plural form (the equivalent of “their”) of the pronouns “ei” and “ele”—the masculine and feminine forms of “they” (as in “Pădurii Lor”).

⁶⁵ F. Brunea-Fox, “Iubirea de oameni cere migață,” interview by Sânziana Pop, *Propuneri pentru paradis* (Junimea, 1975): 83–94.

Romanian Communist Party “is persistently knocking on octogeny’s doors.” The word “octogeny” (“octogenie”) does not exist in Romanian; it is a lexical innovation derived from “octogenarian” (“octogenar”). The person in charge of propagandistic activity “is only 30 years old, lives with his mom,” and “has yet to find a partner in struggle and in life.” In these descriptions, pragmatic implicature blends with rhetorical devices, as the authors play with the meanings of the Romanian word “tovarăș,” (the feminine form of the noun, which is used, being “tovarășă”) translated here as “partner.” In Romanian, “tovarăș”/ “tovarășă,” which can also mean “comrade,” was the official word of address during communism. It is also part of the idiomatic expression “tovarăș [or tovarășă] de viață,” meaning “life partner.” The homonymy of “tovarăș” enables the journalists to create a zeugma—a figure of speech in which a single governing word connects two different ideas—thus alluding to both “class struggle” and “life partner,” two chimeras on the horizon of expectations of the young communist believer. Moreover, as the headline reveals, the party is led by a taxi driver.⁶⁶ To justify this approach, the journalists reference statistical data from a survey by The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania, which showed that nearly 20 years after the fall of dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, 49 percent of respondents believed that living conditions under communism were superior, with the elderly being the most nostalgic social group. Consequently, the dystopian scenario in which Romanian communists might regain power prompts the journalist to downplay both the scenario and those involved in it. In a 2019 reportage, journalist Diana Oncioiu documents the case of Augustin Lazăr, Romania’s Prosecutor General at the time of the investigation, who had been found to have denied, in 1985 and 1986—while serving as a local prosecutor in Alba County—the request for the supervised release of at least one political dissident imprisoned by the communist regime in Aiud. In her investigation, alluding to the flaws of the lustration law, she notes: “Thirty-five years later, Lazăr is the Prosecutor General of democratic Romania, insisting that he was only carrying out his duties, within the legal regime in force at the time.” Taking a firm stance, she asserts:

⁶⁶ Iulian Andrei Crăciun and Cristian Delcea, “Noul Partid Comunist Român, condus de un șofer de taxi” [The New Romanian Communist Party, Led by a Taxi Driver], *Adevărul*, November 7, 2010, <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-interne/evenimente/noul-partid-comunist-roman-condus-de-un-sofer-de-1137465.html>. In Romanian, “a conduce” is a polysemous verb, meaning both “to lead” [an institution], and “to drive” [a vehicle] in this particular context.

“The young prosecutor Lazăr was not a tormentor, but he was not innocent either. Augustin Lazăr was just another cog in the infernal machinery of the communist dictatorship.”⁶⁷

REPORTAGE ABOUT REPORTAGE: FROM REFERENTIALITY TO SELF-REFERENTIALITY

The constant close scrutiny of political activity has become an integral part of the *modus operandi* of this new generation of independent reporters, and has solidified as a defining practice within the discourse community of citizens and journalists committed to identifying and trying to redress a wide range of social grievances. Reportage, as one of the genres chosen to express the goals of this community—to use Swales’s words—is shaped by the discursive needs of its members, and this reverberates throughout the rhetoric of contemporary reportage, as demonstrated by the growing presence of metadiscourse elements in the texts within the analyzed corpus. These metadiscursive units, in addition to their conventional functions, encourage reporters to shift from referentiality to self-referentiality, or, metaphorically speaking, from looking outward to looking inward—aspects I will discuss further. *Sensu lato*, metadiscourse refers to discourse about discourse, encompassing all language units within a text or discourse that appear to serve an explanatory function but are closely tied to the addresser’s communicative intentions, ranging from clarification or negotiation of meaning to persuasion and even manipulation. Because it contains information about the discourse that has been produced, journalistic metadiscourse—“journalism about journalism”⁶⁸—is rather scarce in informative genres. It is conventionally placed outside the main text (as paratextual units) or at its peripheries, either at the beginning, or at the end, to avoid interfering with the body copy, which is highly referential, as it reports on specific events or issues under investigation.⁶⁹ However, the

⁶⁷Diana Oncioiu, “O rotiță în angrenajul dictaturii: cazul procurorului Augustin Lazăr” [A Cog in the Machinery of the Dictatorship: The Case of Prosecutor Augustin Lazăr], *Dela0*, April 5, 2019, <https://beta.dela0.ro/o-rotita-in-angrenajul-dictururii-cazul-procurorului-augustin-lazar/>.

⁶⁸Binakuromo Ogbobor, *British Media Coverage of the Press Reform Debate: Journalists Reporting Journalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 78, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37265-1>.

⁶⁹Marius-Adrian Hazaparu, “Jurnalism despre jurnalism: funcții ale metadiscursului în reportajul literar; Ryszard Kapuściński și *Împăratul* (1978),” *Acta Iassyensia Comparationis* 30, no. 2 (2022): 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.47743/aic-2022-2-0001>.

corpus analyzed for this chapter indicates that narrative journalists incorporate various metadiscursive structures in their stories, serving different purposes. It is important to emphasize that these structures arise from a discourse community that upholds transparency as a core professional value—one that journalists have internalized, as reflected in their use of metadiscourse. Consequently, in the name of transparency, journalists have developed a variety of discourse strategies that aim beyond openness about their work processes, also serving purposes such as appealing to readers’ empathy and enhancing credibility. A frequent type of metadiscourse in the reportages analyzed here involves performance self-evaluation, with reporters highlighting the difficulties they encountered in the documentation and investigation process, as well as their results, desired outcomes, and failures. For “Parcul de distracții din fabrica de diamante” (The Amusement Park from the Diamonds Factory), journalist Victor Ilie attempted to interview a real estate manager involved in the opaque privatization of a Romanian factory, but his request was met with an emailed refusal from the magnate’s image consultant, which Ilie chose to publish. Similarly, reporters express their frustration over hostile or indifferent attitudes from public representatives or sources directly linked to their investigations. A lexical examination of the corpus reveals a preference for terms that highlight the efforts that journalists have—successfully or unsuccessfully—invested in their work, with a strong preference for performative verbs (such as *try*, *succeed*, *manage*, *deny*, *refuse*, and *ask*) and prepositional numeral constructions (e.g., “I have spoken to more than 30 female teenagers,” “I interviewed tens of garment workers,” “We’ve spoken to almost 30 survivors,” “after 1820 kilometers on the roads of real Romania,” “I’ve spent two months in [Bucharest’s] network of sewers,” “I contacted RMGC [Roșia Montană Gold Corporation] at least five times, both by phone and by email. They ignored me.”) Revealing moments of failure during the journalistic process can enhance a journalist’s credibility, as it “seems more authentic than pretending that it is an infallible machine.”⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Gabriela Perdomo and Philippe Rodrigues-Rouleau, “Transparency as Metajournalistic Performance: *The New York Times’ Caliphate* Podcast and New Ways to Claim Journalistic Authority,” *Journalism* 23, no. 11 (2022): 2318, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884921997312>.

In some cases, transparency and authenticity overlap, and the journalistic discourse shifts from referentiality to self-referentiality and, inevitably, to self-reflexivity. While visiting her emigrant mother, journalist Oana Moisil spent 31 hours on a bus traveling from Romania to France alongside Romanian emigrants, seeking answers to a “tormenting” question: “I asked myself many times, first as the daughter of emigrant parents, then as a journalist, what is harder—to leave anywhere, with no clear destination, or to return after years of living in a foreign country?”⁷¹ From this point forward, the narration moves between observation-based reporting, personal retrospection, and introspection, echoing the style of personal reportage used by Polish reporter Ryszard Kapuściński in such works as *The Emperor* (1978) or *Shas of Shabs* (1982).

The disclosure of personal details blurs the boundaries between the journalist’s private life and public persona. Documenting sexual abuse, Ana Maria Ciobanu reflects on her own struggles in overcoming the trauma of sexual abuse. Here is how she begins a long-form article following the highly publicized case of two teenage girls who were abducted, raped and murdered by a 66-year-old man in the town of Caracal, Romania, who then burnt their bodies:

I’ve been writing on violence against women since 2014. I’ve interviewed many teenagers, both male and female, about domestic abuse. I grew up witnessing violence in my family. In high school, my boyfriend at the time hit me. But during the winter of my senior year, something else happened—something I kept to myself for 13 years, until all the reactions post-Caracal convinced me to finally share my story, first with some female colleagues in the newsroom, and then with my husband.⁷²

Hinting at her own experience of rape—although “I cannot say what happened exactly, because if I hear myself voicing my thoughts, it will become true, it will become a part of me, and it will be impossible to pretend it didn’t happen; and because I am ashamed that I did not file a complaint, and that it is possible that, in not doing so, I allowed other girls to be raped”⁷³—the journalist adds a layer of emotional depth to the text.

⁷¹ Oana Moisil, “Cei care pleacă” [Those Who Leave], *Recorder*, April 26, 2018, <https://recorder.ro/cei-care-pleaca/>.

⁷² Ana Maria Ciobanu, “Frica era aici și înainte” [The Fear Was Here Before], *Decât o Revistă*, September 14, 2019, <https://www.dor.ro/frica-era-aici-si-inainte>.

⁷³ Ana Maria Ciobanu, “Frica era aici și înainte.”

By revealing her biases, she also aims at a form of “personal transparency,”⁷⁴ where authenticity and professional experience converge to reinforce her authority as a journalist. “Acasă la Copiii Soarelui” (Visiting the Children of the Sun) follows a similar approach: Delia Marinescu decides to write a reportage about the spiritual leader of a community practicing Vipassana meditation after her own ten-day retreat there as a participant. The first (and lengthy) part of the article narrates her personal experience within the community, explaining her reasons for going there: “I was unhappy ... I was feeling I was going against my own flow. And my personal life was a mess, and I was trying to fix everything with psychotherapy and yoga.” But, “[a]t the end of those ten days of meditation, I felt free. I had made peace with a part of my past, my fears and my ailments.”⁷⁵

According to Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau, audiences’ understanding of journalistic culture translates into greater respect for reporters’ work and a greater willingness to acknowledge their authority⁷⁶. In some of the analyzed texts, reporters seek to establish this authority by emphasizing the journalistic culture—developed within a specific discourse community—that they uphold, as journalist Oana Sandu does in her nearly 14,000-words article about a female student who unexpectedly died under unclear circumstances while attending a team-building camp with her colleagues:

It was quiet and chaotic at the same time, and they [Andreea Avramescu’s colleagues] did not know why they had lost her—though everyone wanted to know it, including a handful of reporters, local correspondents for national TV stations, who descended on Poiana Pinului like vultures, searching for the perfect vox-pop for their news story about the girl who died while attending a team-building camp with her colleagues.... “Did she drink?” “Did she snort?” “Was she depressed?” “Did she have a fight with her boyfriend?” No one asked them who Andreea was, what she meant for them, as if the only thing that mattered was finding a simple explanation as soon as possible—one that would draw people to their TV screens. It would have been easier if she had been drinking, or if she had taken her own life, if

⁷⁴ Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau, “Transparency,” 2314.

⁷⁵ Delia Marinescu, “Acasă la Copiii Soarelui,” *Scena9*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.scena9.ro/article/copiii-soarelui-vipassa-meditatie-apuseni>.

⁷⁶ Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau, “Transparency,” 2315.

she had somehow deviated from the norm. Otherwise, it was complicated, and journalists didn't want complicated answers.⁷⁷

This fragment, in which the metajournalism becomes an integral part of the story, serves as a powerful statement on professional identity. It is rooted in an explicit denunciation of fast-food journalism, along with its tendency to recycle widespread, narrow representations of the world, indulge in sensationalism, and engage in dehumanizing reporting—practices that in-depth, long-form, and slow journalism⁷⁸ firmly stands against.

FINAL REMARKS

The contemporary forms of Romanian reportage discussed in this chapter have evolved within a specific discourse community that exerts a centripetal force on the work processes of narrative journalists. While the literary tradition of reportage continues to enjoy some popularity among today's reporters, its generic integrity faces new challenges, as journalists increasingly prioritize fact-checking and investigation-based methods over creative narrative structures and a writing style reminiscent of literary prose. Since 2011, the "Superscrieri" competition has accommodated a wide range of approaches to reportage. The frequent overlap with journalistic investigation has blurred the *differentia specifica* of reportage—its most distinctive traits, defined in opposition to other genres—and has led to cross-genre pollination. This phenomenon is not only a result of internal changes within contemporary journalistic practices, but also reflects the influence of various interconnected factors, both intrinsic, and extrinsic, such as organizational culture, discourse community, technological advancements and, particularly, political actions that hinder the country's overall development. In Romania's unstable and unpredictable media landscape, independent investigative reporters and narrative journalists strive to cultivate a media diet that encourages audiences to shift from primarily consuming entertainment and fake news to developing a taste for well-crafted journalism.

⁷⁷ Oana Sandu, "Echilibru: Cine a fost și ce ne-a lăsat Andreea Avramescu?" [Balance: Who Was Andreea Avramescu and What Did She Leave Behind?], *Decât o Revistă*, May 22, 2013, <https://www.dor.ro/echilibru-dor-11/>.

⁷⁸ Susan Greenberg, "Slow Journalism in the Digital Fast Lane," in *Global Literary Journalism: Exploring the Journalistic Imagination*, ed. Richard Lance Keeble and John Tulloch (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 381–93.

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PART II

Crime, Corruption, Violence, War



Literary Reportage in the Form of True Crime: *Żeby nie było śladów* (Leave No Traces) by Cezary Łazarewicz

Anna Saignes and Aleksandra Katarzyna Wiktorowska

In 2017, two years after Svetlana Alexievich became the first journalist to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Polish reporter Cezary Łazarewicz was awarded the Nike Literary Prize for his book *Żeby nie było śladów* (Leave No Traces). Łazarewicz's work of literary reportage became the first of its kind to win the Nike Literary Prize—Poland's most prestigious literary award presented annually for the best book written in Polish. In his praise, jury chairman Tomasz Fiałkowski observed: "In his historical reportage, Cezary Łazarewicz neither manipulates nor embellishes the facts. In the name of truth, he painstakingly reconstructs the circumstances

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surrounding the death of a Warsaw high school graduate, the son of opposition activist and poet Barbara Sadowska, and events that followed.”¹

Żeby nie było śladów, released in 2016 by the publishing house Czarne, which specializes in non-fiction and particularly book-length reportage, revisits a news story that shook Poland in the spring of 1983, just a few months after martial law imposed by general Wojciech Jaruzelski had been suspended. The book recounts the case of Grzegorz Przemyk, a young man who was detained by police for refusing to show his identity card. Taken to a police station, Przemyk was brutally beaten and died two days later after several doctors misdiagnosed him with conditions ranging from mental illness to intoxication. In reality, he had been beaten in such a way as to “leave no traces.” The death of the young man became a widely discussed event, and his funeral sparked a large-scale patriotic, anti-communist demonstration. In response, the secret police (SB) initiated an elaborate cover-up to deny their responsibility. In 1984, under pressure from the regime to assign blame, an ambulance driver and a doctor were convicted on the basis of coerced testimonies. They were soon amnestied, having served as convenient scapegoats for the authorities. Although their convictions were overturned following the fall of communism in 1989, five subsequent trials failed to bring resolution, and the case was ultimately dropped. Of the three police officers involved, only one was convicted and he subsequently avoided prison on health grounds. Łazarewicz’s work describes his investigation, thirty years later, to expose the immense apparatus deployed by the Polish government to cover up the incident and protect the image of its police.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce Łazarewicz’s book-length reportage—currently unavailable in translation—to an English-speaking audience. We will start by outlining the author’s biography and situating *Żeby nie było śladów* within his larger body of work. It is worth stressing that in Poland the book has generated significant discussion, with numerous scholarly publications analyzing its impact and themes. Polish critics and researchers have categorized Łazarewicz’s work in a variety of genres, including historical reportage, political and judicial thriller,² archival crime

¹Tadeusz Sobolewski, “Nagroda Literacka ‘Nike’ 2017—Cezary Łazarewicz za *Żeby nie było śladów*. Sprawa Grzegorza Przemyka,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, October 1, 2017, accessed May, 20, 2025, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75517,22454684,cezary-lazarewicz-laureatem-nike-2017-za-pasjonujace-sledztwo.html>. All translations unless noted otherwise are our own.

²Cezary Łazarewicz, “Cezary Łazarewicz *Żeby nie było śladów* BSF 2021,” moderated by Michał Nogaś, interview and discussion, accessed May 20, 2025, <https://youtu.be/U0Fqo2MTag4?si=aoF5j-Q10qS5WrAP>.

reportage,³ reconstruction reportage,⁴ biographical reportage,⁵ and even as a historical or popular science text.⁶ Notably, only a few scholars have examined the book's potential association with the true crime genre. This chapter will explore the affinities between Łazarewicz's *Żeby nie było śladów* and the work that "elevated the true crime book to literature in the United States"⁷—Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*—while also examining the features that set the Polish author's work apart. Furthermore, we will position Cezary Łazarewicz's literary reportage within a broader framework encompassing intersecting narrative modes—namely true crime, journalism, crime fiction, and history—while also engaging with the international resurgence of realism and the prevailing paradigm of inquiry and memory that characterizes contemporary literature.

BIOGRAPHY AND BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ŁAZAREWICZ

Born in 1966 in Darłowo, a seaside town in the Polish Province of West Pomerania, during the 1980s Cezary Łazarewicz was active in the Polish independent pacifist socio-political group Ruch Wolność i Pokój (Freedom and Peace Movement) which was affiliated with the Solidarity trade union. He distributed self-published magazines and edited the underground press. From 1991 to 2003 he worked for the daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*. After leaving the newspaper he served as a director of local radio in Szczecin. He later continued his journalistic career at *Przekrój*. In 2007 he joined the

³ Rafał Szczerbakiewicz, "Archiwistyczny reportaż kryminalny: Retrokryminalna paraliteratura," *Annales UMCS Sectio FF Philologiae* 36, no. 2 (2018): 61–79, 10.17951/ff.2018.36.2.61-79.

⁴ Edyta Żyrek-Horodyska, "Odzyskane z niepamięci: Żeby nie było śladów... Cezarego Łazarewicza i reportażowy zwrot w kierunku rekonstrukcji," in *Poetyki czasu, miejsca i pamięci*, ed. Wiesław Olkusz and Barbara Szymczak-Maciejczyk (Wrocław: Ośrodek Badawczy Facta Ficta, 2020), 427–41.

⁵ Edyta Żyrek-Horodyska, "Reportaż biograficzny czy biografia reportażowa? Refleksje genologiczne i analiza przypadku," *Autobiografia. Literatura. Kultura. Media* 11, no. 2 (2018): 165–85, 10.18276/au.2018.2.11-12.

⁶ Cezary Łazarewicz, "Żeby nie było śladów—sprawa Grzegorza Przemyka," moderated by Grzegorz Wysocki, discussion, accessed May 20, 2025, https://youtu.be/W0FMsrVzIM?si=EeHB6USkZ_zyxyHQ.

⁷ Gary Provost, *How to Write and Sell True Crime* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1991), 7.

national desk at the weekly *Polityka*. He later worked for *Newsweek*, *Wprost*, and *Wirtualna Polska*, an online news source.

When reflecting on his journalistic career, Łazarewicz said he expressed growing disillusionment with the editorial policies of newspapers and the rapid publication schedules imposed on journalists. He remarked, "I know that it is impossible to write a good text in a week, and at *Przekrój*, we were required to produce reportage in five days."⁸ For Łazarewicz, this new situation was unacceptable. He had developed his journalistic craft in the 1990s, a time when producing a single piece of reportage required the kind of in-depth research and extensive material one might gather for writing a book. This meant conducting numerous interviews, combing through documents and sources, and providing richly detailed descriptions of every aspect of the story. And as journalistic practices in his view continued to deteriorate, he turned to the writing of books. A significant influence on this decision was his wife, the reporter Ewa Winnicka, who had achieved success with her first book, *Londyńczycy* (Londoners).

Łazarewicz's first solo publication, written on commission, was entitled *Sześć pięter luksusu. Przerwana historia domu Braci Jabłkowskich* (Six Floors of Luxury: The Interrupted History of the Jabłkowski Brothers' House). Published in 2013, it narrated the history of the six-story department store in the city center of Warsaw that had witnessed, among other significant historical events, the emergence of consumer capitalism, the restoration of independence, the Warsaw Uprising, and martial law. In 2015 he published *Elegancki morderca* (Elegant Murderer) based on Władysław Mazurkiewicz, Poland's first post-war serial killer, who was charged with six murders and two more counts of attempted murder and whose trial electrified Poland in the 1950s. Then, in 2016 he published *Żeby nie było śladów*, which brought him recognition and a number of awards.⁹ His other publications worth mentioning include: *Koronkowa robota: Sprawa Gorgonowej* (Fancy Footwork: The Gorgonowa Case) from 2018, about Rita Gorgonowa, the defendant in the most famous trial of the interwar period in Poland and one of the most notorious in the history of the Polish judiciary, as she was accused of the brutal murder of her lover's seventeen-year-old daughter; *1968: Czasy nadchodzą nowe* (1968: New Times Are Coming), written with Ewa Winnicka and published in

⁸ Cezary Łazarewicz, our interview.

⁹ Among others: the aforementioned Nike Literary Prize, Oskar Halecki Award, MediaTory Award, and Book of the Year in the Radio Krakow poll.

2018 comprising ten non-fiction stories told from the perspective of people whose lives were shaped by the events of 1968; *Nic osobistego: Sprawa Janusza Walusia* (Nothing Personal: The Case of Janusz Waluś) from 2019, based on the case of Janusz Waluś, the Polish assassin of Chris Hani, the charismatic General Secretary of the South African Communist Party who was murdered in 1993; and *Na Szewskiej: Sprawa Stanisława Pyjasa* (On Szewska Street: The Case of Stanisław Pyjas) from 2023, about the mysterious death in 1977 of a student involved in opposition activities.

All of Łazarewicz's books are rigorously researched. And although he expresses reluctance to categorize his work as historical reportage and emphasizes that all the topics he addresses are directly relevant to the present,¹⁰ it is hard to deny that his work has a lot in common with that of a historian or biographer. The author was not an eyewitness to the events he describes in his work; even when he recalls episodes from his youth, he neither documented them nor spoke with witnesses at the time. Instead, he reconstructs events through extensive archival research and interviews with witnesses, positioning his work at the intersection of history and memory. Moreover, if we were to find a common denominator for his work, it would certainly be a fascination with contemporary history and high-profile, often unsolved cases. It is also worth stressing that Łazarewicz's trajectory is a perfect example of the phenomenon observed by Polish academic Rafał Szczerbakiewicz:

The new economic landscape has fostered an internal resistance that has inspired works emphasizing a longing for a classical view of journalism's purpose. This perspective is further nurtured by the freedom of producing books outside the constraints of newspaper editorial offices. Paradoxically, reporters have upheld the genre's high ideological and formal standards by transferring them into independent, personal writing projects. This "analog" approach aligns the emerging trend of historical and archival reportage with the slow media paradigm developing in the West.¹¹

For Łazarewicz, reportage is a detailed narrative that presents human stories in clear, accessible language. It serves as a case study, allowing readers to understand the experiences of a broader group, nation, or historical event. Written with nuance and emotional depth, it provides meaningful

¹⁰ Łazarewicz, our interview.

¹¹ Szczerbakiewicz, "Archiwistyczny reportaż kryminalny," 67–68.

insight into its subject matter.¹² Given this perspective, the book format turned out to be the only choice to recount the story of Grzegorz Przemyk, which impacted his entire generation.

ANALYSIS

A Reportage That Reads Like a Novel

As Izabela Adamczewska-Baranowska has noted,¹³ *Żeby nie było śladów* demonstrates close parallels with Truman Capote's seminal work, and not only because it is an account of a true crime. More specifically, the convergence lies in the fact that Łazarewicz's true crime story seems, in many respects, to apply the ideas set out by Truman Capote in the interview he gave to George Plimpton, published in the *New York Times Book Review* on January 16, 1966, to mark the launch of *In Cold Blood*. At the beginning of the interview, in order to define the specificity of what he called the non-fiction novel or creative reportage, Capote explained: "the form, by necessity, demands that the writer be completely in control of fictional techniques—which means that, to be a good creative reporter, you have to be a very good fiction writer."¹⁴ It seems that in many respects, when writing *Żeby nie było śladów*, Cezary Łazarewicz kept the example of *In Cold Blood* and its theoretical description by Tom Wolfe in mind. In the opening of *The New Journalism*, Wolfe explains that the new—although he acknowledges that it may not be so new—way of writing journalistic texts is to tell the real story using the means of fictional storytelling. It is thus possible

in non-fiction, in journalism to use any literary device, from the traditional dialogisms of the essay to stream-of-consciousness, and to use many different

¹² Łazarewicz, our interview.

¹³ Izabela Adamczewska-Baranowska, "'Z zimną krwią się zbliżyć': Historyczne reportaże kryminalne Cezarego Łazarewicza i Przemysława Semczuka jako 'true crime novels,'" in *Rejestry kultury, Perspektywy Ponowoczesności*, ed. Ksenia Olkusz (Wrocław: Ośrodek Badawczy Facta Ficta, 2019), 953–55.

¹⁴ Truman Capote "The Story Behind a Nonfiction Novel," interviewed by George Plimpton, *The New York Times*, January 16, 1966, accessed May, 20, 2025, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/12/28/home/capote-interview.html>.

kinds simultaneously, or within a relatively short space ... to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally.¹⁵

There is nothing new about these techniques, Wolfe explains: they are the same ones once used by the great realist novelists, such as Fielding, Smollett, Balzac, Dickens, and Gogol¹⁶ which, even if not faithful representations of reality, are at least capable of creating the illusion of reality and provoking a sense of fictional immersion.¹⁷

As If You Were There

Truman Capote and Cezary Łazarewicz seek to transport their readers to a place in time and space where the protagonists and witnesses of the drama recounted in their true novels have lived or are still living. Readers of both *In Cold Blood* and *Żeby nie było śladów* have the same impression of witnessing first-hand scenes that took place in the more or less recent past.

To achieve this, it is necessary for the author to first describe the setting. Truman Capote, for example, carefully sets the scene of Nancy Clutter's bedroom on the family farm in Holcomb, the very place where the young girl will be murdered a few hours later:

Nancy's bedroom was the smallest, most personal room in the house—girl-ish, and as frothy as a ballerina's tutu. Walls, ceiling, and everything else except a bureau and a writing desk, were pink or blue or white. The white-and-pink bed, piled with blue pillows, was dominated by a big pink-and-white Teddy bear, a shooting-gallery prize that Bobby had won at the county fair. A cork bulletin board, painted pink, hung above a white-skirted dressing table; dry gardenias, the remains of some ancient corsage, were attached to it, and old valentines, newspaper recipes, and snapshots of her baby nephew and of Susan Kidwell and of Bobby Rupp...¹⁸

¹⁵ Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, 15.

¹⁶ Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, 31.

¹⁷ On the illusion and fictional immersion, one may refer to Roland Barthes, "L'effet de réel," *Communications* 11 (1968): 84–89; Henri Mitterrand, *L'Illusion réaliste: De Balzac à Aragon* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994); Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction* (Paris: Seuil, 1999). In the specific case of journalism, one may refer also to Marie-Ève Thériault, "Le new journalism à la française: Actualité et littérature (XIX^e–XXI^e siècles)," *ELFe | Self XX–XXI – Etudes de littérature française des XXe et XXIe siècles*, 3 (2013): 145–58.

¹⁸ Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (Penguin Books 1966), 66–67.

One cannot help but recall these lines when encountering the opening scene of *Żeby nie było śladów*, which presents Grzegorz Przemysk's bedroom as he awakens just hours before his fatal beating at the police station. The mention of the date "May 1983" followed by "May 12, Thursday" sets the time machine in motion and transports the reader to the young man's bedroom in the Warsaw flat he shares with his mother:

On a bed lies a boy wrapped in a sleeping bag. It's actually not even a bed, but a foam mattress spread out on the floor and covered with a thick blanket. Two red cats walk around it: Sabina and Rózia. Next to the bed sleeps a curled-up mongrel, a bit like a spitz. It's Gaś.

The morning rays of spring sunshine are streaming in through the window. It is warm and dry.

In the room there is a piano (a gift from his father), a guitar leaning against the wall, a desk strewn with books and album covers. On the wall hangs a pin board with portraits of the patron saint of France, Saint Therese of Lisieux, the all-time genius, Albert Einstein in the pose of a madman with his big tongue hanging out, and the guru of transcendental meditation, Maharishi Yogi. [...]

Above the piano on the wall, Rafał Wojaczek's poem *The Heroes' Prayer* is calligraphed in green crayon [...].

In the room there is also a huge world map with the route of boy's great journey that is not going to happen [...].¹⁹

In both cases, the decor of the room—the objects, the photos, even the very disorder in which things seem to have been left by their owners—allows the reader, as Tom Wolfe intended, not only to imagine the two teenagers, but also to form an idea of "their position in the world or what they think it is or hope to be."²⁰ Thus inscribed in a specific space and time, Nancy and Grzegorz gain depth and consistency even before appearing on the pages of the true novel.

¹⁹ Cezary Łazarewicz, *Żeby nie było śladów* (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2021), 13–14.

²⁰ "The fourth device has always been the least understood. This is the recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of traveling, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving towards children, servants, superiors, inferiors, peers, plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic details that might exist in a scene. Symbolic of what? Symbolic, generally, of people's status in life, using that term in the broad sense of the entire behavior and possessions through which people express their position in the world or what they think it is or hope to be. The recording of such details is not mere embroidery in prose. It lies as close to the center of the power of realism as any other device in literature," Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, 32.

A key aspect of the settings these two writers create is their use of detail. The Polish writer is also perfectly aware of the importance of detail in his writing, as he explained in an interview when talking about his research in the archive. He emphasizes that small, realistic details are what truly bring the atmosphere of martial law to life. He contends that capturing the specific aesthetic of a figure like prosecutor Detko—Jackowska — her attire, neckline, makeup — is what gives his book its persuasive power, transforming historical data into a visceral, lived experience for the reader.²¹ It is clear the writer is not concerned so much with faithfully reconstructing an era as he is with producing the atmosphere of plausibility which will allow his text to escape what he calls the “dry record of facts.” It is all about the reader’s pleasure, a pleasure that goes hand in hand with immersion, which the novel as an art form masters so well.²²

If, far from being a dry record of the facts, the reportage reads like a novel it is also because, once the scene has been set, the characters soon come to life, moving, talking—to the reporter, to the other protagonists, to themselves—in scenes in the narratological sense of the term (cf. Genette).²³ For example, in Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, we quickly see Nancy Clutter enter the scene and immerse herself in her beauty routine:

Nancy was invariably the last of the family to retire; as she had once informed her friend and home-economics teacher, Mrs. Polly Stringer, the midnight hours were her “time to be selfish and vain.” It was then that she went through her beauty routine, a cleansing, creaming ritual, which on Saturday nights included washing her hair.

Tonight, having dried and brushed her hair and bound it in a gauzy bandanna, she set out the clothes she intended to wear to church the next morning: nylons, black pumps, a red velveteen dress—her prettiest, which she herself had made.²⁴

There is a skillful shift here from the iterative (“invariably,” “on Saturday nights”) to the singular (“Tonight,” cf. Genette), as well as a shift from a

²¹ Cezary Łazarewicz, “Bili tak ‘by nie było śladów’: A jednak o zabójstwie Grzegorza Przemyka dowiedział się świat,” interview by Hubert Orzechowski, *Newsweek*, May 14, 2018, accessed May 20, 2025, <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/spoleczenstwo/cezary-lazarewicz-zeby-nie-bylo-sladow-sprawa-grzegorza-przemyka-wywiad/stwevhp>.

²² Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction*, 327.

²³ Gérard Genette, “Discours du récit,” *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 122–44.

²⁴ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, 67.

narrative based on information—obtained by the narrator from Mrs. Polly Stringer—to a description of Nancy in her bedroom on the night of the murder, a scene recomposed by the narrator, admittedly on the basis of real elements, but which redirects us to what might be called extrapolation by imagination. Similarly, in *Żeby nie było śladów*, Łazarewicz describes Grzegorz Przemyk waking up, opening the door to his friends with whom he then has a few drinks before leaving the flat:

Grzesiek is wearing brown corduroys, a grayish unbuttoned shirt draped over his shoulders, and leather sandals on his bare feet (he doesn't wear socks when it's warm).

They leave the apartment around three in the afternoon. Under the apartment block, in the Wiecha Passage, they run into Piotrek Kadłëk, who taught Grzesiek to play guitar. He's hanging around aimlessly, waiting for the showing of the Polish horror film *Wilczyca* at the nearby Atlantic cinema. It doesn't take much convincing to get him to join them on their way to the Old Town. Why there? Grzesiek says his classmates are there celebrating the end of their exams.

Along the way, he talks about a planned summer trip to Dębki by the sea.²⁵

Just as Capote did not see Nancy in her bedroom on the night of the murder, neither did Łazarewicz see Grzegorz leave the flat with his friends on May 12, 1983. Even though it is based on precise documentation—accounts, testimonies, depositions—the scene here is taken over by an omniscient narrator, in the manner of Balzac or Dickens, a narrator who has seen what no one else has. This so-called knowledge is shared with the reader, who thus benefits from an overarching point of view on the events recounted in the story. Note the discreet epanorthosis in the description of Grzegorz Przemyk's room: “not even a bed, but a foam mattress,” which suggests the image of a narrator observing Grzegorz Przemyk's awakening as if through a magic peephole, a novelistic device, allowing us to see not only through a closed door but also back through time.

The Interplay of Points of View

The use of the omniscient third-person narration is dominant in both *In Cold Blood* and *Żeby nie było śladów*. This technique undeniably creates a fictional effect. However, the use of a character's point of view

²⁵ Łazarewicz, *Żeby nie było śladów*, 15.

paradoxically achieves the same result. This paradox arises from the fact that these two seemingly opposite narrative techniques—one providing an all-knowing external perspective, the other immersing the reader in a character's subjective experience—both enhance the sense of fictionality rather than anchoring the narrative in objective reality. The contradiction is resolved when considering that the hallmark of realistic fiction lies in the continuous shift between perspectives: from omniscient narrator to character, from character to another character. Once again, artifice enables the reader to move from one mind to another, granting access to a level of knowledge beyond ordinary experience and beyond the facts of objective reality. Additionally, it allows not only the narration of the central action but also an exploration of the inner thoughts of the witnesses.

Capote does not refrain from adopting various points of view: not only those of the victims and their relatives, but also—albeit more rarely—those of the murderers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. The same is true of Łazarewicz. The following excerpt demonstrates the sophistication with which he manipulates narrative perspectives. It takes place as Kuba, who witnesses Grzegorz's brutal arrest by the police outside the Royal Castle in Warsaw, arrives at the police station where his friend has been taken:

Kuba walks from Castle Square to the police station on Jezuicka Street around the corner. He stands in the courtyard and listens. Grzesiek's wild howling reaches him. "They're beating him"—he thinks. He's afraid that if he goes inside now, he'll get punched too. He waits until the screams stop, then swings open the heavy wooden door of the police station. Behind them he sees Grzesiek curled up on the floor. His eyes are closed and he is moaning in pain.

Kuba asks the duty officer to let his colleague go.

– He has done nothing wrong. He just wanted to celebrate his graduation—he explains.

– It would be good—replies the policeman—for his mother to come here before the ambulance takes him away.

The ambulance pulls up in front of the police station at around 5pm.

– He's a madman—says the angry policeman to the ambulance driver.

The driver looks at the slightly-built brunet, who is standing among uniformed policemen in civilian clothes, and calls them the worst of the worst, while they meekly don't even lift their truncheons. "Why do they allow such a thing?"—wonders the driver.

The dispatcher has written “mentally ill” on the departure sheet. This brunet really doesn’t look normal. Because who would dare to scold police officers like that?

The sergeant on duty points out the other man to the paramedics. He is a barefoot boy hunched over a chair, his trousers torn at the knees and his shirt unbuttoned. Only now does the driver notice him. His hair is tangled, his face covered in dust and his eyes absent. It is impossible to make contact with him. He doesn’t answer questions, just clutches his stomach and rolls around in his chair.²⁶

This excerpt features a number of devices characteristic of fictional narrative. It is preceded by an ellipsis that creates suspense: from the moment Grzegorz Przemyk is taken away by the police, the reader remains at Kuba’s side, unaware of what is happening to the main protagonist. The reader soon hears the news at the same time as Kuba, who hears the cries of pain from inside the police station. The third-person narrative is then transformed into an interior monologue in the form of quoted monologue: “They’re beating him,” and then into psychonarration, to use Dorrit Cohn’s terminology,²⁷ i.e., the narrator’s discourse on the thoughts or feelings of a character, even though, here, the narrator’s discourse probably consists of the narrative he has learned about through interviewing Kuba. It is through Kuba’s eyes that we first see Grzegorz being beaten. After a brief exchange between Kuba and one of the policemen, the arrival of the ambulance is accompanied by a change in point of view, which will henceforth be that of the ambulance driver, reported in the form that shifts between quoted monologue (“Why do they allow such a thing?”) and narrated monologue (“This brunet really doesn’t look normal”). The point of view of the ambulance driver offers a new, more precise description of the victim and the state he is in, but it also has the advantage of emphasizing the unusual nature of the scene: the policemen allow themselves to be insulted by a young man, which suggests that they are more than aware of having committed a blunder. Adopting the perspective of the ambulance driver serves as a way of introducing a new actor in the tragedy—one of its collateral victims. In July 1984—just over a year after the events—the judicial system, subservient to the regime, convicted Michał Wysocki, the ambulance driver who provides the lens through

²⁶ Łazarewicz, *Żeby nie było śladów*, 17.

²⁷ Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

which we witness the violence inflicted on Grzegorz, with assault and battery in the young man's death. The narrative fluidity, achieved through the interplay of perspectives and the layered meanings suggested by formal choices related to point of view in this scene, is reminiscent of what we find in the realist novel. At the same time, however, these shifting perspectives seem to correspond to the various sources Łazarewicz interviewed for his story, even though this is not explicitly stated.

Editing

Lastly, Cezary Łazarewicz's reportage features a skillful arrangement of episodes that both gives a sense of time passing, setting events in a long timeframe, and intensifies the suspense. Although *In Cold Blood* follows the events in chronological order, the narrative is organized on the principle of alternating between sequences (a few pages long) devoted to the inhabitants of Holcomb (the victims, then their relatives when they hear the news, as well as the investigators), and sequences focusing on the murderers (their progress towards the scene of the crime, then their escape). In this last part, analepses allow the reader to discover Dick and Perry's childhoods. The chronological account of the events is also emphasized in *Żeby nie było śladów*. To the reader who opens the book at the table of contents page, the order of the narrative may appear to be strictly chronological, apparently dictated by the unfolding of real events. More specifically, the book offers a precise day-by-day account of the events, organized into two main parts. The first is subdivided into major sequences corresponding to periods, which provide the titles: May 1983, June 1983, July 1983, and so on until July 1984. Each of these sections is itself subdivided into days of the week. Often, within the same day, there are several references to times. When he wrote *Żeby nie było śladów*, Łazarewicz undoubtedly had *In Cold Blood* in mind: the subdivisions within a sequence devoted to the same month echo the alternating principle we find in Capote, focusing on different characters: the victim and his mother but then, increasingly as the book progresses, on other characters involved in the case (the victim's friends who are also the main witnesses, the mother's friends, then other collateral victims). From May 19, 1983, the date of the boy's funeral, another thread completes the plot: part of the sequences will now be devoted to what goes on behind the scenes in government, which decides to hush up the affair, setting in motion a plethora of tactics to intimidate

witnesses, corrupt the justice system, charge innocent people and erase all traces.

The sequences that take place on the side of the assassins, i.e., behind the scenes in the corridors of power, do not abandon the idea of bringing the characters to life by giving them a voice. The reader is transported to the office of General Kiszczak, the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MSW), to witness the announcement of his decision to cover up the blunder:

The minister reveals to party activists spicy details of the life of the murdered high school graduate, his mother and his colleagues.

He says the boy was neglected, from a broken family, was a drug addict, came drunk to school, received psychiatric treatment and had a history of suicide attempts. The mother was similar: after head surgery, she abused alcohol and started brawls.

Can we trust witnesses who today accuse officers of the worst bestiality?

– After all, the main witness had a criminal record and psychiatric treatment—reveals the general. And as if anyone had any more doubts, he adds that F. is associated with low-life, drug addicts and homosexuals.²⁸

There's no description of the decor here, and no details about the appearance of the actors on stage. However, the language is responsible for producing the same effect as visual details: in the general's reported speech, the mixture of colloquial lexicon ("the boy") and rhetoric characteristic of the regime ("low-life," "drug addicts," and "homosexuals") succeeds perfectly in resurrecting a bygone era, no doubt even for readers who only have second-hand knowledge of it (i.e., through literature or film).

Finally, Łazarewicz's editing presents a third thread. Titles referring to the months of 1983 and 1984 alternate with titles corresponding to the first names of the characters in the drama, its more or less direct victims, as well as collateral victims: Barbara (the mother), Grzegorz (the young man murdered), Piotr, Igor, Kuba, Czarek (friends and first witnesses), Michał Wysocki (one of the ambulance drivers), Kiszczak (the Minister of the Interior), Leopold Przemysław (the father). The final section ("Cichy from Czerkasy") is devoted to the two policemen: Arkadiusz Denkwicz, the only one who was convicted (but never served time in prison, officially because of his psychiatric condition), and Ireneusz Kościuk who is now

²⁸ Łazarewicz, *Żeby nie było śladów*, 60.

living in Italy. Certain titles and first names recur several times, composing a narrative in the form of a series. These sections use a variety of devices. Sometimes the individual tells the journalist his or her own story, as in the case of ambulance driver Michał Wysocki, now a monk, who under pressure from the police, agreed to confess to hitting Grzegorz Przemyski and to charge his colleague. Other collateral victims refused to talk to the reporter because they did not want to stir up a painful past. This is the case of Czarek, the main witness who accompanied Grzegorz to the police station. He faced prolonged harassment from the police and his own parents and remains unwilling to revisit the events. Instead, his story is narrated by his wife. The story of Barbara, the mother of the victim who died shortly after her son, is reconstructed through meticulous archival research and a selection of interviews. In short, the structure of *Żeby nie było śladów* is much more complex and heterogeneous than that of *In Cold Blood*, and it undoubtedly constitutes one of the great strengths of the book. All sections have a common denominator, which lies in the plan to tell the story from the point of view of the various players involved, but also to tell the story of different shattered destinies, suggesting the broad scope of the collateral damage. This sophisticated and heterogeneous construction has two main effects. Firstly, it gives the reader a panoramic view of the case, creating the impression of exhausting the subject and embracing all its ins and outs. Secondly, it gives the characters a depth and consistency that encourages identification and empathy, two essential effects of fiction.²⁹

A Story as Close to Reality as Possible?

Żeby nie było śladów employs many of the devices of fiction, mainly the traditional realist novel. Yet both works, *In Cold Blood* and *Żeby nie było śladów*, aim to recount events that really happened and to produce a true account that is as faithful as possible. In both cases, the facts are known to potential readers of the books. The murder of the Clutter family was widely reported in the American press—which is how Truman Capote found out about it. The Grzegorz Przemyski case is a famous episode in the history of The Polish People's Republic, and by the time Łazarewicz tackled it, some thirty years after the fact, it had already been the subject of numerous articles, books, and debates, spanning the period between the

²⁹ Vincent Jouve, *L'Effet-personnage dans le roman* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992); Françoise Lavocat, *Fait et fiction: pour une frontière* (Paris: Seuil, 2016).

events and 2016. When their books came out, both Capote and Łazarewicz made numerous claims with regard to the scrupulousness of the work of documentation that preceded their writing. In a 1966 conversation with George Plimpton for the *New York Times Book Review*, Capote emphasized the exhaustive nature of his investigative process. He detailed a massive collection of sources — letters, court reports, media archives — noting that the sheer volume of his research materials was enough to fill an entire room.³⁰

Very similar statements were pronounced by Łazarewicz. At the time of the release of his book the author stated in interviews that he had read over 20,000 pages of various documents that involved materials from archives: 84 volumes of files at the Institute of National Remembrance,³¹ 46 volumes of files at the court, materials from the Karta archives³² and all the publications that appear in the bibliography. However, there is one major difference between *In Cold Blood* and *Żeby nie było śladów*. Capote only commented on his documentation work outside his book, in texts that, like the interview he gave to the *New York Times Book Review*, accompanied its publication. In his book, Łazarewicz explained how his reportage was produced.

Documentation Work on Display

First and foremost, Łazarewicz's work is distinguished by its thresholds and paratexts. When the reader finishes the story, they come across a page of acknowledgements in which the reporter expresses his gratitude to an unnamed "witness to the events" who provided him leads, suggested contacts, and shared their thoughts. The list of people thanked also includes Natalia Woroszyńska, the daughter of a friend of Barbara Sadowska who gave the reporter access to her father's diary; a prosecutor who was in charge of the investigation into the role of General Kiszczak and Ministry of the Interior officials in the Przemyk case; and other people who

³⁰ Capote, "The Story Behind a Nonfiction Novel."

³¹ Institute of National Remembrance: The Institute of National Remembrance (in Polish, IPN) was set up in 1998 to investigate and preserve documentation on Nazi and Communist crimes against the Polish nation, to make this documentation available to the public, and to prosecute those who committed these crimes.

³² Foundation Karta is an independent non-governmental organization with the status of a public benefit organization housing the largest social archive in Poland with the aim of documenting and disseminating the recent history of Poland and Central and Eastern Europe.

contributed to shedding light on the case. After the acknowledgements, there is a bibliography organized under four headings: “Most important articles” (7 titles), “Books” (27 titles), “Court cases” (against General Kiszczak, against Barbara Sadowska, against one of the police officers) accompanied by their citations, and two “Archive fonds” from the Institute of National Remembrance (the Przemyk case and the Komierowski family case). The “Books” section includes a wide variety of works: a history of Poland (Andrzej Albert),³³ an extensive interview with General Kiszczak conducted in 1991,³⁴ books of memories or memoirs published by the leaders of the communist government after the fall of the regime, various works on the period, two books on the case written by the ambulance driver forced to confess to a crime he did not commit, a volume of poems by Grzegorz Przemyk, and two volumes by Barbara Sadowska (in both cases published posthumously). The bibliography is followed by 96 notes to which the meticulous reader has already been referred by the time the narrative explicitly mentions them. These notes specify the realia of the time, explain acronyms, and also refer to documents that the reporter undoubtedly found in the files and archives mentioned in the bibliography, but whose nature is detailed here. These include witness statements, the recollections of Grzegorz Przemyk’s girlfriend, a memo from a police officer, articles in the press, and so on. Finally, the book ends with a list of photographic credits, including witnesses’ personal collections as well as archives. Indeed, the book includes a large number of images, photos of Grzegorz at various stages of his life, photos of his parents, notices of Grzegorz’s death published in the press, photos of the funeral ceremony, photos taken by the police (of the suspect lineup, of the attempted reconstruction of the beating in the ambulance), leaflets distributed by the opposition to inform the Polish people as to what really happened, and some photos taken during the various trials.

There are several reasons for mentioning sources and producing visual documents, including the possibility they offer readers to consult the archives, verify the reporter’s claims, or even extend the reading of *Żeby nie było śladów* with their own investigation, to thereby establish a different version. But that is probably not the most important. The author is relying above all on the testimonial power of documents, the references to which

³³ Andrzej Albert, *Najnowsza historia Polski 1914–1993* (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 1995).

³⁴ Witold Bereś and Jerzy Skoczylas, *Generał Kiszczak mówi... prawie wszystko* (Warszawa: Polska Oficyna Wydawnicza BGW, 1991).

show that they provided ample nourishment for the writing process. They also suggest that the investigative work was meticulous and methodical, and even exhaustive. In other words, the reportage highlights a strong correspondence between what is written and what actually happened. But that's not all. The ways in which sources are mobilized here are also characteristic of what Marie-Jeanne Zenetti calls the "melancholic regime"³⁵ of the documentary device. The document is present as a trace, i.e., something that materializes the past, attests that the past really happened, that "it was."³⁶ On the other hand, the document—and the photos in particular, which the narrative does not comment on—reveal the now inaccessible nature of the past, because the documents as a whole are a gigantic jigsaw puzzle of which only certain pieces have been preserved.

From Concealment to Anointment of the Reporter

As we have already noted, Łazarewicz's presence in the story is discreet. He does not put himself at the center of the narrative, speaks little about himself, and does not usually describe how he conducts his investigation. Łazarewicz never informs us of his intellectual or emotional journey which — we can easily imagine—accompanied his investigation and writing of the book. During the few interviews with witnesses that partly make up the book his silhouette only appears discreetly. This is the case in the following sequence, which recounts a meeting with Krystyna Rodowska, a friend of the victim's mother whose name the reporter found in one of the files at the IPN: "She invited me to the former canteen of the ZLP in John's tenement house in Castle Square. Today, anyone can enter the Literatka restaurant, but only writers have discounts on lunches."³⁷ The conversation is rendered in the direct speech of Rodowska, who shares her

³⁵ Marie-Jeanne Zenetti, "L'effet de document: Diffractions d'un réalisme contemporain," in *Un art documentaire*, ed. Aline Caillet and Frédéric Pouillaude (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2017), 67–79, <https://books.openedition.org/pur/181924?lang=fr#bodyftn14>.

³⁶ "Ça-a-été," Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 129.

³⁷ Łazarewicz, *Żeby nie było śladów*, 97. ZLP: Związek literatów polskich, The Polish Writers' Union or the Union of Polish Writers. In communist Poland, the ZLP was the only official representation of the country's literary community. After 1965, the Union became less of a political arm of the Party and more of a true writers' organization devoted to creative output and the well-being of its members.

impressions of Barbara Sadowska, Przemek's mother ("She was not pretty, but she had great spiritual power and attracted the young, says Rodowska.")³⁸ Rodowska's speech is punctuated infrequently by the reporter's inquiries ("– Why?"). This stylistic choice creates a seamless flow that may lead readers to momentarily forget they are engaging with a reported account. This approach to narrative blurs the line between the voices of the characters and the authorial perspective, effectively immersing the reader in the emotional landscape of the recollections.

Żeby nie było śladów, also, however, includes several scenes in which the author depicts himself in the archives, like a painter in his studio. The book opens with such a self-portrait, which serves as an introduction ("Introduction"). In it, Łazarewicz explains that he originally wanted to write an article on Grzegorz Przemek to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the young man's murder. While searching through the court archives, he came across a short typed text by Barbara Sadowska, in which she expressed her assurance that her son's murder will one day become "a textbook example of injustice," and adds "[...] I do not suppose it will happen soon. It will be at such times, when the systematic profanation of the grave of my late son Grzegorz will be only a shameful sign of today's reality."

The author then has the impression that the text is addressed to him:

I felt that these three sentences were addressed to me.

As she predicted, no one responded to her plea for years, although she had many friends among journalists and writers.

They didn't want to mess around with it? They lacked the strength? Was it too early? It fell to me—I thought.³⁹

In other words, the reporter feels chosen, invested with a mission, not to say anointed, as the one who must not only do justice to the facts and to the victims, but above all perpetuate their memory, prevent them from being lost to oblivion, because the oblivion inherent in time is perhaps even more dangerous than the secret police of communist Poland, whose efforts to erase all traces of the events were thwarted by men and women determined to defend the truth.

³⁸ Łazarewicz, *Żeby nie było śladów*, 98.

³⁹ Łazarewicz, *Żeby nie było śladów*, 9.

The Reporter as a Guardian of Collective Memory

According to Marie-Ève Thérenty, the masculine mythology of the reporter is built on a double embodiment: one a sexualized figure surrounded by film stars, the other a martyr in the service of information, wounded or killed in war.⁴⁰ *Żeby nie było śladów* depicts a decidedly heroic figure of the reporter, but one whose heroism consists in confronting not armed enemies but archives.

Although the reporter's presence is generally discreet, his investigative work is occasionally brought to light in the narrative. In the excerpt below, the reporter is not actually described or even mentioned, apart from the verb conjugated in the first person ("I am trying"). Nevertheless, his figure emerges in these few lines:

From newspaper cuttings, scraps of paper, old postcards, yellowed letters, empty envelopes, photographs, drawings, scribbled doilies, pages torn out of a calendar, I am trying to reconstruct her life.

At the end of the 1990s, the pile of papers found its way to the collection of the Karta Center in Warsaw, which collects memories of the communist era. It is not even known who brought all this junk. At Karta, they were sorted, divided into years and enclosed in two boxes marked 'Barbara Sadowska'.

All you have to do is walk down the winding staircase to the cramped basement, sit down at the big wooden table and, page by page, immerse yourself in Sadowska's life.⁴¹

Certainly, the passage testifies to the pleasure experienced in contact with old documents in their materiality, so well described by Arlette Farge in her landmark book *Le Goût de l'archive*,⁴² in which the French historian describes the tactile, interpretive, and emotional experience of archival work. The vast quantity of documentary material, its heterogeneous nature, the absence of any prior sorting (other than a rough initial ordering by year), the lack of information about its origin and circulation ("It is not even known who brought all this junk"), its fragmentary dimension ("newspaper cuttings," "pages torn out of a calendar"), all make the work

⁴⁰ Marie-Ève Thérenty, "Le *rewriting* et le romanesque dans les reportages de *Paris Match* (1949–1959)," Laurent Demanze, Anna Saignes, eds. *Recherches & Travaux* 98, 2021 <http://journals.openedition.org/recherchestravaux/3490>.

⁴¹ Łazarewicz, *Żeby nie było śladów*, 62.

⁴² Arlette Farge, *Le Goût de l'archive* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

of the reporter heroic, even titanic. A number of pitfalls lie in wait: the hastily scribbled words on the paper napkins are undoubtedly difficult to decipher, and those written on yellowed sheets are certainly fading. The empty envelopes create false leads and dead ends from which the investigation cannot escape. In the final sentence, the spiral shape of the staircase and the narrowness of the cellar sum up the difficulty of the task, while the size of the table symbolizes its magnitude. The descent into the cellar is a veritable catabasis, a perilous but initiatory operation because it equips the reporter to accomplish the task to which he once felt called, the reconstitution of lives from disparate junk.

Yet this description is also a way of questioning the transition from document to narrative, a question also raised by Arlette Farge,⁴³ who, like Cezary Łazarewicz, works in judicial archives. Following in Farge's footsteps, Łazarewicz suggests that archives do not offer an organized and continuous representation of a past reality. They consist of fragments, none of which hold significance on its own, and whose meaning remains to be uncovered. The gaps in information allow us to perceive acts of institutional power and, in the case of Grzegorz Przemyski, they shed light on the process of erasing traces—as in the passage where the reporter notes the description of several volumes of notes taken by the secret police on Barbara Sadowska:

Cardboard folder bound with a ribbon, registration number—13686—and code name 'Parisian.' The Security Service kept a record of Barbara Sadowska's opposition life in it, divided into volumes. Volume one survived; the rest were burned after the fall of communism in a paper mill in Konstancin-Jeziorna. The archivists from the Institute of National Remembrance are bringing it to me in white gloves.⁴⁴

Sometimes the narrative pauses and questions the reconstruction. This is the case, for example, with the description of Grzegorz's bedroom, suddenly interrupted by a parenthesis that calls the narrative into question:

On the wall hangs a pin board with portraits of the patron saint of France, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, the all-time genius, Albert Einstein, in the pose of a madman with his big tongue hanging out, and the guru of transcendental meditation, Maharishi Yogi. (It's not Maharishi, but Krishnamurti—insists

⁴³ Farge, *Le Goût de l'archive*.

⁴⁴ Łazarewicz, *Żeby nie było śladów*, 95.

Igor, Grzegorz's friend, today—And all those photos were hanging in Basia's room, while in his, there was only John Lennon—he adds.)⁴⁵

Żeby nie było śladów is thus a paradoxical work: on the one hand, it is a genuine attempt at reconstituting, prompting the author to resort to the techniques of the realist novel, as this novelistic aesthetic, by convention, guarantees illusion and immersion. At the same time, however, there is an opposing dynamic that sees the reporter struggling with decaying material. Perhaps for Łazarewicz, the aim is to demonstrate that reconstruction and immersion have the power to bring the past to life. By identifying with others and immersing himself in their lives, the author—and the reader—is able to grasp their personalities, and through them, gain a certain access to the past. This method suggests that identification—alongside critical distance—can serve as a legitimate pathway to knowledge. In doing so, the book captures the history of a social body in motion, marked by tensions and transformations. Such an approach also redefines the role of the archive: no longer seen as a transparent reflection of reality or a repository of definitive proofs, it becomes a constellation of traces—fragments that call for careful, interpretive engagement, always open-ended and never fully complete.

INTERSECTING NARRATIVES: TRUE CRIME, JOURNALISM, CRIME FICTION, AND HISTORY

Ian Case Punnett points out “[t]rue crime seeks to create emotional sensations regarding criminal events and transport moral messages and social truths through entertaining narratives rich in detail and color,”⁴⁶ a description that, as we have demonstrated, aligns with Łazarewicz's publication. Like *In Cold Blood*, *Żeby nie było śladów* employs narrative strategies that immerse the reader, creating a sense of presence through varied perspectives and a layered structure that conveys the passage of time and heightens suspense. These techniques not only bring Łazarewicz's work close to Truman Capote's but also lend it the literary depth that enabled both

⁴⁵ Łazarewicz, *Żeby nie było śladów*, 13.

⁴⁶ Ian Case Punnett, *Toward a Theory of True Crime Narratives: A Textual Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 93.

theatrical and cinematic adaptations.⁴⁷ Such narrative choices—characteristic of novelistic writing and consistent with others discussed in our analysis—represent concrete evidence as to why Łazarewicz’s reportage ultimately reads like a novel.

Around the same time that Łazarewicz was seeking publication for his book and facing repeated rejections from several publishers, two Polish publishing houses started to compete to acquire readers by launching true crime series. Tomasz Sekielski, a well-known crime fiction writer, journalist, and reporter, established the publishing house *Od Deski do Deski*, where he launched a project titled “Na F/Aktach” (On F/acts). His idea was to provide a list of significant Polish criminal cases from recent decades to selected authors and to grant them access to the relevant court records. The project was marketed explicitly as true crime and made reference to the work of Truman Capote.⁴⁸ The experiment was quite successful—although the books were written primarily by novelists—and soon another publishing house, *Agora*, affiliated with *Gazeta Wyborcza*, launched a competing series titled “True Crimes.” How is it then that Łazarewicz’s book did not seem to appeal to those publishers and was finally published by *Czarne*, specializing in reportage?

Łazarewicz mentioned that many publishers believed the subject seemed unattractive because the case was already well-known and would not attract readers. He reflected, “No one gave a broken penny for it. Colleagues said it was noble but foolish, arguing that it wasn’t worth spending so much time on something that had already been extensively covered.”⁴⁹ But the reason for its rejection, as we have attempted to demonstrate, may lie in the fact that Łazarewicz’s work surpasses the limits of true crime as its aim is not only to entertain—which is the clear objective of true crime⁵⁰—but also to seek justice, inform and expose, the mission that seems proper to a journalist.

⁴⁷ On January 25, 2018, the premiere of a play directed by Piotr Ratajczak, based on the book, was held at Teatr Polonia in Warsaw. In 2021 the book was also adapted into a film. Directed by Jan P. Matuszyński, it premiered at the Venice Film Festival in the same year and won many awards, including the Silver Lions Award at the Gdynia Film Festival in Poland.

⁴⁸ Adamczewska-Baranowska, “Z zimną krwią się zbliżyć,” 953–55.

⁴⁹ Cezary Łazarewicz, our interview.

⁵⁰ See MaryAlyce R.G. Cornett, “Capitalizing on Crime Stories: Unveiling the Connection between Sensationalism and Commercialization in True Crime,” 2024, Honors Capstone Projects and Theses, no. 878, accessed May, 20, 2025, <https://louis.uah.edu/honors-capstones/878>.

Noam Chomsky rightly states: “The duty of a journalist is to write the truth. Journalism means you go back to the actual facts, you look at the documents, you discover what the record is, and you report it.”⁵¹ Łazarewicz exemplified this principle by meticulously examining over 100 volumes of files, conducting interviews with witnesses, and reviewing all available bibliographical materials related to the case. However, instead of writing a feature, an article or long reportage for one of the weeklies where he worked at the time, he embarked on a different project and decided to write a book. Here again, *Żeby nie było śladów* seems an interesting example of another sociocultural phenomenon. While the crisis of the publishing sector in Poland forced some authors to embrace non-fiction works, such as biographies or book-length reportage, others have transitioned away from non-fiction to write detective stories, crime novels, and thrillers.⁵² An analysis of the Polish publishing market in the 21st century reveals significant publisher investment in reportage series, along with a resurgence in crime and detective fiction. Bernadetta Darska points out the growing interest in crime fiction, as demonstrated by the rise of crime book festivals, the establishment of awards for crime novels, the proliferation of crime series from various publishing houses, and the genre’s remarkable popularity among both readers and reviewers.⁵³

Why, then, did Łazarewicz choose to pursue non-fiction instead of following the trend among his colleagues to write crime fiction? He addressed this in the interview:

I have always focused on reporting. Everything I have worked on has either been a subject of my own or a topic that genuinely interested me. I never sought to write for financial gain. Writing reportage is challenging yet enjoyable; it enhances my knowledge and satisfies my curiosity, and the case of Przemek was particularly significant to me on a personal level.⁵⁴

⁵¹Noam Chomsky, “Lecture: Noam Chomsky,” interview by Joy Wang, *Bullpen*, New York University Journalism Projects, accessed May, 20, 2025, https://nyujournalismprojects.org/bullpen/noam_chomsky/lecture.

⁵²Piotr Bojarski, Katarzyna Bonda, Ryszard Ćwirlej, Piotr Głuchowski, Marcin Meller, Magdalena Omilianowicz, Tomasz Sekielski, Maciej Siembieda, and Mariusz Zielke, among others.

⁵³Bernadetta Darska, “Współczesny polski reportaż wobec kryminalnego śledztwa,” *Folia Litteraria Polonica* 1, no. 66 (2023): 426, 10.18778/1505-9057.66.18.

⁵⁴Cezary Łazarewicz, our interview.

This perspective underscores Łazarewicz's commitment to journalism as a means of exploration and understanding, rather than as a commercial pursuit.

Another significant development in contemporary crime fiction also connected to *Żeby nie było śladów* is the emergence of the "retrocrime" novels. These draw inspiration from the conventions of classic interwar detective stories as well as from the so-called "militia novels"⁵⁵ of the communist era. The trend reflects a growing interest in historical contexts and narrative styles that resonate with readers' nostalgia for the past. In his analysis, Szczerbakiewicz, a Polish academic, writes:

Like the nostalgic longings found in historical novels, where the brutality and injustice of past eras are acknowledged yet cast in a melancholic light, retrocrime novels evoke sentimentality. This nostalgic idealization is fueled by the belief that past times were "truer," where people were more "flesh and blood," and problems were tangibly, even "brutally," material. In contrast, postmodernity is often marked by a sense of fragmentation and the seeming superficiality of places, experiences, and personal identities. Consequently, retrocrime novels—set against the backdrop of the coarse times of the People's Republic—emerge as literary forms of "retrotopia," an imaginative return to the perceived concreteness of an earlier world.⁵⁶

Curiously enough, this trend is also visible in *Żeby nie było śladów*. Although the author does not romanticize the 1980s in Poland, he does evoke a certain nostalgia for the era's human solidarity and the collective struggle against an oppressive system. Thus, on the one hand Łazarewicz openly criticizes the regime and shows the terrible mechanisms it employed, and on the other, acknowledges the strength found in the sense of community and shared purpose of that time.

⁵⁵ Militia novel (*Powieść milicyjna*) is a crime fiction subgenre published between 1955 and 1991 in Eastern Bloc countries, including Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and the Soviet Union, featuring sympathetic militia officers as detectives solving crimes, usually murders. The term "militia" reflects the communist replacement of pre-war police with ideologically controlled forces modeled on the Soviet system. Novels were shaped by socialist realism and served as a tool of state propaganda. See Wolfgang Brylla, "Powieść milicyjna—reaktywacja," in *Kryminal. Między tradycją a nowatorstwem*, ed. Marta Ruszczyńska, Dorota Kulczycka, Wolfgang Brylla, and Elżbieta Gazdecka (Zielona Góra: Oficyna Wydawnicza Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, 2016), 97.

⁵⁶ Szczerbakiewicz, "Archiwistyczny reportaż kryminalny," 63.

Indeed, one of the most significant aspects of Łazarewicz's book is its meticulous recreation of the past. The Przemyk case, like others that the author has explored, is not merely the story of an individual's tragic death but also a portrayal of the past communist era. And although the author prefers not to categorize his works as historical reportage, it is important to acknowledge that memory and history play a crucial role in his writing, aligning his work with another important cultural phenomenon, i.e., the apparent disappearance of the frontier between contemporary history and journalism. One hundred years ago this frontier was very clear. Historians studied history through historical source materials, journalists depicted what they could see or hear, while writers and non-professional history enthusiasts recounted past events in the way they were recorded in human memory. Epistemologically, as Krzysztof Pomian points out, their work was radically different: "University dissertations were products of indirect cognition of the past, while publications by journalists, writers, amateurs grew out of popular cognition and memory."⁵⁷ Over the past century, these differences started to blur "[a]fter the entry of indirect cognition into both everyday life and the practice of many professions, including journalism."⁵⁸ The difference though still lies in the different weight given to the three dimensions of a historian's work: research, interpretation of facts, and writing. For history and historians, the quality of the research is what counts most, interpretation comes second, writing third. In turn, non-professional history places the writing and evaluation of facts from a political, aesthetic, or moral point of view higher, as they are more important to it than the research itself. Therefore, even though in 1984 Paul Veyne put forward the notion that "history is a true novel"⁵⁹ and Norman Sims argued in his 2012 text that in some historical works by literary journalists, the quality of the research is about the same as that of an academic historian,⁶⁰ the work of literary journalists—even well documented instances such as *Żeby nie było śladów*—lies closer to memory (social, cultural and personal) than history.

⁵⁷ Krzysztof Pomian, *Historia: nauka wobec pamięci*, trans. Hanna Abramowicz (Lublin: UMCS, 2006), 225.

⁵⁸ Pomian, *Historia*, 226.

⁵⁹ Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*, trans. by Mina Moore-Rinvulcri (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

⁶⁰ Norman Sims, "The Personal and the Historical," in *Global Literary Journalism*, ed. Richard Lance Keeble and John Tulloch (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 209.

All in all, if true crime originated from sensationalist press coverage and evolved into a fully developed and respectable genre thanks to the popularity of documentary-style true crime—now widely popular worldwide due to podcasts, TV series, and books—we could argue that Łazarewicz exemplifies its sophisticated journalistic Polish form. Alternatively, one might suggest that true crime serves merely as a framework for him to engage in classical, slow journalism, allowing him to write reportage without the constraints of daily newspaper editorial boards or imposed deadlines.

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CHAPTER 6

Polish Reportage on the War in Bosnia: Non-narration in Wojciech Tochman's *Like Eating a Stone*

Cecilia Aare and Aleksandra Katarzyna Wiktorowska

INTRODUCTION

In Wojciech Tochman's reportage book from 2002, *Like Eating a Stone: Surviving the Past in Bosnia*, what is not told is of greater importance than what is told.¹ Such a narrative technique, based on omissions and so-called non-narration, forces us to read between the lines and thus share experiences and feelings with survivors of the Yugoslav Wars. Without drawing attention to the mediating language, it places the readers there and then,

¹Wojciech Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone: Surviving the Past in Bosnia* [2002] trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (London: Portobello Books Ltd, paperback edition, 2009).

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in a post-war narrative, where meaning is conveyed through exclusion. At the same time Tochman constructs a double exposure of multiple points in time when the story moves back and forth between contemporary experience, memory and past experience.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the construction of emotion in *Like Eating a Stone*. The chapter begins with a review of existing scholarship on the Polish School of Reportage, Tochman's body of work, and some research references on emotion in journalism. Following this, we provide the historical and political background of the Yugoslav Wars and examine the book's publication history. Next, we use narratological concepts to analyze excerpts from the text and identify key features that define Tochman's narrative style. We then consider Tochman's underlying motivations as well as the influences of the Polish School of Reportage on his work and writing. Finally, we summarize our conclusions and situate Tochman in the broader field of war reporting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although Polish literary reportage has received considerable attention in recent years—both in Poland and abroad—and many in-depth studies on the history of the genre, its evolution, modifications and adaptations have been published in English,² there are practically no foreign academic publications devoted to the work of Wojciech Tochman, today one of the leading practitioners of this trend. This lack of available scholarship, in our view, may be attributable to the fact that only a small number of the author's works have been translated into and published in English,³ thereby limiting the ability of international scholars to engage with his writings.

² See Diana Kuprel, "Literary Reportage," in *History of Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, ed. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (John Benjamins, 2004), 375–85; Susan Greenberg, "Kapuściński and Beyond," in *Global Literary Journalism: Exploring the Journalistic Imagination*, ed. Richard L. Keeble and John Tulloch (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 123–40; Katarzyna Frukacz, "Literary Reportage or Journalistic Fiction? Polish Reporters' Struggles with the Form," *Literary Journalism Studies* 11, no. 1 (2019): 7–34; Aleksandra Katarzyna Wiktorowska, "The Politics of Literary Journalism in the New Poland," in *The Routledge Companion to World Literary Journalism*, ed. John S. Bak and Bill Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2023), 397–409.

³ Just two of Tochman's books have been translated to English: *Like Eating a Stone* (Portobello Books: 2009) and *Roosters Crow, Dogs Cry* (Open Letter, 2022).

In Poland, however, many researchers have analyzed his work, focusing primarily on his particular style of writing and depicting war,⁴ the use of photographs in his books as a sense-making tool,⁵ his reportages as examples of “texts of violence” or “wound texts” that transcend the boundaries of the text itself and bring the reader closer to the lived experience of the depicted reality,⁶ his travels “in search of death” as a record of existential experience,⁷ double narrative temporality in his work,⁸ the way he narrates genocides,⁹ axiological reflection present in his reportage,¹⁰ the impact of Ryszard Kapuściński and Hanna Krall on his writing,¹¹ and even on his role as a refugee’s spokesperson in the Polish internet media.¹² A monograph entirely devoted to his work was also published in 2016.¹³

All of these publications prove that the work of Wojciech Tochman deserves the attention of scholars and researchers as an important voice of the new generation of Polish literary journalists.¹⁴ In our chapter, we introduce him to an English-speaking audience and show the

⁴ Ewa Józefa Sławek, “Style współczesnego reportażu wojennego,” *Fabrica Litterarum Polono-Italica* 1 (2023): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.31261/FLPI.2023.05.07>.

⁵ Katarzyna Frukacz-Lewandowska, “Prawda obrazu czy obraz prawdy?,” *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* 1, no. 33 (2024): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.31261/PS_P.2024.33.03.

⁶ Łukasz Żurek, “Tekst przemocy jako problem dla reportażu literackiego,” *Tekstualia* 47, no. 4 (2016): 49–66.

⁷ Magdalena Piechota, “Wojciecha Tochmana podróże ‘za śmiercią’,” *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis: Studia Historicolitteraria* 7 (2007): 186–200.

⁸ Mateusz Zimnoch, “Podwójna czasowość narracyjna reportażu ponowoczesnego,” *Naukowy Przegląd Dziennikarski* 3 (2013): 44–66.

⁹ Mateusz Zimnoch, “Śmierć przywrócona,” *Ruch Literacki* 14, no. 6 (2013): 671–88, <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10273-012-0093-0>.

¹⁰ Monika Elżbieta Wiszniowska, “Refleksja aksjologiczna w *Eli*, *Eli* Wojciecha Tochmana,” in “*Ja*” w przestrzeniach aksjologicznych: z problematyki podmiotowości w literaturze XIX–XXI wieku, ed. Leszek Zwierzyński, Monika Elżbieta Wiszniowska, and Paweł Sebastian Paszek (Katowice: Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Śląskiego w Katowicach, 2017), 213–33.

¹¹ Anna Modzelewska, “Wpływ Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego i Hanny Krall na twórczość reporterską Wojciecha Tochmana,” *Naukowy Przegląd Dziennikarski* 1 (2014): 29–42.

¹² Agnieszka Całek, “Wojciech Tochman—społeczny rzecznik uchodźców,” *Media Biznes Kultura* 1, no. 4 (2018): 71–82.

¹³ Karolina Szcześniak, *Między reportażem a literaturą: Twórczość Wojciecha Tochmana* (Lublin: UMCS, 2016).

¹⁴ By “new generation,” we refer to a group of literary journalists who began their careers at *Gazeta Wyborcza* in the 1990s, distinguishing them from the first post-war generation of writers, which includes, among others, Ryszard Kapuściński, Hanna Krall, and Krzysztof Kąkolowski.

characteristics of his style and working methods, focusing primarily on how he portrays emotions.

In recent years media scholars have displayed a growing interest in the construction of emotion in journalistic content, often by identifying when reporters and sources express their feelings.¹⁵ However, in literary journalism, emotion is implicitly conveyed rather than explicitly expressed. This means that such studies fail to describe the narrative constructions behind the kind of emotion that reporters like Tochman convey.¹⁶ Instead, we argue that literary analyses are better suited for this purpose. In this chapter, we use narratological tools to highlight emotions implicitly at work in Tochman's journalism.¹⁷

THE HISTORICAL-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE YUGOSLAV WARS

The Yugoslav Wars, known also as the 1990s Balkan Wars, were a series of wars and conflicts that took place from 1991 to 2001 in the aftermath of the splitting of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. They include the Ten-Day War in Slovenia in 1991; the war in Croatia that lasted from 1991 to 1995; the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the deadliest of them all, from 1992 to 1995; the war in Kosovo from 1998 to 1999; and the war in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in 2001.¹⁸ Together, these wars have often been described as Europe's most lethal conflicts since the Second World War, marked by genocide, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and mass wartime rape.¹⁹ They were also highly

¹⁵ See Karin Wahl Jorgensen, "The Strategic Ritual of Emotionality: A Case Study of Pulitzer Prize-Winning Articles," *Journalism* 14, no. 1 (2013): 129–45 and researchers who refer to this study.

¹⁶ Cecilia Aare, "Subjectivity Conditioned by Narrative Form: A Narratological Approach to Emotion in Narrative Journalism," *Journalism* online, May 31, 2024.

¹⁷ An approach like that is still uncommon in analyses of literary journalism, but there are some exceptions, see for example Cecilia Aare, "Reportaget som berättelse: En narratologisk undersökning av reportagegenren" [The Reportage as Narrative: A Narratological Investigation of the Genre], PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2021, and Rasmus Rønnlev and Susanna Sommer, "Mellem tilbagetrukket og fremtrædende: Tredjepersonsfortællerens funktioner i nyere skandinavisk fortællende journalistik," *Journalistica*, no. 1 (2023): 114–40.

¹⁸ International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, "Conflicts in the Former Yugoslavia," <https://www.icty.org/en/about/what-former-yugoslavia/conflicts>.

¹⁹ On the Yugoslav wars, see for example Catherina Baker, *The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

mediatized due to relatively easy accessibility and technological advances such as satellite phones that enabled contact with reporters and live broadcasts for the first time in the history of journalism.²⁰

Many high-profile and award-winning journalistic long-form pieces from around the world have explored the Yugoslav Wars, and the Bosnian War in particular, during both the war and the years after its end. The conflict marked a whole generation of reporters and correspondents for whom the Balkans played a key role in their careers. These, among many others, include American Barbara Demick, author of *Logavina Street: Life and Death in the Sarajevo Neighbourhood*, French Hervé Ghesquière, author of *La Blessure: Sarajevo, la vie après la guerre*, Spanish Alfonso Armada, author of *Sarajevo. Diarios de la guerra de Bosnia*, Maltese-American Jose Sacco, author of *Safe Area Goražde* and *The Fixer*, British Ed Vulliamy, author of *War is Dead, Long Live the War*, American Roy Gutman, author of *Witness to Genocide*, Croatian Slavenka Drakulić, author of *The Balkan Express: Fragments from the other side of War*, and Polish Wojciech Tochman, author of *Like Eating a Stone: Surviving the Past in Bosnia*, which is dedicated entirely to the ethnically rooted Bosnian War.

When summarizing the course of the war in Bosnia, it is crucial to highlight the devastating casualty figures. Research indicates that the Bosnian War and genocide resulted in the deaths of nearly 100,000 civilians, with approximately 80 percent being Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims). Additionally, over 2 million individuals were forcibly displaced, and up to 50,000 women experienced systematic rape, all due to their ethnic and religious identities. In the aftermath of the conflict, more than 40,000 people were reported missing, and since 1995, over 3,000 mass graves containing their remains have been discovered.²¹ Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, endured the longest siege in modern warfare, surrounded by Serb-controlled forces from April 1992 to February 1996, during which more than 10,000 people lost their lives. Detention centers for civilians were established by all warring factions in various locations, including Prijedor, Omarska, Konjic, and Dretelj. In the Omarska Camp, the largest of these facilities, around

²⁰ See Karoline von Oppen, "Reporting from Bosnia: Reconceptualising the Notion of a 'Journalism of Attachment'," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 17, no. 1 (2009): 21–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782800902844669>

²¹ John R. Lampe, "Bosnian War," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 13, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Bosnian-War>.

3,500 individuals, predominantly men, were held under inhumane conditions. In the summer of 1995, the town of Srebrenica, designated as a UN safe area, was attacked, resulting in the execution of over 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys by Serb forces in a horrific act of genocide.²²

In contrast, Tochman's book shifts the focus from statistics to personal narratives, emphasizing the painful memories and lingering shadows of war. It follows primarily female protagonists in their poignant quest to find family members and their remains in the aftermath of the conflict. The book intertwines personal testimonies and historical context to illuminate the trauma experienced by survivors. The narrative of the journey through Bosnia is structured around forensic anthropologist Dr. Klonowski's individual and mass graves exhumations. Every chapter includes a map of Bosnia, highlighting the locations central to the unfolding narrative. Places such as Mostar, Prijedor, Omarska, Bratunac, Srebrenica, Nevesinje, Presjeka, and Rizvanovici are no longer merely geographic points; they are sites associated with concentration camps, mass graves, secondary burial sites, and harrowing accounts of massacres.

HISTORY OF THE BOOK'S PUBLICATION

Born in 1969, Wojciech Tochman belongs to the generation of Polish reporters who learned their craft at the daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, where he worked from 1990 to 2004. He is also the author of many book-length works of literary journalism, among others the aforementioned *Like Eating a Stone* on genocide in Bosnia, *Dzisiaj narysujemy śmierć* (Today We Will Draw Death) from 2010 on genocide in Rwanda, *Eli, eli* (Eli, Eli) from 2013 on people living in extreme poverty in the slums of Manila, a co-author of *Kontener* (Container) on conditions in a refugee camp in Zatori, Jordan, from 2014, and the author of *Roosters Crow, Dogs Cry* published in Poland in 2019, on the Khmer Rouge terror in Cambodia. If we were to find a common denominator among his publications, it would be the commitment to the people who are suffering and whose lives are marked by the terror of war, famine, the subhuman conditions in which they live, and the atrocities they have had to face.

As a twenty-three-year-old journalist, the author decided to travel to Bosnia to see with his own eyes the horrors of the war that had just flared

²² R. Jeffrey Smith, "Srebrenica genocide," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Srebrenica-genocide>.

up anew in Europe. He joined a group of journalists who accompanied the convoy with humanitarian aid, organized by Janina Ochojska, a social activist and founder and director of Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH). The convoy left Poland on December 26, 1992. All its members (36 people, among them activists, drivers, and journalists) needed to sign a declaration that they were aware of the danger and undertook the travel at their own risk and expense.²³ It was Ochojska's idea to send a bus of journalists together with trucks filled with humanitarian aid because she wanted them to write about besieged Sarajevo and mobilize public opinion to organize more convoys. What is also worth mentioning is that this was the first time since 1989 that Poland's role changed from being the recipient of aid to its benefactor. On January 9, 1993, Tochman published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* a reportage entitled "Ściemnia się" (It's Getting Dark), an account of what he saw and experienced in Sarajevo. Years after in an interview he confesses:

In Sarajevo I saw suffering I had never seen before: stumps of arms and legs, tears, people trembling from cold, hunger and fear of snipers. I felt that fear myself. That experience could probably be called my generational experience. Earlier, in Poland, I had never lived it. Perhaps fortunately. When August and then martial law came, I was 12 and 13 years old, and in Sarajevo I was already 10 years older, so old enough to understand what was going on around me. And immature enough to have imprinted in myself for the rest of my life an obsessive opposition to the killing that was happening before the eyes of a silent world. I was there once more during the war, right after a grenade killed dozens of people in Sarajevo's Markale market. On the surrounding balconies hung the remains of the victims, their bloodied clothes. Such a view is impossible to forget.²⁴

The Bosnian War marked Tochman for life. When we interviewed him, the author remembered that his interest in the Balkans at one point became problematic for even Małgorzata Szejnert, then the editor in chief of *Duży Format* (supplement to *Gazeta Wyborcza*), who did not understand his interest and believed it was turning into an obsession.²⁵ As soon

²³ Szymon Majcherowicz, "Wjazd do Sarajewa." *Karta* 105 (2020): 109.

²⁴ Tochman, "Kat żąda milczenia," interview by Ewa Woydyłło, *Charaktery: Magazyn psychologiczny*, April 30, 2019, online version: <https://charaktery.eu/artykul/kat-zada-milczenie>. All translations from Polish to English in this chapter, unless otherwise stated, are our own.

²⁵ Tochman, our interview.

as the opportunity arose in 2002, Tochman immediately decided to return to Bosnia accompanied this time by the Icelandic forensic anthropologist Ewa Klonowski in her quest to find the remains of Bosniaks killed during the war for their families, who wanted to bury them. He recalls:

So I returned to Bosnia after the war when all the journalists had already left for other wars. The deserted Bosnians were licking their wounds and mourning their murdered and missing. I started going there more and more often. I took part in the opening of large mass graves, in the exhumations of hundreds of bodies, in their identification. I wrote *Like Eating a Stone*. And it was a professional trap, because after that I couldn't write about anything else.²⁶

In our interview, Tochman says that the idea about writing a book on Bosnia came to him precisely when he was gathering materials for his reportages published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*.²⁷ It was at that time he met his protagonists, first Ewa Klonowski and then also Jasna, Mubina and Mother Mejra.

Therefore, *Like Eating a Stone* consists mainly of reportages previously published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*: “Żałoby nie ma, domu nie ma” (The Mourning Is Gone, the House Is Gone) from June 2000; “Pierwsze wicko, drugie” (First Coffin Lid, Then the Second) from December 2000; “Kotłownia” (Boiler Room) from October 2001; and “Kołnierzyk 41” (Collar Size 41) from December 2001, published also in the online edition as “Kobiety z Rizvanovici” (Women from Rizvanovici). Reorganized and sometimes slightly changed—for instance there are some subheadings entitled differently—these reportages form the main axis of the book, therefore, there are just four original chapters (“The Widow,” “The Suburbs,” “The Rocks,” and “The Memorial”) that were not published previously in the press.

The motto for the book comes²⁸ from the interview Tochman conducted with Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Territory of the Former

²⁶Tochman, “Kat żąda milczenia.”

²⁷Tochman, our interview.

²⁸The book opens with an epigraph: “When you look at such terrible misfortune, you become overwhelmingly aware that first of all you are a human being—that your nationality is secondary. Humanity unites us in misfortune, in experiencing it. If only people understood that.” in Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*.

Yugoslavia, who resigned in 1995 in protest over the international community's insufficient response to the Srebrenica massacre committed by the Serb army that year. The interview entitled "First Class Order of Emotions," was published in *Magazyn Gazety Wyborczej* in April 2002. The first chapter of the book, "Frost," comprises parts of the reportage published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* already in 1993 when Tochman visited Bosnia for the first time. The last chapter, "Earth," which serves as a post-face, was added to the book in 2003 and was also published previously in the press.

This procedure of combining earlier reportages into a new whole is nothing new if we look closely at the work of other Polish reporters. Ryszard Kapuściński, for example, worked in a similar way, his early books, such as *Nobody Leaves* or *Czarne gwiazdy* (Black Stars) also consist of reportages previously published in the weekly *Polityka*.²⁹

The fact that *Like Eating a Stone: Surviving the Past in Bosnia* is composed not only of new texts but also, and primarily, of reportages published previously in the press is noteworthy because it means that the chapters that make up the book were written at different times. Basically, there are three timelines evident in text. The first is Tochman's eyewitness experience of the war, so from 1992–1993 when he went to Bosnia for the first time and then, again, in 1994, when he returned to cover the massacre on the Markale market. The second timeline covers trips he made in the 2000s when he met Ewa Klonowski, Jasna, and Mubina, among others, to whom he dedicated his long journalistic pieces. Finally, the third is when he sat down to merge his previous texts with new ones to create a homogeneous book. Therefore, in *Like Eating a Stone*, he not only shadows Ewa Klonowski but also, like her, digs into the past to piece together the horrible events that his characters had experienced.

The first edition of *Like Eating a Stone* was published in Poland in 2002 by the publishing house Pogrnicze. It contains photographs taken by photo reporter Jerzy Gumowski (the same photographs that later appeared in the English translation). The book was immediately acclaimed as an extraordinary account of war and received many reviews in the Polish

²⁹ Aleksandra Katarzyna Wiktorowska, "Ryszard Kapuściński: visión integradora de un reportero" (PhD diss., Universitat de Barcelona, 2014): 27–29, 43–45, <http://hdl.handle.net/10803/145315>.

press.³⁰ It was also shortlisted for the prestigious Polish NIKE Literary Prize in 2003 and to date has been translated into Arabic, Bosnian, Czech, English, Finnish, French, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Slovak, Spanish, and Ukrainian.

ANALYSIS

In his theory of narration, Gerald Prince mentions *non-narration*, which refers to what is not narrated because of “ignorance, repression, or choice.”³¹ This means that the non-narrated or *the unnarrated* is something that happened without being mentioned in the text. Another of Prince’s concepts is *the disnarrated*, which refers to what did not happen but is mentioned as an opportunity or something the characters wished would have happened.³² It is exactly through these gaps in the narrated text that Tochman’s special style thrives, a style that conveys meaning through exclusion. In this chapter we use *non-narration* as a collective name for everything that is not narrated as facts in the story, although it is implicitly indicated or explicitly referred to. We include the unnarrated and the disnarrated with Prince’s meaning and additional kinds of non-narration like negations.

Other theoretical premises for our analyses are based on narratological theory. A crucial pre-condition is that a narrative can be divided into *what* is told (the content, what we get to know) and *how* it is told (form and style) and that we can distinguish between *the narrator* (the voice who seems to accompany the reader through the events) and *the characters* (the persons who are present in the scenes and experience what happens).³³ We use the designation *telling* for a style of representation dominated by the narrator’s voice and *showing* for a style dominated by scenes.³⁴ Analytical tools, drawn from narratology, are combined with an interpretive approach.

³⁰ Many critics and writers, such as Janina Ochojska, Olga Tokarczuk, Jarosław Mikołajewski, Michał Radgowski, Józefa Hennelowa, and Ireneusz Statnik published their reviews in the Polish press.

³¹ Gerald Prince, *Narrative as Theme* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 29.

³² Prince, *Narrative as Theme*, 29–30.

³³ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 19.

³⁴ William C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983 [1961]), 40, 50 and 94.

We start our analysis with an example from Bosnian Vogošća, where the reporter gets in contact with the organization The Mothers of Srebrenica, which helps mothers who survived the war to carry on with everyday life. Tochman mentions a woman whose husband and sons died but whose daughter is still alive: "The daughter is clever and well-read and would like to study but the mother hasn't money for that. Without paying a bribe the girl has no chance of getting into a good school."³⁵ Immediately after that, the text continues: "The neighbour from the block next door *had* three sons: the oldest *was* nineteen, the middle one seventeen and the youngest fifteen. She also *had* a father, brothers and a husband. She *did* not have any daughters. Now every morning she wakes up regretting that a new day has dawned. She is forty years old."³⁶

The sequence is pervaded by the unnarrated. However, it is not an application of *show, don't tell*, Anton Chekhov's famous advice to storytellers, which is the usual form of the unnarrated. Tochman's style of representation is not scenic here. Instead, the narrator is talking directly to the readers through telling, a style that is otherwise associated with expressed evaluations. But this time both evaluations and important information are withdrawn. With attention to a combination of linguistic markers and contextual knowledge, we can understand what the narrator does not explicitly tell us; since the previous sentences are narrated in present tense, the preterit tense in "had," "was," "had," and "did" (see emphasis) indicates that the neighbor's father, brothers and husband are dead, probably executed by Serbs. A shift in the tense is here the only sign of past dramatic events.

The last sentence in the quote seems to be a neutral statement, but readers can use their imagination to evaluate information about the woman's age, together with what is mentioned about her thoughts in the mornings, and then fill in what she might be thinking: although she might have half her life before her, her personal life has already come to an end. The effect of the message is emphasized by the contrast between this woman and the woman presented in the previous paragraph, who is lucky to have a daughter. In comparison, this mother's problems seem insignificant. We can also trace a hidden meaning: more women than men survived the massacres committed against civilian Bosnians.

³⁵Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*, 48.

³⁶Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*, 49. Our emphasis.

Another woman, who has lost two sons, tells the reporter about what happened when she returned to her previous home. She looked at the house from a distance, but someone saw her through a window: “‘A woman opened the door to me wearing my dress,’ says the mother of the two sons she would like to bury.”³⁷ This time a character is talking in her own words within a scene (showing) but with a short supplement from the narrator (telling). Both parts of the sentence lean heavily on the unnarrated. We may guess that a Serbian family has moved into the house and that they now use the previous owners’ clothes as their own. Furthermore, the narrator’s comment implies that the visiting woman had two sons whose bodies have not been found. Consequently, the woman has not yet achieved the kind of closure that a funeral would provide. The comment is an example of non-narration in the form of the disnarrated since it refers to how something that has not happened affects the narrative, here by expressing the woman’s wish to find and be able to bury her sons.

In a longer scene, two women who have lost family members have followed Ewa Klonowski to a forest with caves. The reader knows that she is a forensic anthropologist who is searching for bodies in mass graves. She helps people to identify bones and pieces of clothing from their missing relatives so that they can be buried. A section starts:

We are in the forest. There are a lot of caves here, holes in the ground. There’s also Gavoja Pit —a place identified by a witness. There are *no* witnesses with us—they’re all too frightened. But Sanja Mulać and Jasna have talked to a witness, who told them, “Take a look in Gavoja Pit.” [...] Dr Klonowski puts on some latex gloves, grabs a torch and descends into the pit. It is irregularly shaped. We *cannot* see the bottom, *nor* can we see Dr Klonowski anymore. But now and then she pulls on the line for us to slacken it a bit, and it’s clear she wants to go down even lower. She is *out of sight* for five, ten, twenty minutes.

“There’s *nothing* there,” she finally says, poking her head above ground again and shaking insects from her hair.

“What?!” exclaims Jasna, losing her cool. “What do you mean, there’s *nothing* there?”

Jasna was hoping that she might finally find some red rubber boots today.³⁸

³⁷Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*, 49–50.

³⁸Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*, 94–95. Our emphasis.

Initially, the narrator gives a background to the scene that follows. Although the tone is neutral, this background could not be part of a news article. The reason is that important information is missing, and the purpose of news journalism is to be as informative as possible. Instead, the unnarrated plays a crucial role when references to witnesses and their fear implicitly signal what they are afraid of: to find human remains from a massacre of civilians that they once witnessed in this forest.

The scene, with its representational style of showing, starts after the square brackets. From here, the concretion is high with many specified details, like the latex gloves, the torch, the line that is slackened bit by bit, and the minutes that are passing. This kind of detail constitutes the stylistic opposite of explicitly expressed emotion. From these details and from the actions in the scene, described by active verbs, the reader is free to imagine the characters' feelings. This is the type of the unnarrated that can be classified as the narrative technique *show, don't tell*.

Further in the quote, we can notice five negations in the words "no," "cannot," "nor," "out of sight," "nothing," and another "nothing" (see emphasis). This pattern can be understood as non-narration on a micro level in the text, and it is a recurring stylistic feature in Tochman's writing. Such negations refer to what is *not* the case and leave it to the reader to figure out how things actually are or what actually happened (if you cannot see the bottom of a pit, what can be hidden down there?). Some other examples of this technique in the book are: "People changed after the war. They *don't* visit each other; they *don't* laugh.' 'Lonely old women *don't* get grants. Europe *doesn't* want to rebuild our houses. We *don't* contribute to development.'"³⁹

In the last sentence of the quote from the forest scene, the unnarrated is combined with the disnarrated. The red rubber boots are a pregnant detail that helps the reader to understand what is not told: that Jasna was expecting to find the remains of a special person (from other parts of the book we can conclude that this person is her son). The interpretation that she is disappointed is supported by her previously rendered questions: "What?!" and "What do you mean, there's *nothing* there?" In other words, it is of importance what *does not* happen, what never becomes realized. In a second stage, a tension is established between fear and hope, between what the anonymous witnesses fear would happen and what Jasna wishes should happen (in both cases that Ewa Klonowski will find a mass grave).

³⁹Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*, 135. Our emphasis.

This tension is the predominant dramaturgical component through the quote.

We can conclude that the reporter, who signals his presence with the “We” in the first sentence, observes the scene. This means that most of the scene is rendered from an external, narrative perspective belonging to the reporter as an experiencing character in his own story.⁴⁰ Other scenes in the book are built on reconstructions of what people have told the reporter in interviews. They are narrated in the third person and from a point of view belonging to the person interviewed. This technique enables the reader to experience the thoughts and feelings of characters other than the reporter. However, sometimes we can also follow a character’s narrative perspective in a scene where the reporter is at the same time present. For example, Tochman describes traveling by bus with the Bosnian woman Mubina to her old hometown Bratunac, from where both her husband and her father went missing:

The frost has gone from the windows now, the meadows are filled with flowers, and we’re driving along the Drina towards Bratunac. We pass villages Mubina has known since childhood. Last time she saw them was eight years ago. What she sees now looks different from how it looked then: there are heaps of rubble and the burned skeletons of houses, the plum trees are in blossom, and there are no people.⁴¹

The perspective in this passage is initially external from the reporter’s point of view. We can see the bus window and the scenery with meadows

⁴⁰Within narratology, there are many different ways of perceiving and defining narrative perspectives. In this chapter, we choose to speak simply about *external* and *internal narrative perspective* since we assume that these names are easy to remember for readers who are not familiar with narratology. However, these concepts should not be mistaken for Gérard Genette’s *external* and *internal focalization*, which refer to different positions of knowledge in the narrative. Instead, our concepts can be compared to Göran Rossholm’s *affèrent* and *effèrent* narrative perspective; see Göran Rossholm, “Perspektiv och inlevelse i film och prosa,” in *Att anlägga perspektiv*, ed. Staffan Hellberg and Göran Rossholm (Stockholm: Brutus Östlings bokförlag Symposion, 2005), 148–51. In the first case, the reader’s gaze is directed against what can be seen and heard from the outside. It could be linked to both a present, experiencing character and an invisible observer. In the second case, the reader is invited to take part in a character’s thoughts and feelings from the inside. These two types can be identified in scenes, when the style representation is *showing*. Sometimes, we will also talk about a *collective perspective*. This can occur when the style of representation is *telling* and the narrator expresses attitudes that can be linked to opinions among groups of people.

⁴¹Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*, 30.

through his eyes. But the reporter is only present as an eyewitness. He himself is of no interest. Instead, he serves as a bridge to Mubina. Already in the third sentence, the narrative perspective has altered to her external perspective. Now it is her gaze that the reader is invited to follow. We can also indirectly follow her thoughts through an internal narrative perspective when she compares the view with what she remembers from her childhood. Thus, emotion is transmitted implicitly.

A contrast, built on the unnarrated, arises between flowers and trees in blossom on the one hand and burned houses on the other. With help from contextual knowledge, we can fill in the message that Serbs have destroyed the houses while nature is as beautiful as before the war. The negation in “no people” further underlines the omitted fact that the previous citizens are dead or were forced to leave the town.

A related construction can be found in a paragraph about an area in the village Presjeka:

But there is some greenery, which tells us there was once a village here, [...] There are pear trees, plums, walnuts, elder and rowan; trees, saplings, bushes and creepers are all pushing their way with impunity into hallways, cellars, bathrooms, sitting rooms, kitchens, larders, workshops, stables, cowsheds, classrooms, a café and a shop. Nothing stops the onward march of the trees; there is no-one to feel them or prune their branches. Copious rain in spring and autumn keeps them alive.⁴²

Here, Tochman writes with a mix of showing and telling. It is a scene, but in the form of a description of a place where nothing happens. Rather, it bears resemblance to a still image, a frozen moment that implicitly reflects the history of the area. The long enumeration places nature against civilization, accompanied by the following sentence where the narrator describes, with the help of telling, how the vegetation has taken the place over. However, nothing is said about what caused “the onward march of the trees” from the beginning. In other words, we are told about trees but not about people. This means that the paragraph also places narration against non-narration, where the latter is reinforced by the negations “Nothing” and “no-one.” In the gaps of what is told, readers can imagine the human life that was once lived in this village.

⁴²Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*, 103–4.

Long enumerations are a recurring stylistic feature in Tochman's text. Here is another example:

DNA testing is something new in the history of war. So are body bags, computers, the Internet, computerized cold stores, forklift trucks and trays on wheels. Apart from that, it has all happened before: prison camps, barracks, selections, ghettos, hiding places, the sheltering of victims, armbands, piles of shoes left behind by victims of mass murder, hunger, looting, late-night knocks on doors, people disappearing from their homes, blood on the walls, the burning of farmsteads, burning of entire villages, besieged cities, human shields, the raping of women, the killing of educated people first, columns of refugees, mass executions, mass graves, mass exhumations, international tribunals and people disappearing completely.

After the war in Bosnia almost twenty thousand Muslims were missing.⁴³

Overall, it is possible to identify a definite relationship: the more cruelty we can sense behind this kind of enumeration, the more clinical Tochman's language. You could also say that the more emotion the implied historical events trigger, the less emotional the narrative style. In the quoted example, things admittedly are mentioned by proper names; no facts are withheld. Nevertheless, this passage becomes an example of the unnarrated, but in this case because the emotional comments that one expects from the narrator are completely absent.

Another stylistic feature worth mentioning is irony, which sometimes appears together with an imagined or invented narrative perspective. The latter can be described as a game where the narrator pretends to give voice to characters without actually doing so. This construction corresponds to Monika Fludernik's concept *reflectorization*, which designates a kind of rhetoric that can be described as neither showing, nor telling. Rather, it is a linguistically created technique, also called pseudo-oral, where the narrator uses one or several characters' possible choices of words to express a general meaning.⁴⁴ We find an example in the recurring story throughout the book about Bosnian Mejra and her search for the remains of her missing children Edvin and Edna, who both had joined the Bosnian territorial defense force. Mejra's family is Bosnian, but she has a Serbian friend whom she begs for help at a time when Edna is imprisoned in a camp:

⁴³Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*, 27.

⁴⁴Monika Fludernik, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 178–79.

She went to see a close friend two streets away. She wanted to give her everything she had in exchange for her help.

"You are Serbian," said Mejra. "Do something so that Edna comes home."

But her friend had her own worries. For three days her husband Slavko had not come home. He had gone to Keraterm and disappeared. *He was meant to come straight back.* Now Mejra knows what happened to him: there was a prison camp at Keraterm too. In those few days, 250 people were murdered there.

Killing, washing blood off the walls, digging ditches—it all takes time.

That was why Slavko was away for so long.⁴⁵

The initial three lines constitute a reconstructed scene, since the reporter has not witnessed it. Then the style of representation changes to two kinds of telling, one where the anonymous, third-person narrator gives background information in a neutral tone and one where the narrator's voice seems to be mixed with a character's voice (reflectorization, see emphasis). In the first two italicized sentences, it is the friend's own choice of words that seems to echo in the narrator's voice. The third italicized sentence expresses possible words of the friend, her husband or, more likely, an officer of the Serbian army to which Slavko belonged. (Later Mejra realizes that Slavko had also tried to help Edna). The irony in these parts is not subtle. On the contrary, it creates a sharp contrast to Mejra's narrative perspective and her concern, which otherwise dominates the quote.

Furthermore, we can notice two different points in time. "Now Mejra knows what happened to him" refers to a later moment than when the meeting between Mejra and her Serbian friend takes place. In other words, Tochman accomplishes a double projection of two parallel moments, a technique that can be found in many scenes in *Like Eating a Stone*; the narrator oscillates between a "now," where the reporter is present, and a reconstructed "back then," where interviewed persons' memories come to life. In these flashbacks, the echo-effect in the narrator's voice is one of the components that enable a bridge to earlier moments.

In general, Serbs are depicted with greater distance than Bosnians, and Serbian men in particular are described with open criticism, at least as a group (individual exceptions do exist). When the reporter and a photographer visit Serbian Sokolac, they see men sitting outside their houses

⁴⁵Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*, 20. Our emphasis.

watching everyone that passes. However, it is impossible to get a word with any of them:

The ones drinking coffee outside their own doors slowly get up and go inside. The rest have a little further to go (fifteen or twenty meters), so they can't hide their panic as easily: they scuttle off, startled like creatures in the forest, losing their shoes on the way. The cloud of smoke they have left behind goes on hanging in the air. [...] Now we can hear them turning keys from inside the buildings.

What has frightened them? It's our camera. In the Serb Republic the men avoid being photographed and hide their faces. [...] But you don't have to come all the way to the suburbs of Sokolac to discover this. You only have to switch on Serb Republic Television (you can also get in Sarajevo). [...] On screen, the women always do the complaining. There are no men. The local men are afraid that someone—a survivor—will recognize them and report to the prosecutors at the International Tribunal, telling them here are the men who played football with Muslim skulls, or who forced Muslim men to bite off the testicles of other Muslim men.

The Serb men shudder to think the Muslim women will recognize them. They remember their faces, their stench and their strength better than almost anyone.⁴⁶

What is perhaps most remarkable here is that the narrative style is not built on subtle hints where it is up to the reader to fill in the gaps. In other words, Tochman does not use non-narration at all in this quote. Telling dominates and is this time charged with cynicism and open contempt when the narrator describes the men he sees (they are like “creatures”) and puts into words their supposed motives for not showing their faces.

The previously mentioned red rubber boots, belonging to Jasna's missing son, is the kind of pregnant detail that is typical of the style associated with the Polish School of Reportage and is used to convey hidden messages. Similar details are the plants that flourish in abandoned gardens and equipment that is used to sort dead bodies. Sometimes, the details appear one by one, sometimes in the form of enumerations. One more example of the former is from an episode about how thousands of women and children were separated from their husbands and fathers and then forced to leave their homes in Potočari, a village in Srebrenica (later known for the mass murder Serbians committed on civilians). We are informed that

⁴⁶Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*, 69–70.

they were transported on buses or trucks to tents at the airport near Tuzla. The text continues: "A month later they heard on the local radio that in the area around Srebrenica an American satellite had photographed some large fields of freshly disturbed earth. At night the women went outside and howled."⁴⁷ The detail about the "freshly disturbed earth" is the only hint of what had happened to the men. The readers are left to figure out why the women howled (they understood that their husbands and brothers had been executed and the bodies thrown into the ground).

This is not reflectorization, since nobody seems to be voicing an opinion. Yet we can trace a collective perspective in this quote as well. Such an impression is supported by the reference to "the women" as an anonymous group, the radio as an impersonal source, and the mentioning of the disturbed earth as information we can imagine was spread from person to person. More precisely, the third-person narrator becomes a mere messenger of experience shared by the great mass of people concerned.

Sometimes details that are crucial to implicit meaning give name to section headings. Such is the section "Trees," which describes how the vegetation has taken over an area in the village Presjeka. Other examples are "Mothers," "The Small Tractor," "Daffodils," and "Fractures." A section with the title "The Toy" is about the anthropologist Ewa Klonowski. She is in many ways the perfect hero of a reportage by Tochman since she does not get emotional. She meets desperate relatives searching for their missing loved ones, performs DNA tests and pieces together bones with skulls. But she never seems to hesitate—except for one moment. In longer episodes, Tochman rarely allows his characters to speak in their own words. But in this case, Klonowski says:

It's all the same to me whether I dig up a child or an old person. Bones are bones. [...] And I came upon some smaller bones of the kind I was expecting to find. And a toy next to them—a Superman doll. I had to put it in a plastic bag. I couldn't do it. I was holding it in my hand and the child's father was there above me. I felt as if I could no longer cope. I was about to start crying. I rationalized it to myself by thinking, Ewa, someone has to work here. Bones are bones. This is a toy found next to some bones. You must put it in the plastic bag and get on with the next body.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*, 36.

⁴⁸Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*, 154.

Previously in the book, we have been given the impression that Ewa Klonowski is emotionless. Now, suddenly, we understand that this is just an attitude she has adopted in order to do her job. When Tochman chooses “The Toy” as the title of the section, he highlights the complexity in the anthropologist’s personality: emotions are present behind the technical facade—all the time. Which is exactly the case with Tochman’s narrative technique when he narrates about emotion without emotion.

We will conclude our analysis of the narrative technique in *Like Eating a Stone* with a slightly longer quote. A section with the title “Gnashing” starts: “We are drinking coffee at Halima’s house (she is forty-two). ‘I have got used to it now,’ she says. ‘I have a wash and get into bed. When I feel cold, I reach for the red blanket. I fall asleep without any difficulty, straight off, worn out by the long day.’”⁴⁹ This is a scene, and consequently the style of representation is showing. The initial “We” indicates that the reporter is present and probably interviewing Halima. However, none of his questions are evident in the text, which directly after the first sentence is transformed into a long monologue by Halima. The construction is complex and built on several kinds of non-narration.

To begin with, we can notice how Halima’s introductory “it” in “I have got used to it now” is referring to something unnarrated that seems to be of importance. What is it that Halima “has got used to”? This is not explained anywhere in the episode. Halima continues:

Sometimes he visits me. I don’t like those visits. What does he come for? I know he’ll be gone very soon. I know that from the beginning. I turn over to face the wall.

Go away, I say, go back where you came from. I’ll wake up in a moment.

He doesn’t listen. He sits there, on the sofa bed, at the foot. He smiles. He doesn’t even embrace me. If only he’d explain what happened. Where did he go that day?

If only he’d ask about the child.

I could talk and talk, without stopping. About how I cleared the bushes, for example. I ruined my hands that time, and my back.

Nothing. He is silent, like a stone. He just stares, as if he knows everything. Sometimes I feel angry with him for leaving me like that.

Just then our son might come in from the other room (at two or three in the morning?), take another blanket from the armchair and cover me with it.

I get up with the sun.

⁴⁹Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*, 119.

“Same thing again, Mama,” says my son. “You were gnashing your teeth in the night again.”

“Was I crunching again? Sorry.”

“As if you were eating a stone.”

I drink some coffee, open the window and look out. The world is still there.⁵⁰

This is a construction with three narrative levels. The outer frame is the scene where the reporter drinks coffee and talks with Halima. But after the first sentence, this scene disappears completely from view. Instead, Halima’s monologue is uninterrupted by descriptions of setting or input from the reporter. The monologue form creates the impression that she is addressing the readers directly. This level can be considered “a narrative within the narrative,” a construction that Gérard Genette calls *intradiegetic*.⁵¹ Here, the narrator of the main narrative has been replaced by the intradiegetic narrator, who is Halima. If we then perceive what she tells us as an independent story, we can note that she shifts her style of representation between showing (she conveys a scene or, more precisely, recurring scenes) and telling (she comments on how her husband behaves in the dreams and what she herself thinks about that, see emphasis).

The construction is even more complex because the scenes of the monologue also occur on two levels, an outer one that takes place in Halima’s bedroom and an inner one that depicts what she experiences in her dreams such as how she is talking to her dead man and how she can see him sitting at her sofa bed. However, Halima nowhere clarifies when she switches between real scenes and dreamed scenes. And, above all, she does not tell the readers (or the reporter, if we take into account that he is constantly present as an invisible listener on the primary level of the narrative) that she is talking about dreams. In fact, the word *dreams* (or dreamed visits from her dead husband) is not mentioned at all. And yet, this is probably the meaning of “it” in “I have got used to it now” from the beginning of the monologue. The omission is a powerful example of non-narration in the form of the unnarrated.

A more detailed examination of non-narration in the passage reveals examples of the unnarrated in what the “dream-husband” never tells

⁵⁰Tochman, *Like Eating a Stone*, 119–20. Our emphasis.

⁵¹Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980 [1972]), 228.

Halima, such as what happened when he disappeared during the war. The effect of this stylistic feature is reinforced by negations in “I don’t like,” “He doesn’t listen,” “He doesn’t even embrace me,” and “Nothing.” Furthermore, there are elements of the disnarrated in what Halima’s “dream-I” wishes but that does not come true—in dreams as well as in real life: “If only he’d explain what happened” and “If only he’d ask about the child.” All her unanswered questions form a weave of non-narration that spreads across the story’s three levels.

The monologue ends with a retold scene, built on several similar occasions, about how Halima’s son finds her gnashing her teeth when she sleeps. The son compares what he can hear with a specific sound: “As if you were eating a stone,” a simile that Tochman uses in the title of his book. Thus, much of what is untold in the book—withheld information as well as unspoken feelings; all kinds of non-narration and the strategy of “narrating about emotion without emotion”—becomes encapsulated in this expression, in the thought of somebody trying to eat a stone.

TOCHMAN AND THE POLISH SCHOOL OF REPORTAGE

There is no doubt that reporters, like other authors, have their own literary style. It can be both an expression of originality, an author’s signature, something like a thumbprint that allows us to identify the authorship of the text, or a way of writing dictated by learned rules. In our analysis we have focused on particular characteristics of Tochman’s style, but even though many of them are original for the author, some are clear recurrences of different schools of writing typical of the Polish School of Reportage.

Many critics and literary scholars see Tochman as Hanna Krall’s most gifted student.⁵² Even Hanna Krall herself, a leading figure and co-founder of Polish reportage,⁵³ in one of her interviews paid attention to the similarities in their work. According to her there are two ways to write about the world: through a broad, sweeping panorama, the history of nations, wars and revolutions, as Ryszard Kapuściński does, or through the story of one man, as she does.⁵⁴ Tochman clearly belongs to the latter group.

⁵²Tadeusz Nyczek, “Wyrok na życie,” review of *Wściekły pies*, by Wojciech Tochman, *Przekrój*, January 18, 2008.

⁵³Frukacz, “Literary Reportage or Journalistic Fiction?,” 13.

⁵⁴Jacek Antczak, *Reporterka: Rozmowy z Hanną Krall* (Warszawa: Agora, 2007), 45.

In her books, Krall writes about the fate of Jews, Germans, and Poles. Tochman, in turn, describes what happened to Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats, to Tutsis and Hutus, and to Khmers. Like his teacher, he focuses on the survivors, on those who lost everything and yet still must go on living, “I don’t write about graves. I write about people standing over stinking holes in the ground,”⁵⁵ he says.

But these similarities are not just down to shared themes and interests; they also manifest in the chosen narrative style. From Krall, Tochman may have learned to write in short, factual, and seemingly emotionless sentences. Like Krall, he tries to avoid adjectives, commentary, ideologizing, or moralizing. As he confesses in our interview, the reporter should not be emotional in his text, only the protagonist can be that. The reporter can be emotional when gathering material, listening to people—but not in his book: “At work, a reporter must be himself. So that later, when I arrive home and sit down at my desk, these emotions, already devoid of exaltation, come back to me in pure form.”⁵⁶ Monika Elżbieta Wiszniowska points out:

Tochman’s style of writing in a fragmented narrative, full of understatement and omissions, is also connected with Krall’s work. The choice of such a method of narration stems for both authors from their struggle with the difficult matter of being able to tell the story of people’s limit situations, as well as from their awareness of the moral dilemmas they face.⁵⁷

If Tochman’s chosen subjects and language bring him close to Hanna Krall, the construction of his texts shares many characteristics with *Gazeta Wyborcza*’s style, as evidenced for instance by the recurring structure of reportages published in the supplements *Magazyn* and *Duży Format*. There is always an intriguing title that catches the reader’s interest; the main body is divided into smaller parts, always sub-headed; vivid, evocative descriptions of the protagonists and setting allow the reader to

⁵⁵ Wojciech Tochman, “Zdziwienie i podziw,” interview by Maja Jaszewska, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, March 13, 2005, <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/zdziwienie-i-podziw-128104>.

⁵⁶ Tochman, our interview.

⁵⁷ Wiszniowska, “Refleksja aksjologiczna w *Eli*, *Eli* Wojciecha Tochmana,” 217.

imagine people and places; and literary devices give the reader the illusion of participation.⁵⁸

Another influence visible in Tochman's writing is that of Ryszard Kapuściński. A Polish researcher, Anna Modzelewska, points out that memory plays a crucial role in their work. Tochman, like Kapuściński, "most often writes from memory, he looks up his notes just to check numbers, dates, names. He does not record his interviewees. He sees the secret of truly valuable reportage in the fact that as a reporter he is not a recorder. The role of a journalist is to collect, select facts, absorb impressions, emotions, colors, smells, tastes, and then translate them onto paper."⁵⁹ In our interview the reporter openly admits: "I am writing from memory. What I don't remember at my desk is apparently not so important to write about."⁶⁰ And he adds: "When I start working, I never have a thesis. A thesis is the reporter's enemy, a thesis kills reportage. But my brain—already at the stage when the interviewee's words are spoken—makes a selection. It registers something and omits something else. And I can't help it. However, I have the feeling that I have written everything honestly. That is, as I heard it."⁶¹

Also, his process of writing is similar to that of Kapuściński. The reporter gathers material during his travels, he tries to live with his protagonists, he immerses himself in their reality, tries to absorb everything that happens around him, internalizes what he sees, hears and feels and then once back at home he reads all available material on the subject and then writes⁶², and that is when observed events change into non-fiction literature.

TOCHMAN'S STANCE AND WAR REPORTING IN BOSNIA

The war in Bosnia was distinctive within the context of the Balkan Wars, particularly regarding its victims and the way it was represented in the press and media. If before, in Slovenia or Croatia, journalists did not pick sides and tried to maintain objectivity, in Bosnia their perspective drastically changed, more so after the discovery of Srebrenica and other mass graves. Like many other journalists, Tochman aligns himself with the

⁵⁸ Kazimierz Wolny-Zmorzyński, *Na tropach reportażu i fotografii dziennikarskiej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UPJP2, 2018), 43.

⁵⁹ Modzelewska, "Wpływ Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego i Hanny Krall," 35.

⁶⁰ Tochman, our interview.

⁶¹ Tochman, our interview.

⁶² Tochman, our interview.

Bosnian Muslims and takes a clear stance against the Serbian side. In our interview, when asked about his position, he explains that the distinction between victims and oppressors was evident to him from the outset. He notes that no one ever questioned Hanna Krall for taking the side of the Jews rather than the Nazis when writing about the Holocaust.

A similar comparison to the Second World War is made by Roy Gutman, a *Newsday* reporter and a Pulitzer Prize Winner, who uses Nazi-era imagery to describe the actions of the Serbs.⁶³ Bru Rovira, a Spanish journalist and war correspondent, explains it in these words: “If in Slovenia or Croatia the sides of conflict were sometimes blurred, in Bosnia from the start we knew who were the victims and who the oppressors.”⁶⁴ Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the aforementioned special rapporteur of the UN Commission on Human Rights, clarifies the situation:

It was an attempt to impose Serbian hegemony. The national community recognized Bosnia as a separate sovereign country, and then treated the conflict as a civil war. This was a fundamental mistake. Second: the Serbian policy of ethnic cleansing was conscious and consistent in Bosnia. It was the goal of the war, not its effect. Such a policy was also carried out in Croatia against the Serbs there, although not with such intensity. As for the Bosniaks, they were primarily victims.⁶⁵

Therefore, Tochman is not alone when he takes a stand against the Serbs and sides with victims, finding two of his main protagonists among Bosnian Muslims: Mother Mejra and Jasna, two women who are searching for their lost children. He openly acknowledges that his intention is to shock and sensitize readers to the realities of human injustice:

We see blood on TV and don't care. We drink tea, eat dinner. So I want to write so that the reader loses his appetite. To make him hurt, feel fear, the frost or the stink. To make him get dirty, puke or cry from helplessness. I

⁶³ Sherry Ricciardi, “Confused Images: How the Media Fueled the Balkans War,” *The Journal of the International Institute* 3, no. 2 (1996), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0003.215>.

⁶⁴ Bru Rovira, personal communication with the author, 4.09.2024.

⁶⁵ Tadeusz Mazowiecki, “First Class Order of Emotions,” interview by Wojciech Tochman, *Magazyn Gazety Wyborczej*, April 11, 2002, 9.

would like the reader to get into the skin of the protagonist, at least for a moment. So that he would tremble and think: it can happen to me too.⁶⁶

In *Like Eating a Stone: Surviving the Past in Bosnia*, Tochman's technique to make the reader tremble is to use what Gerald Prince calls *non-narration*; the story is told through gaps and omissions. Occasionally, the reporter openly shows his opinion. However, most of the time he does not express any evaluations, and his feelings are hidden. Furthermore, important facts and conclusions about events are withdrawn, and the readers are left to use their own knowledge of the context to interpret what has happened. Other times, the narrative technique relies on *disnarration*. Here, it is of importance to the message what the characters wished would have happened, i.e., what their dreams were of what never came true. All this means that although Tochman takes a clear stand against the Serbs and empathizes with Bosnian victims, this stance is more obvious from what is not told than from what is told. Tochman's style, so typical of the Polish School of Reportage, conveys its meaning through exclusion.

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⁶⁶Agnieszka Wójcińska, *Reportrzy bez fikcji. Rozmowy z polskimi reporterami* (Czarne, 2011), 64.

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The Kuciak Murder: Narrative Journalism in Twenty-First Century Slovakia

Marek Debnár, Gabriela Sedmáková, and Jana Comová

This chapter examines two key periods in the development of narrative journalism in Slovakia during the twenty-first century. The first part focuses on the state and practices of literary journalism prior to the spring of 2018, when Ján – a journalist, PhD graduate, and external lecturer in investigative journalism at the Department of Journalism and New Media at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra—was murdered. The second explores the transformation of narrative journalism in the wake of his death, highlighting the response to his work and life.

Before Kuciak's death, literary journalism in Slovakia consisted mainly of essays, feuilletons, and reports by notable contributors such as Eugen Gindl and Andrej Bán. This period, spanning from the 1990s to the second half of the 2010s, addressed themes such as national identity and Slovakia's cultural position between East and West, as reflected in outlets

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G. Túry, R. Alexander (eds.), *Central European Narratives*,
Palgrave Studies in Literary Journalism,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-32529-7_7

like *SME.sk*, *Domino Forum*, and *týždeň*. The establishment of the Absynt publishing house in 2015, specializing in literary reportage, further enriched the field.

Kuciak's murder marked a turning point, revitalizing narrative journalism with a focus on investigative themes. Journalists increasingly adopted literary techniques, enhancing narrative depth and emotional engagement. His legacy inspired books such as *Umlčaní* (Silenced) by Marek Vagovič and fostered initiatives supporting independent journalism through grants and the development of projects that empowered investigative reporters to continue their work despite its many challenges. This shift underscores the enduring impact of Kuciak's life and work on Slovak journalism.

CONTEXT

Just as independent Slovakia remains a young democracy, still exploring and testing its limits, the Slovak language, as an autonomous linguistic entity, is also relatively young. Although it belongs to the Western branch of the Slavic language family and has been spoken in the territory of present-day Slovakia for centuries alongside the languages of neighboring nations—and those of the political entities to which the region historically belonged such as Hungarian, German, Polish, and Czech—Slovak was not officially codified until 1848. Even after its codification, its official use faced prohibitions and restrictions for many years. The codification of its standard form and its use in official communication and the literary arts only began toward the end of the eighteenth century, with significant development occurring in the nineteenth century, driven by the changes introduced by the so-called “Štúrovci”—a national revivalist movement formed around Ľudovít Štúr—a revolutionary, politician, linguist, and writer who fought for the rights of Slovaks in the Kingdom of Hungary. While journalistic genres in neighboring countries already had well-established traditions, Slovakia—then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—was only just beginning to publish its first newspapers in Slovak. Elsewhere, however, the differentiation of magazine format from that of newspapers was already underway. Inspired primarily by Germany, Slovakia imported journalistic genres and adapted them to its newly codified language.¹ The quality of domestic journalism, along with the readership's

¹ Jozef Mistrík, *Štylistika* (Bratislava: Slovenské pedagogické nakladateľstvo, 1997), 467.

engagement with its genres, functioned, much like the arts, as one of the primary indicators of the nation's cultural and intellectual state—and to a certain extent, as this text will demonstrate, it continues to serve this role today.

Before 1989, journalism in Slovakia was often used as a tool for ideological propaganda, controlled by the state and the ruling Communist Party. The media primarily served to promote the party's policies, censor dissenting voices, and reinforce the official worldview. Despite this, certain forms of journalism, especially reportage and other more artistic genres, provided opportunities for creative expression. Some journalists managed to avoid blatant political influence and produced texts that captured authentic human experiences and preserved artistic quality, offering glimpses of the reality beyond the constraints of the regime.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and the dissolution of the independent fascist Slovak state, there emerged a brief period during which both the journalistic community and the broader public shared the belief that journalism ought to communicate societal views freely and operate independently between the spheres of power, politics, and the citizenry. However, the professionalization of media as well as the democratization of society and cultural life were soon curtailed by the onset of the communist regime.²

While censorship was particularly severe in the 1950s, restricting not only journalism but also artistic and cultural expression, the 1960s witnessed a gradual loosening of these constraints alongside broader societal changes. These developments culminated in the Prague Spring, a crucial period for the entirety of Czechoslovakia, spanning from 1967 until the occupation of the country by Soviet forces in August 1968, after which the period of liberalization and rapprochement with the West was abruptly and forcibly terminated. During the 1960s, Slovak journalists and other writers were among the first to voice unexpectedly forceful and open criticism of contemporary conditions. At congresses and conferences, they no longer passively accepted the status quo and the continual postponement of proposed solutions to pressing issues. A particularly striking development was the fact that the Slovak journalistic community emerged as more engaged and active than its Czech counterpart—an unprecedented shift at the time. Journalists not only challenged the conditions

² Jozef Darmo, "Novinári v historických prelomoch moci a politiky (1945–1948) – II." *Otázky žurnalistiky*, no. 4 (2000): 300–301.

that restricted journalism itself, but they also began to scrutinize the state system and the actions of the Communist Party in a broad way, addressing issues that reverberated across the entirety of society.³

Journalism, and especially reportage, continued to be dominated by the same state-mandated style: socialist realism. This approach focused primarily on the life of the working class—above all, the agricultural workforce, given that Slovakia had never been a strongly industrialized country—and depicted the relentless struggle of the individual laborer against bourgeois structures in pursuit of community advancement and state progress. Journalists and writers who deviated from this prescribed standard were inconvenient to the regime, but today they are regarded as vital figures in the history of Slovak literature and journalism. Perhaps the most significant of these writer-journalists was Ladislav Mňačko, whose reportage texts, published in book form, achieved tremendous success and provoked near-hysteria in communist-era Slovakia. In addition to his writings from the period of the Second World War and the fascist Slovak state, his book *Oneskorené reportáže* (Delayed Reportages), which portrays life under Stalinism in the 1950s, proved to be a landmark both for Slovak literature and for the emergence of literary journalism in the country.

A highly specific characteristic of the period was also self-censorship, which many writers and journalists adopted during this time. For some, this shift occurred as early as the 1950s; for others, it took place during the so-called Normalization period, which followed the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops in 1968 and the dismantling of the more liberal conditions in society and culture that had emerged during the 1960s. In Slovakia, numerous prominent figures from the artistic circles turned to self-censorship as a means of ensuring their professional survival. The poet Vojtech Mihálik was one such figure; like others who chose to adjust to the regime and avoid resistance in their writing, he gradually aligned his work with the officially sanctioned form of socialist realism.

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, which comprised a series of non-violent protests by students, dissidents, and dissatisfied citizens in Slovakia and Czechia calling for a transition from a command economy to parliamentary democracy, the totalitarian regime of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia fell. This led to the emergence of press freedom and a

³Elena Londáková, “Slovenskí novinári v kultúrnom a demokratizačnom procese šesťdesiatych rokov,” in *Rok 1968: Novinári na Slovensku*, ed. Jozef Hupka (Bratislava: Historický ústav SAV, 2008), 51–54.

growing diversity of journalistic genres. New newspapers were established, and the landscape of television and radio media was transformed with the rise of private commercial TV stations and radio broadcasters.⁴ Journalistic books also began to be published—aimed at young journalists studying within the democratic system and engaging with Western influences. At the same time, new works of non-fiction appeared, including those by the prominent dissident Milan Šimečka, as well as by Ľuba Lesná, who focused on contemporary reportage but was not directly involved in the dissident movement.

Developments such as democratization, international integration, modernization, globalization, and the ambition to join the European Union—which had unfolded over several decades in the West—transpired in Slovakia, as in other post-communist countries of the former Eastern Bloc, at a markedly accelerated pace.⁵ These transformations, mirrored in the rapidly developing sphere of free journalism, allowed little scope for real-time reflection; instead, a systematic evaluation of both the media landscape and societal shifts has only emerged in retrospect.

During the turbulent 1990s, following the dissolution of the federal state with the Czech Republic, under the premiership of Vladimír Mečiar and the ruling Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), the country experienced a surge in organized crime and mafia-related activities, often directly connected to politicians at various levels of power—from local administrations to the highest state offices.⁶ These turbulent years were marked by widespread violence perpetrated by mafia gangs, named after their leaders, who divided Slovakia into regional territories and subsequently fought over them. These groups intimidated the civilian population through extortion and threats and were often linked to the Slovak secret services and other networks of organized economic crime, all of whom rapidly accumulated wealth during the privatization of former state-owned enterprises.

⁴Vladimír Holina, “Zmeny novinárkej profesie na Slovensku,” *Otázky žurnalistiky*, no. 2 (1997): 103.

⁵Karol Jakubowicz and Miklós Sükösd, “Twelve Concepts Regarding Media System Evolution and Democratization in Post-Communist Societies,” in *Finding the Right Place on the Map: Central and Eastern European Media Change in a Global Perspective*, ed. Karol Jakubowicz and Miklós Sükösd (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008), 9–10.

⁶Miroslava Dobrotková, Artur Bekmatov, Andrea Chlebcová Hečková, and Ján Kuciak, *Slovak Mass Media in the 21st Century: Current Challenges* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019), 8–10.

Journalism had to respond swiftly, frequently resorting to improvised investigative reporting. In the decades that followed, investigative journalism that focused on the intersection of corruption and politics emerged as the most dynamic and arguably the most crucial journalistic genre in Slovakia. It not only generated significant public engagement but also drove substantial political and social change. Investigative reports exposing the ties between political figures and corruption—published by media such as *Aktuality.sk*, *Denník N*, and *SME.sk*—led to mass protests, shifts in governmental positions, and a marked transformation of the political climate, both during the wave of demonstrations in 2011 and in the period following the spring of 2018. These developments also had a profound impact on cultural and artistic productions, inspiring the creation of new films, songs, and, notably, a surge in literary journalism. In this way, investigative journalism came to play a defining role in shaping both the nature and forms of journalism in the country.

DEFINING LITERARY JOURNALISM IN SLOVAKIA

Tracing the development of literary journalism in Slovakia is a challenging task as no such concept currently exists within Slovak academic terminology. Terms such as “literary journalism” or “narrative journalism” are absent from Slovak journalistic and literary discourse, meaning they receive no scholarly attention or dedicated studies. The closest established term in the Slovak context is “literary reportage,” even though it carries specific connotations and follows distinct conventions in Slovak usage. But the introduction of the umbrella term *literary journalism*, encompassing sub-genres such as literary reportage, seems imminent. While the Slovak academic and literary communities have been slow in formalizing this terminology, a closer examination of actual works that would fit within the framework of literary journalism reveals a thriving creative field. Over the past two decades, these two groups (and others) have been notably active in producing works associated with this genre, which—despite lacking a fixed designation—has gained considerable popularity among both writers and readers. Book series such as *Padreho klan* and *Vlastnou hlavou*, which employ narrative journalism to explore contemporary political developments in Slovakia, exemplify this trend. Slovak textbooks for aspiring journalism students, such as *Novinárska prvouka*, already recognize that the boundary between literature and journalism is very thin, though still clearly existent. Fiction and journalism influence each other, and their

relationship is reflected in emotionally driven journalistic commentary—a term perhaps closest to the umbrella concept of literary journalism.⁷ The blurring of the line between fiction and journalism is not a new phenomenon and today's Slovak authors and readers are familiar with names like Twain and Hemingway, experiments with documentary fiction, and the New Journalism movement of the 1960s and 1970s, even though such works were extremely hard to find in Czechoslovakia during the communist regime.

With societal changes and the rise of social media, mass media communication has also evolved, leading to a media discourse increasingly defined by hybridization, both in Slovakia and globally. Hybridization entails the merging and dissolving of rigid boundaries between forms, styles, and genres. The once clearly delineated categories have become far more fluid, and literary journalism, with all its subgenres, is precisely a product of the hybridization of literature and journalism. Hybridization also directly reflects readers' expectations of how journalism and fiction should present the world and current events, while also reshaping perceptions of who holds the authority to narrate what happens around us.⁸ These expectations are currently undergoing a crisis due to growing distrust in traditional media in Slovakia, as reflected in data from the Reuters Institute in 2022, which showed that only 26 percent of people in Slovakia trusted the media⁹ and the parallel rise of a professionalized disinformation ecosystem in the country, including privately owned outlets and online platforms that deliberately spread misleading or false narratives for political or financial gain. Thus, a renewal through hybridization seems inevitable; in today's media landscape, simply conveying information is no longer enough: audiences demand complex stories.¹⁰ Information is consumed in massive quantities and at incredible speed on social media, where everything is compressed into easily digestible snippets, leaving ever less

⁷ Ján Hacek, Anna Sámelová, and Mária Stanková, *Novinárská prvouka: Slovník základných pojmov žurnalistiky* (Bratislava: Katedra žurnalistiky, Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Komenského, 2019), 79–80.

⁸ Geoffrey Baym, "Journalism and the Hybrid Condition: Long-Form Television Drama at the Intersections of News and Narrative," *Journalism* 18, no. 1 (2017): 12.

⁹ Andrea Chlebcová Hečková and Simon Smith, "Reuters Institute Digital Report 2022," June 15, 2022, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/slovakia>.

¹⁰ Gabriela Sedmáková, "Žáner bez mena—pátranie po literárnej žurnalistike na Slovensku," *VLNA*, no. 101 (2024): 100.

attention for purely informative texts. It is no surprise, then, that literary journalism, which combines the informative function of journalism with fiction's ability to tell stories through characters and situations, has gained an audience. It maintains the reader's attention through narrative while simultaneously communicating data. The traditional dichotomy of literature as a realm of subjective authorship and imagination, and journalism as a domain of objectivity and factuality, is thus changing.¹¹ This shift reveals that contemporary Slovak readers are more interested in themes than genres, while the relationship between reality and truth is also evolving. The questions of why and how are becoming as significant as who, where, and when.¹²

Although Slovak terminology has yet to officially adopt the term literary journalism, this does not mean that literary journalism as a genre—or as a method of using literary narrative techniques in long-form or book-length journalistic texts—does not exist in the country. On the contrary, many reportage texts meet the criteria of literary journalism: they tell cohesive stories, include descriptions and dialogue, employ artistic devices, make evaluative judgments, and use generalizations. They often feature settings, plots, and characters—all while recounting real events and people, based on data collected directly from the field.

An illustrative example is the beginning of a text by Martina and Juraj Koník, published in *Denník N*, on December 9, 2024, titled “Children of War: When Bombs Fall, Even If They Want to Attend Music Class, They Must Go Underground (Reportage from Kharkiv)”:

Three-year-old Nadija covers her ears; the siren is blaring everywhere. She holds her mother's hand as they walk in a large group. As she approaches the stairs, she uncovers her ears. She lets go of her mother's hand for a moment, turns around, looks at her, and calms down.

Air raid alarms and shelling occur almost daily. Some children run; others are terrified. When they descend the stairs, they enter a different world—a shelter.

Kharkiv, in eastern Ukraine, is about thirty kilometers from the Russian border. Sirens blare day and night. Despite this, a large portion of the population has stayed in the city. They live under the siren's constant wail.

¹¹ Sedmáková, “Žáner bez mena,” 100.

¹² Baym, “Journalism and the Hybrid Condition,” 16.

When the children enter the underground shelter and the heavy doors close behind them, it's as if everything is suddenly okay. Even Nadija laughs and chirps joyfully.¹³

As this example demonstrates, even long-form online reportage in Slovakia contains numerous literary features and tendencies. Similarly, many investigative texts exhibit the characteristics mentioned above—technically fitting within the framework of literary journalism, even if they are not published in book format.

Under the umbrella of literary journalism in Slovakia, one could also include books that currently enjoy significant success yet remain difficult to categorize by genre. These works are written by journalist-writers such as Marek Vagovič, former head of the investigative reporting department at *Aktuality.sk*, who is now working for the conservative daily *Postoj*, and who used to be a colleague of the murdered investigative journalist Ján Kuciak, and Peter Bárdy, editor-in-chief of *Aktuality.sk*.

An exploration of what might be considered literary journalism in Slovakia reveals trends and transformations that reflect broader societal changes. From the mid-2000s until 2018, the dominant genres included essays, feuilletons, and reportages, primarily focusing on Slovak history, past criminal cases and scandals, the mafia of the 1990s, and life in the regions outside the major cities and/or near the country's borders. Prominent figures of this era include Michal Hvorecký, Fedor Gál, Andrej Bán, and Martin Michal Šimečka.

A significant shift occurred after 2018, following the murder of Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. With their deaths, literary journalism began to concentrate more on recent history and unresolved political scandals, giving rise to a new phenomenon: books about still-active political figures such as Robert Fico, Igor Matovič, and Štefan Harabin. This period also saw the publication of works blending investigative journalism, reportage, and fiction, many dedicated to the murdered journalist and his fiancée. While essays and regional reportage continue to have a presence in the Slovak book market, few new authors contribute to these genres; those involved before 2018 largely remain active in this field.

¹³ Martina Koník and Juraj Koník, "Deti vojny: keď padajú bomby, aj keď chcú ísť na hudobnú, musia do podzemia (reportáž z Charkiva)," *Denník N*, December 9, 2024, <https://dennikn.sk/4349717/deti-vojny-ked-padaju-bomby-aj-ked-chcu-ist-na-hudobnu-musia-do-podzemia-reportaz-z-charkiva/> (translation ours).

THE IMPACT OF KUCIAK'S MURDER ON LITERARY JOURNALISM IN SLOVAKIA

Corruption, a persistent issue throughout history, has had significant consequences in the Slovak Republic during its period of independence. High-ranking politicians and their parties, including the current Prime Minister Robert Fico and SMER-SD, have been at the center of numerous scandals involving bribery, nepotism, abuse of authority, and other corrupt practices. These acts have disrupted the functioning of the state, caused social crises, and highlighted the pathological nature of corruption in Slovak society. This environment of corruption became a central focus for many Slovak independent journalists including the young journalist Ján Kuciak, who dedicated his career to investigating and exposing these practices. Kuciak's work, along with the efforts of other journalists, drew attention to the pervasive corruption in Slovakia. However, his murder in 2018 marked a turning point. The tragedy not only underscored the dangers faced by investigative journalists but also galvanized Slovak media. Competing newsrooms began collaborating on investigative projects, breaking down barriers that had previously hindered cross-editorial teamwork. These efforts extended beyond Slovakia; Slovak journalists fostered partnerships with those in the Czech Republic and other countries, strengthening the fight against corruption and reinforcing the importance of a free press in holding power to account. The Ján Kuciak Investigative Center (ICJK), established in January 2019 following the journalist's assassination, has become a key hub for Czecho-Slovak cross-border investigative cooperation. ICJK is also an active member of major international investigative networks such as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and the Global Investigative Journalism Network, participating in global collaborative efforts to expose corruption and organized crime.¹⁴

JAN KUCIAK'S LIFE AND WORK

Ján Kuciak, born on May 17, 1990, in the Slovak village of Štiavnik, was the eldest of three siblings. He completed his primary education in his hometown and pursued secondary education at an eight-year high school in Bytča. Initially, Kuciak enrolled in computer science at the Slovak

¹⁴ Journalismfund Europe, "ICJK," n.d., <https://www.journalismfund.eu/media/icjk>.

University of Technology in the Slovak capital Bratislava. However, he soon discovered that his true passion lay in journalism, prompting him to transfer to Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. There, he earned both a bachelor's and a master's degree in journalism, eventually pursuing a doctoral program during which he also served as a teaching assistant in the department.

Beyond his academic roles, Ján Kuciak emerged as a pivotal figure in Slovak investigative journalism, dedicating his career to exposing political corruption. His journalistic journey began during his university years when he contributed to blogs on the platform *SME.sk*. Between 2009 and 2013, Kuciak published 68 articles, often expressing frustration with Slovakia's political landscape. His early works, documented in Marek Vagovič's book *Umlčaní—príbeh Jána Kuciaka a Martiny Kušnírovej* (Silenced—The Story of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová), reveal a writer deeply concerned with ethics and morality in politics.

Kuciak's reporting focused on the struggles of ordinary people, highlighting social injustice, and advocating systemic change. He aimed to "gradually unveil the political world's connections with oligarchs and organized crime,"¹⁵ believing in journalism's transformative potential. His dedication to investigating corruption and his sensitive approach to social issues cemented his legacy as a significant contributor to Slovak public discourse and investigative journalism.

While pursuing his studies, Ján Kuciak actively sought practical experience in journalism. In 2012, he applied for an internship at *SME*, a prominent Slovak newspaper. Despite having only limited experience in journalism, at regional titles, he was accepted by then-editor-in-chief Konštantín Čikovský. At the time, Kuciak was writing his bachelor's thesis on *SME*, and he recognized that the internship would significantly enhance his understanding of the publication and journalism more broadly. During his time at *SME*, he collaborated with colleagues on an analysis of the so-called "Gorilla" case, a major political scandal in Slovakia.

The Gorilla affair came to light in December 2011 when a set of leaked documents appeared online, allegedly originating from the Slovak Information Service, an intelligence agency of the state. These materials included transcripts of covert recordings made in a Bratislava apartment and revealed possible cooperation between prominent businesspeople and

¹⁵ Marek Vagovič et al., *Umlčaní: Príbeh Jána Kuciaka a Martiny Kušnírovej* (Bratislava: Ringier Axel Springer SK, a.s., 2018), 110.

high-ranking politicians in the management of state assets and public funds. The nickname “Gorilla” referred to the codename of the intelligence file containing these recordings. The so-called Gorilla case allegedly exposed collusion between Slovak politicians and influential financial groups to advance shared interests. Among the key actors was Penta, a prominent Central European investment group active in sectors such as finance, healthcare, energy, manufacturing, retail, real estate, and media.¹⁶ Evidence suggested that politicians received commissions to facilitate Jaroslav Haščák, head of Penta, in gaining influence over the privatization of state-owned enterprises.¹⁷

Although his contributions were substantial, Kuciak was not credited as a co-author of *SME*’s investigative reports into the Gorilla case. After completing his internship, he sought a permanent position at the newspaper, but his application was unsuccessful.

In the fall of 2014, Kuciak participated in a course titled “Achillova data,” organized by the Czech Center for Investigative Journalism. The course aimed to train emerging journalists in network investigative techniques and foster talent in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The course introduced students to fundamental methods of cross-border investigative journalism and promoted collaborative development among aspiring Czech and Slovak journalists. Pavla Holcová, the course leader, invited Slovak investigative journalist Marek Vagovič from *Aktuality.sk* to mentor Kuciak’s team. Vagovič was impressed by Kuciak’s analytical skills and dedication.

Kuciak began working with *Aktuality.sk* in 2015, under the leadership of editor-in-chief Marek Vagovič. Despite his growing academic responsibilities at the university where he was a PhD student at the Department of Journalism and New Media and where he took a position of a teaching assistant, he continued producing high-quality investigative articles, often working late into the night and on weekends. Through his work with *Aktuality.sk*, Kuciak solidified his role as a meticulous and determined investigative journalist, becoming a significant voice in uncovering corruption in Slovakia.¹⁸ His work frequently delved into issues involving the mafia, members of the SMER-SD political party allegedly linked to organized crime, and suspicious financial activities. Among the critical issues he

¹⁶ *SME.sk*, “Penta,” n.d., <https://index.sme.sk/t/7910/penta>.

¹⁷ *Kauza Gorila*, “Kauza Gorila,” n.d., <https://kauzatorila.sk/kauza-gorila/>.

¹⁸ Vagovič et al., *Umlčani*, 134–42.

investigated were tax evasion and the use of “straw men” to obscure ownership and accountability in business dealings. In an interview with the student magazine *Občas Nečas*, produced by the Department of Journalism and New Media where Kuciak was based, he emphasized choosing topics based on their public relevance and the possibility of substantiating them with verifiable facts.

Kuciak noted the evolving nature of investigative journalism, highlighting the increasing reliance on public databases, government information systems, freedom of information requests, and the public procurement bulletin—a state-administered register of public procurements designed to promote transparency in the allocation of public funds. These resources formed the foundation of his investigative process, allowing him to systematically gather and analyze data to uncover hidden connections. He frequently cross-referenced materials to build a comprehensive understanding of the cases he investigated.

Despite being in his twenties, with relatively limited experience, Kuciak demonstrated exceptional diligence in his research. He dedicated significant time to studying archival materials and conducting in-depth background investigations. His work often required him to gain a nuanced understanding of the individuals and networks he was investigating, which he achieved not only through written records but also through direct fieldwork. This meticulous approach to gathering evidence and building connections exemplified his commitment to the integrity and impact of investigative journalism.

KUCIAK’S MAIN CASES

The most significant articles by Ján Kuciak were dedicated to various cases in which he mapped out the unethical business practices of oligarchs. The first major case he investigated involved the business activities of Jozef Brhel, one of the influential oligarchs linked to the ruling political party SMER-SD and its leader, Robert Fico. He co-authored the article with Marek Vagovič for the magazine *týždeň*. To write the article, Kuciak had to meticulously examine public databases and systematically connect complex information, as Brhel was virtually unknown to the public. Over several weeks, he reviewed 129 contracts associated with Brhel’s activities and discovered that more than half of Brhel’s business during Fico’s administration was tied to state contracts. After the article’s publication, Brhel

attempted to discredit the journalist, but Kuciak's evidence was irrefutable.¹⁹

Another case Kuciak uncovered in 2015 concerned the overpriced purchase of ultrasound machines for Slovak hospitals. Following a previous scandal involving an overpriced CT scanner in a Piešťany hospital, Kuciak focused on a company that had been awarded exclusive contracts to supply ultrasound machines under Fico's government. The selection criteria were set up in a discriminatory manner, often making the dubious company the sole bidder. Kuciak also discovered that the selection committees included relatives and associates of politicians affiliated with the SMER-SD party. Despite attempts at intimidation, Kuciak managed to demonstrate the connections between this company and politicians, sparking public interest and a media response.²⁰

In January 2016, Kuciak and his team at *Aktuality.sk* mapped out business connections and personal ties among SMER-SD politicians—specifically Ján Počiatek (former Minister of Transport and Minister of Finance) and Robert Kaliňák (former Minister of Interior). He discovered links suggesting that companies winning state contracts in the IT sector might have been influenced by these two politicians. Kuciak found evidence in the accounting documents of a company called Anex, where the email address of a close friend of Ján Počiatek appeared. The journalist discovered that Počiatek's friend held high positions in state enterprises and was responsible for accounting at Anex, a company profiting from government IT contracts. He exposed nepotism at the highest levels of Slovak politics.²¹

Further revelations by Kuciak involved the activities of Ladislav Bašternák, known for his connections to political elites. He owned the luxury apartment complex called Bonaparte, located in Bratislava. To secure unjustified VAT refunds, he formally transferred apartments between various companies, thereby artificially inflating the number of sales and securing the refunds. He also used indebted and inactive companies, which he registered under front men—individuals used to conceal

¹⁹ Vagovič et al., *Umlčani*, 134–38.

²⁰ Ján Kuciak, "Polícia stíha nákup ultrazvukov: V komisii bol aj Paškov synovec," *Aktuality.sk*, 2014, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/310157/policia-stiha-nakup-ultrazvukov-v-komisii-bol-aj-paskov-synovec/>.

²¹ Ján Kuciak, "Kauza: Firma spájaná s Počiatkom zarába za Fica milióny na štátnych IT zákazkách," *Aktuality.sk*, 2016, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/312065/kauza-firma-spajana-s-pociatkom-zaraba-za-fica-miliony-na-statnych-it-zakazkach/>.

the real owners. The Bonaparte complex was also linked to political elites, including Prime Minister Robert Fico, who resided there.²²

Kuciak's work extended beyond Slovakia. He contributed significantly to the Slovak coverage of the Panama Papers investigation, a global project exposing how elites used offshore companies to avoid taxes or conceal wealth. Invited by Czech journalist Pavla Holcová, he joined a temporary cross-newsroom team of Slovak reporters who worked with leaked documents from the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca. Despite his young age and limited resources, Kuciak helped uncover how Slovak-linked companies and businesses used offshore structures, including suspicious financial transfers made through a private Slovak bank and undeclared property holdings abroad. His reporting brought Slovakia into a major international journalism effort and revealed patterns of hidden influence among the country's wealthiest elites. As part of the international Panama Papers project, his team showed that certain Slovak businesses, including those of the oligarch Miroslav Výboh, hid their money abroad to evade taxes.²³ It was revealed that, through accounts in a bank owned by the financial group Penta, millions of Euros were transferred for foreign clients of the Mossack Fonseca law firm. Výboh, an oligarch also close to Prime Minister Fico, had companies connected to overpriced state defense contracts. In collaboration with foreign journalists, Kuciak revealed that Výboh's companies used offshore shell companies and were involved in the ownership of the luxury DoubleTree by Hilton hotel in Bratislava.²⁴

In his articles, Kuciak also summarized the practices of various business groups linked to the SMER-SD party. Shortly before his death, Kuciak's articles primarily focused on one individual—Marian Kočner, who, among his other activities, had lively connections with Slovak organized crime groups. Marian Kočner is one of the most controversial business figures in Slovakia and has been implicated in numerous corruption cases, some of which remain unresolved. From January 2017 to February 2018, Kuciak published over 20 investigative reports on the prominent businessman,

²²Dušan Mikušovič, "O čom písal zavraždený novinár Kuciak: Vedel pátrať vo verejných databázach, polovica z jeho posledných textov je o Kočnerovi," *Denník N*, 2018, <https://dennikn.sk/1040891/o-com-pisal-zavrazdeny-novinar-kuciak-vedel-patrat-vo-verejnych-databazach-polovica-z-jeho-poslednych-textov-je-o-kocnerovi/>.

²³Ján Kuciak and Marek Vagovič, "Ficov priateľ z korupčnej kauzy chcel robiť biznis cez daňové raje v Karibiku," *Aktuality.sk*, 2016, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/336875/ficov-priatel-z-korupcnej-kauzy-chcel-robit-biznis-cez-danove-raje-v-karibiku/>.

²⁴Vagovič et al., *Umlčanie*, 152–58.

covering cases like *Technopol*, *Donovaly*, and the *Markíza promissory notes scandal*.

Kočner deceitfully took control of a company called Technopol and attempted to transfer its assets, worth tens of millions of euros, to his own businesses. To gain control of this company, Kočner and his associates staged a fake general meeting, exploiting legal loopholes and receiving support from acquaintances in the judiciary. These tactics enabled Kočner to expand his business and gain control over significant assets.²⁵

In addition to the Technopol case, Kočner was implicated in the so-called Donovaly case, which centered on suspicions of unjustified VAT refund claims exceeding 8 million euros. These were allegedly linked to the sale of real estate properties in the mountain resort of Donovaly through a network of commercial companies.²⁶

He was also involved in a high-profile case against the Slovak commercial television channel Markíza, when he forged promissory notes worth tens of millions of euros in order to make an illegitimate financial claim against the network. In this case, Kočner and his associate, Pavol Rusko, were accused of fabricating four promissory notes totaling nearly 69 million euros. Kočner claimed that Rusko, the former director of Markíza, had signed these notes in 2000 to settle a dispute, although the dispute had been resolved by other means. In 2018, Kočner managed to get a court to recognize the notes without verifying their authenticity. Had the notes been validated, Markíza would have had to pay Kočner a substantial sum.²⁷

Before the murder, Kočner regularly threatened and attempted to blackmail Kuciak and even had him and his colleagues surveilled, with the aim of uncovering compromising information about their private lives.²⁸

Following Kuciak's murder in February 2018, Slovak authorities initiated a formal criminal investigation led by specialized prosecution teams and police homicide detectives. The investigation analyzed digital

²⁵ Ján Kuciak, "Nová kauza Technopol: Majetok za 20 miliónov prešiel na ľudí okolo Kočnera," *Aktuality.sk*, 2017, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/407504/nova-kauza-technopol-majetok-za-20-milionov-presiel-na-ludi-okolo-kocnera/>.

²⁶ Minúta po minúte, "Špecializovaný súd odročil proces v kauzách Donovaly a Báč, kde je obžalovaný Marian Kočner." *Dennik.sk*, 2024, <https://dennik.sk/minuta/4132562/>.

²⁷ Ján Kuciak, "Kočner sa znovu súdi s Markízou: Za Ruskové zmenky žiada 70 miliónov eur," *Aktuality.sk*, 2017, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/468206/kocner-sa-znovu-sudi-s-markizou-za-ruskove-zmenky-ziada-70-milionov-eur/>.

²⁸ Vagovič et al., *Umlčanie*, 166–71.

evidence, financial records and witness testimony.²⁹ The evidence also included a transcript of a September 5, 2017 telephone call in which Kočner threatened Kuciak, also referencing investigative journalist Monika Tódová from the independent Slovak daily *Denník N*:

I will start taking an interest, Mr. Kuciak, in your mother, your father, your siblings, in all of you. I will start publishing everything I can find about you, Mr. Kuciak. You will be first; I will prioritize you over Ms. Tódová.... I know there's something else behind this, but I can't prove it yet. When I can, Mr. Kuciak, I guarantee you will stop writing because I will make sure you're exposed...³⁰

The journalist reported Kočner's threats to the police, but they did not classify them as a criminal offense. Despite repeated threats, Kuciak continued to write about Kočner's activities. In 2019, Marian Kočner and six of his companies were added to the Magnitsky sanctions list—due to risky investments and various financial frauds. The Global Magnitsky Sanctions program, implemented by the United States, is based on a combination of legal authorities, including executive orders issued by the President and statutes passed by the U.S. Congress. These authorities are codified by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) within the U.S. Department of the Treasury and published in the Code of Federal Regulations. Updates or modifications to these regulations are formally announced in the Federal Register.³¹ This listing meant that Kočner would likely be unable to conduct business in the United States and possibly Europe, losing all associated profits. Kočner was charged for ordering Kuciak's murder, considered one of the most shocking attacks on a journalist in modern Slovak history and a turning point for press freedom in the country. Since then, Kočner has been tried and found guilty of forging the Markíza promissory notes, though he was acquitted in the case concerning the ordering of

²⁹ Pavla Holcová and Árpád Soltész, "Kočner's World," *OCCRP*, February 21, 2020, <https://www.occrp.org/en/project/a-journalists-undying-legacy/kocners-world>.

³⁰ Monika Tódová, "Prestanete písať, hrozil Kočner Kuciakovi (kompletný prepis rozhovoru)," *Denník N*, 2018, dennikn.sk/1088265/prestanete-pisat-hrozil-kocner-kuciakovi-kompletny-prepis-rozhovoru/.

³¹ Office of Foreign Assets Control, "Legal Framework for the Global Magnitsky Sanctions," *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 2025, <https://ofac.treasury.gov/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/global-magnitsky-sanctions>.

Kuciak's murder.³² That acquittal was later overturned by the Supreme Court in May 2025, and the case is currently (2026) being retried before the Specialized Criminal Court.³³

THE AFTERMATH OF KUCIAK'S MURDER

Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, archaeologist Martina Kušnírová, were murdered in their house in Veľká Mača on February 21, 2018, by a former police officer, Tomáš Szabó. The murder was a contract killing, with charges filed against the alleged person who ordered the crime, Alena Zsuzsová, intermediary Zoltán Andruskó, and driver Miroslav Marček. The investigation revealed that the group had been planning the murder for several weeks. The primary motive, according to investigators, was Kuciak's journalistic work.³⁴

The journalist's murder, along with that of his fiancée, had a profound impact on Slovak society. The consequent wave of mass protests led to changes in key government positions, the most significant of which was the resignation of then-Prime Minister Robert Fico. The contract killing of the young journalist also irreversibly influenced public perception of journalism and its role in society—reshaping Slovakia's media landscape and contributing to its transformation. Negative sentiment toward the SMER-SD political party grew, leading to its decline in subsequent elections. The murder also altered the political balance of power and sparked legal proceedings against major defendants. In August 2022, the Law on Publications and the Law on Media Services came into effect, introducing modern regulatory measures, such as self-regulation, and brought significant transparency to the ownership and financing of print and digital media. These measures also strengthened protections for journalistic sources. Slovakia, whose position in the Press Freedom Index after the murder had declined, was back close to its pre-murder ranking by 2023. Despite improvements, though, there is still room for further progress. In

³² Monika Tódová, "Američania uvalili sankcie na Kočnera, zmrazia mu účty," *Denník N*, 2019, <https://dennikn.sk/1681949/americke-sankcie-na-kocnera-zmrazia-mu-ucty/>.

³³ Marek Biró, "Súd v kauze vraždy Jána Kuciaka začína odznova: Marian Kočner predstúpi pred úplne nový senát," *Aktuality.sk*, January 26, 2026, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/8csoxen/vsetko-odznova-o-par-hodin-sa-zacne-nove-kolo-sudu-v-kauze-vrazdy-jana-kuciaka-rozhodovat-budu-novi-sudcovia/>.

³⁴ "Vražda Jána Kuciaka," *Aktuality.sk*, n.d., <https://www.aktuality.sk/vrazda-jana-kuciaka/>.

the aftermath of the murder, Slovak media faced additional challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and a surge in disinformation, which significantly impacted the media landscape particularly in relation to coverage of the pandemic and to the war in Ukraine, following the Russian invasion in February 2022.³⁵

Ján Kuciak himself did not consider his work dangerous. In an interview for a student magazine, he commented on investigative journalism as follows:

I've never been beaten or had my car set on fire, which used to be common. Maybe it's because I've only had my car for a few months (*laughs*). I don't think my work is dangerous in that sense. At most, someone threatens us with a lawsuit or files a criminal complaint. In my opinion, the sources are in a more vulnerable position.³⁶

His last article was titled “Talianska mafia na Slovensku: Jej chápadlá siahajú aj do politiky” (The Italian Mafia in Slovakia: Its Tentacles Reach into Politics), detailing the Italian mafia's connections to top Slovak government officials and public figures in Slovakia. The journalist did not live to complete the article. However, shortly after his death, authorities launched an investigation, which revealed that Italian businessman Antonino Vadala was among the key figures involved. He was closely associated with the ‘Ndrangheta—one of Europe's most powerful mafia organizations. He had settled in eastern Slovakia, where he was active in agriculture, real estate, and energy. He received state subsidies for farmland, some allegedly fraudulently, according to charges filed against him. In 2018, Italian courts issued a European arrest warrant for Vadala. Vadala was allegedly in a relationship with Mária Trošková, who later became a senior state adviser to Prime Minister Robert Fico. Together, they established a company, and Trošková's proximity to top political circles raised concerns about the influence of the Italian mafia on the Slovak

³⁵ Bianka Francistyová and Ján Višňovský, “Journalism in Slovakia Five Years after the Murder of Ján Kuciak,” *Media Literacy and Academic Research* 6, no. 2 (December 2023): 126–34, <https://doi.org/10.34135/mlar-23-02-07>.

³⁶ Monika Radošovská, “Novinár Ján Kuciak: Je veľa možností, ako môže bežný človek bojovať proti korupcii,” *Občas Nečas*, August 20, 2017, <https://www.obcasnecas.ukf.sk/2017/08/novinar-jan-kuciak-je-vela-moznosti-ako-moze-bezny-clovek-bojovat-proti-korupcii/>.

government. In 2019, Italian media reported that Vadala and Fico had spoken on the phone in 2012, fueling further suspicions of their connections.³⁷

Kuciak's unfinished article was published posthumously in draft form on the *Aktuality.sk* portal and was also featured in numerous international media outlets such as the BBC, *The Guardian*, and Politico.eu. The *Aktuality.sk* portal added this note at the end of the article: "This is the last report by our colleague Ján Kuciak on which he was working. He did not have the chance to complete and publish it, as he and his partner were murdered. The conclusion of the article is missing, as the author did not have time to finish it." During his time at *Aktuality.sk*, Kuciak authored 137 articles. The last two articles, published after his death, were based on information he had gathered and were therefore published under his name.³⁸

REFLECTIONS OF KUCIAK'S MURDER IN SLOVAK LITERARY JOURNALISM

Kuciak's early articles, like those of some of his colleagues, often departed from standard journalistic clarity. His pieces initially seemed too complex, with extensive branching and frequent digressions from the main issue, which made it easy for readers to lose track. According to Vagovič, however, they showed potential despite these issues. He notes that at the time, *Aktuality.sk* was the second most-read news portal in Slovakia, and writing investigative articles required a different approach than writing for a print magazine with a far smaller readership. Articles for *Aktuality.sk* often needed to be concise, direct, with an engaging story and a punchy headline.

Vagovič further mentions in his book that Kuciak's early writing showed occasional language and stylistic imperfections. The biggest challenges arose when editing his lengthy texts. Over time, however, the budding investigative journalist realized that he simply needed more time and effort to refine his sentences. After incorporating the editorial feedback,

³⁷ Compiled by Spectator staff Editorial, "Fico: I did not speak with Vadala on the phone," *Spectator*, March 20, 2019, <https://spectator.sme.sk/politics-and-society/c/robert-fico-antonino-vadala-phone-call>.

³⁸ Ján Kuciak, "Talianska mafia na Slovensku: Jej chápadlá siahajú aj do politiky," *Aktuality.sk*, 2018, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/568007/talianska-mafia-na-slovensku-jej-chapadla-siahaju-aj-do-politiky/>.

his articles gradually gained greater success and readership. Infographics also posed a challenge for him; they were supposed to help readers navigate the topic but, initially, Kuciak designed them in a way that only he could fully understand. In the *Aktuality.sk* newsroom, this was humorously referred to as “Ján’s universe.” Paradoxically, infographics became a significant part of Kuciak’s articles—eventually, the editorial team began to place substantial importance on them as an integral element of their journalistic output. Thanks to Kuciak, infographics are now an essential feature of *Aktuality.sk*, contributing to its status as one of the most-read websites in Slovakia.³⁹

Following Ján Kuciak’s murder, several initiatives were established to honor his legacy. In 2018, the Investigative Center of Ján Kuciak was founded by former journalist Árpád Soltész and colleagues who had worked with Kuciak. Soltész regarded Kuciak as a model journalist for both Slovakia and the international community. The Center continues Kuciak’s mission by focusing on uncovering corruption and international crime, and examining environmental issues, while promoting investigative journalism education and freedom of speech. Funded through grants, it operates as a civic association and encourages collaboration and resource-sharing among newsrooms in order to elevate investigative reporting standards. Founders Árpád Soltész, Zuzana Petková, and Pavla Holcová drew on the mission of the All For Jan team, which continued Kuciak’s work after his death.⁴⁰

In addition to numerous online articles, several books have been published about Kuciak’s life and work, including *Umlčaní—príbeh Jána Kuciaka a Martiny Kušnírovej* (The Silenced: The Story of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová) by Marek Vagovič, *Kuciak*, a compilation of his articles from 2015 to 2023, and *Vražda Jána a Martiny—vyšetrovanie* (The Murder of Ján and Martina—Investigation) by Laura Kellö Kalinská. The novel *Sviňa* (The Swine) by investigative journalist Árpád Soltész also indirectly explores Kuciak’s murder and the rise of corruption in Slovakia in a fictionalized context. The book was later adapted into a movie of the same name.

Umlčaní—príbeh Jána Kuciaka a Martiny Kušnírovej recounts their story through authentic testimonies from family, friends, and others close to them. Fourteen journalists contributed to this work under the

³⁹ Vagovič et al., *Umlčaní*, 140–42.

⁴⁰ ICJK.sk, “O nás,” *ICJK.sk*, 2023, <https://www.icjk.sk/223/O-nas>.

leadership of then-editor-in-chief Marek Vagovič. The book provides a detailed exploration of the lives and backgrounds of Ján Kuciak and his colleagues, offering insight into the methodologies and challenges of their investigative journalism within the broader political context of the era. The book serves not only as a tribute to Kuciak's memory but also as a rallying call to uphold and continue his legacy.⁴¹

In her book, Laura Kellö Kalinská provides a comprehensive analysis of the investigation into the murders of Kuciak and Kušnírová, chronicling the inquiry from late February 2018 until the sixth anniversary of their deaths, when the book was released. The book documents precisely the steps taken by Slovakia's largest and most complex investigative team, showing how evidence led the police to rule out various leads and false trails. The publication serves as a comprehensive summary of the facts, dispels rumors, and provides an explanation for the public as to why specific defendants were brought to court and convicted. It includes carefully compiled facts and logically interconnected arguments, giving readers insight into how the investigators pieced together the last hours of Ján and Martina's lives and the perpetrators' activities in the days leading up to the crime.

LITERARY REPORTAGE—THE REPRESENTATION OF READERSHIP, THE FUTURE OF AUTHORSHIP

In the latter half of the 2010s, the evolution of literary journalism in Slovakia was not only influenced by works addressing the murder of Ján Kuciak, published in the aforementioned media, but also by the establishment of the publishing house Absynt, dedicated to the publication of literary reportage. Thanks to this publisher, the genre is currently experiencing what Radoslav Passia has described as both a publishing and readership renaissance.⁴² Its first publication was a translation of the book *Eyes Covered with Sand* (2015) by Polish journalist Paweł Piotr Smoleński, which offers an insightful perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the daily lives of those directly affected. A year later, Absynt published *The Unwomanly Face of War* by Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexievich.

⁴¹ "Umlčani: Príbeh Jána Kuciaka a Martiny Kušnírovej," *Aktuality.sk*, n.d., <https://www.aktuality.sk/tema/kniha-umlcani-jan-kuciak-martina-kusnirova/>.

⁴² Radoslav Passia, "O troch reportážnych knihách: (poznámky ku Gindlovi, Forróovi a Bánovi)," *plav.sk*, November 26, 2020, <https://www.plav.sk/node/212>.

Originally released in a shortened and censored form in the 1980s, Absynt presented its expanded original version.

The first Slovak book of reportage published by Absynt was *Slon na Zemplíne: Príbehy Slovenska* (An Elephant in Zemplín: Stories from Slovakia, 2018) by photo-documentarist Andrej Bán. Other Slovak authors followed, including journalist Lukáš Onderčanin with *Utópia v Leninovej záhrade* (Utopia in Lenin's Garden, 2021), which has also been published in Czech translation, and Marek Hudec with *Uzol* (The Knot, 2022), which focuses on his hometown of Nové Zámky. In 2023, Absynt published *The Women Who Stayed* by Magdaléna Rojo, and most recently, Slovak reporter Tomáš Forró and his books *Donbas* (2019) and *Spev sirén* (The Song of the Sirens, 2024), which document the ongoing war in Ukraine. Other prominent figures of Slovak reportage include Eugen Gindl and Irena Brežná. A few years ago, Gindl published a collection of his previously released reportage titled *Čelom vzad ozvena!* (Echo of an About-Face, 2015). This work is a well-structured, cohesive book composed of chapters focusing on specific regions of Slovakia, particularly villages. A defining feature of Gindl's reportage was his focus on themes relating to the disappearance of the "old world," the transformation of landscapes, and their cultural layers. He demonstrates a profound understanding of the contexts and historical connections underlying these topics.⁴³ Irena Brežná's reportage was initially published in the magazines *Aspekt* and *Romboid*. A selection of her work from the early stages of her career can be found in the extensive collection *Tekutý fetiš* (Liquid Fetish, 2005), which combines prose with literary reportage from war-torn regions. The most notable of these is *Vlčice zo Sernovodska* (She-Wolves of Sernovodsk, 2016), where Brežná offers a detailed account of Chechnya's more than two-decade-long struggle for independence, which was marked by two brutal colonial wars that ultimately led to Ramzan Kadyrov's dictatorship.⁴⁴

Books published by the Absynt publishing house have gained such popularity in Slovak literary circles that they have inspired their own colloquial term: "absyntovky," referring to literary reportage released by Absynt. Their success is evident from bestseller lists published by Slovakia's largest

⁴³ Passia, "O troch reportážnych knihách."

⁴⁴ Irena Brežná, *Vlčice zo Sernovodska: Zápisky z rusko-čičeňskej vojny* (Žilina: Absynt, 2016), for a description, see "Irena Brežná, Vlčice zo Sernovodska," *Slovenské literárne centrum*, <https://www.litcentrum.sk/dielo/vlcice-zo-sernovodska>.

bookstores, including Martinus.sk, Panta Rhei, and Artforum. Notably, Martinus.sk has even created a separate ranking category for reportage publications, where Absynt's literary reportages frequently appear alongside interview-based books. Although Absynt is the flagship publisher of literary reportage in Slovakia, it is important to note that the publishing house primarily focuses on translating foreign literary works into Slovak. These include reportage books by authors such as Ryszard Kapuściński, Åsne Seierstad, Ilona Wiśniewska, and Wojciech Jagielski, as well as translations of works such as *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote. Only about one-third of its publications come from Slovak authors. The success and popularity of "absyntovky" thus reflect the preferences and expectations of Slovak readers more than the output of local journalists and writers. The success of Absynt does, though, demonstrate that Slovak readers are more than receptive to literary journalism and its subgenres, and that they expect world-class quality at the local level. A publisher like Absynt is a great indicator of what Slovak literary journalism may be like in the future while the most important issues will still be domestic, the techniques of foreign literary reporters and journalists experimenting with the form will undoubtedly become an established part of Slovak literary journalism. Ultimately, Slovaks are keen to avoid lagging behind their neighbors, and the strong Polish reportage schools will undoubtedly serve as a significant model for them.

Another prominent theme of literary reportages in book format, as has been previously mentioned, has been Ukraine. Before 2022, the focus was primarily on Slovakia's eastern borderlands. However, after the onset of Russia's invasion, reportage shifted directly to Ukraine, with noteworthy contributions coming from Tomáš Forró (a journalist at *Denník N*) and Stanislava Harkotová (a journalist at *Aktuality.sk*).

In recent years, there has also been an increased interest in publishing literary journalism that addresses the concerns of minorities, LGBTQ+ topics, and works by female authors like Hana Kubátová, Veronika Prušová, and Kvet Nguyen.

However, in addition to literary reportage and essays, Slovak literary journalism also includes texts bordering on investigative reporting and literary fiction. Examples include novels by former journalist Árpád Soltész—*Mäso* (Meat), *Sviňa* (Swine), and *Hnev* (Rage)—as well as Marek Vagovič's *Padreho klan* series, with "Padre" serving as a pointed reference to Robert Fico (three-time PM) and his close associates, whose behavior and operations resemble those of a clan.

Although Ján Kuciak did not engage in literary journalism, focusing instead on investigative reporting where narrative techniques are seldom used, his death marked a decisive shift in Slovak literary journalism, particularly within book-length publications. Certain narratives possess a universal resonance, recurring across cultures and helping to articulate fundamental civilizational values. The murder of a young, innocent individual who meticulously pursued his work and sought to bring positive changes to society is a motif that transcends cultural boundaries and elicits widespread empathy. Kuciak's life, work, and death became such a narrative. In Slovakia, it prompted reflection not only on the role of storytelling in art and journalism but also on the centrality of sacrifice as a foundational narrative within Western civilization—one capable of mobilizing entire societies. His death, and that of his fiancé, profoundly impacted Slovak society, fostering a broader awareness of systemic issues. As a result, journalism and literature entered a much closer genre convergence, since the story became the means through which people were able to understand the condition of Slovak society at the time. The story of the lives of these two young people helped journalists forge a stronger connection with their audiences and truly move them—specifically through narrative methods, which suddenly proved highly effective. Journalists succeeded in motivating the public to protest and to vote, which in the 2020 elections resulted in a defeat for the political players implicated in the scandals that Kuciak had investigated.

Many works of literary journalism published in Slovakia before 2018, including those discussed in this article, tended to have a narrow focus—whether on the eastern border of the state, a marginalized region, a particular community, or on an isolated historical event such as various mafia-related killings from the 1990s. However, the murder of Ján Kuciak marked a turning point. This shift has manifested both in the types of books now produced by Slovak authors and in evolving reader expectations. This powerful and universally comprehensible story also brought with it an increasing emphasis on broader contextualization—within reportage, investigative journalism, and texts at the intersection of journalism and literature. Kuciak's death was directly linked to his journalistic work, though for a long time it remained unclear which of his specific investigations had provoked his murder, or what direct connections existed between his murder and the Slovak political establishment. Suddenly, scandals rooted in regions of eastern Slovakia became entangled with politicians who, in turn, were linked to organized crime, which itself was tied

to corrupt courts. A complex network of relationships, requiring a holistic understanding and broad contextual insight, was abruptly laid bare to the entire nation. Slovak readers increasingly sought journalistic works capable of conveying this expansive interconnectedness—ideally in book-length formats, which allow for greater depth, and in narrative styles, which facilitate an ease of orientation in time, characters, and events, while simultaneously evoking emotions that encourage civic engagement.

The thematic “bubbles” of reportage from before 2018 burst, as the murders of Kuciak and his fiancée revealed that, in Slovakia, everything is interwoven. This revelation underscored the necessity of writing and thinking in broader contexts. The works of Marek Vagovič provide a clear example of this development: they illustrate the interconnections between personal tragedy, corruption scandals, political machinations, and the general socio-political atmosphere in the country. Similar approaches are evident in the works of other authors engaged in Slovak literary journalism discussed in this chapter.

CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORKS OF SLOVAK LITERARY JOURNALISM: EXPECTATIONS, RECEPTION, AND SOCIAL IMPACT

The fact that the term literary journalism is not well established in Slovakia is not unusual, considering how nations perceive literary journalism often depends on their historical print culture.⁴⁵ In Slovakia, where free media is still relatively young, journalism is catching up after years of stagnation under totalitarian rule. Publications and approaches that could be classified under the umbrella term of literary journalism are diverse, appearing at first glance as a blend of North American literary journalism—“sharp and bitter in its unwavering facticity,” as John S. Bak describes it—with creative non-fiction,⁴⁶ while also exhibiting the strong influence of the Polish school of reportage.

Despite these undeniable international influences, Slovak literary journalism primarily responds to domestic needs. Its evolving and heterogeneous nature likely stems from this very fact. Ilona Nan describes literary journalism as a practical art, akin to the role of a strategist or

⁴⁵ John S. Bak, “Introduction,” in *The Routledge Companion to World Literary Journalism*, ed. John S. Bak and Bill Reynolds (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 1–2.

⁴⁶ Bak, “Introduction,” 1–4.

navigator⁴⁷—not quite a fine art, not quite a “technē.” This conceptualization applies well to Slovak publications that can be categorized as literary journalism.

Although, as demonstrated by the study by Van Krieken and Sanders, we know very little about the actual effects of literary journalism on audiences, its potential positive impacts are widely assumed. Narrative techniques are believed to enhance the readers’ comprehension, to evoke a wide range of emotions—especially empathy—and to help readers better understand the society they live in, while also actively engaging them in the issues discussed.⁴⁸

Slovak texts from the past two decades are undoubtedly both artistic expressions and examples of practical journalism. While proving their positive influence may be challenging, their popularity in the Slovak book market suggests that domestic readers are interested not only in the subjects these books address but also in their format and narrative techniques. Many of these topics could be explored through standard newspaper articles; however, readers still choose books that employ narrative methods and merge journalism with fiction.

Nevertheless, in Slovakia, literary journalism extends its influence beyond reader engagement, permeating real-life contexts. The latest book by journalist Marek Vagovič, *Čurillovci* (The Čurilla Group), focuses on a group of police officers currently being unjustly persecuted for their diligent work investigating political corruption. On December 3, 2024, investigative journalist Monika Tódová of *Denník N* shared on her Instagram page an excerpt from the interrogation of one of the currently detained officers involved in exposing corruption. During the questioning, the investigator inquired whether the officer had participated in Vagovič’s book and asked about specific details, characters, and contacts described within it:

Investigator: Could you state whether you participated in the creation of Marek Vagovič’s book *Čurillovci*? If so, please describe in detail how you were involved.

⁴⁷ Ioana-Gabriela Nan, “Journalism with a Vengeance: The Immodest Proposals of the American New Journalism,” *Lingua: Language and Culture* 14, no. 1 (2015): 97.

⁴⁸ Kobie van Krieken and José Sanders, “What is narrative journalism? A systematic review and an empirical agenda,” *Journalism* 22, no. 6 (2021): 1394–1404.

Defense counsel: I object to the question posed, as the book is unrelated to the act that took place in 2021.

Investigator: I insist on an answer to the question posed.

Accused: I will not answer.⁴⁹

Investigator: Could you state whether you are currently, or have been previously, in contact with the protagonists of Marek Vagovič's book *Čurillovci* (Čurilla, Kišš, Mašin, Ďurka, Hamran, Imre, Chudý, Svitok, Kotek, Sabota, Daňko)? If so, please describe for what purpose you were in contact, what you communicated about, what issues you discussed, and so on.

Defense counsel: I object to the question posed, as the book is unrelated to the act that took place in 2021.

Investigator: I insist on an answer to the question posed.

Accused: I will not answer.⁵⁰

Literary journalism in Slovakia is thus not merely a topic of civic engagement happening in bookstores, it has also become a thorn in the side of the current government. The process of writing literary journalism books in Slovakia has itself become dangerous; literary journalism not only documents and bears witness but also serves as a tool of resistance. As Baym

⁴⁹ Transcription and translation of a post published by *Denník N* journalist Monika Tódová on Instagram on December 3, 2024, featuring an excerpt from the interrogation of detained police officer R. Magula, who was involved in uncovering the corruption of Slovak politicians. During the interrogation, an inspector inquired whether Magula had participated in the creation of Marek Vagovič's book. This post was transcribed and translated into English by the authors of this chapter. Original text: "*Otázka vyšetrovateľa na obvineného:* Mohli by ste uviesť, či ste participovali na vytvorení knihy Mareka Vagoviča *Čurillovci*? Ak áno, opíšte podrobne akým spôsobom. / *Poznámka obhajcu obvineného:* Namietam položenú otázku, pretože kniha nesúvisí so skutkom, ktorý sa odohral v roku 2021. / *Poznámka vyšetrovateľa:* Trvám na odpovedi na položenú otázku. / *Odpoveď obvineného:* Nebudem odpovedať."

⁵⁰ Original text: "*Otázka vyšetrovateľa na obvineného:* Mohli by ste uviesť, či ste v súčasnosti, resp. ste boli predtým v kontakte s protagonistami knihy Mareka Vagoviča *Čurillovci* (Čurilla, Kišš, Mašin, Ďurka, Hamran, Imre, Chudý, Svitok, Kotek, Sabota, Daňko)? Ak áno, opíšte za akým účelom sa kontaktujete, o čom komunikujete, čo riešite a podobne. / *Poznámka obhajcu obvineného:* Namietam položenú otázku, pretože kniha nesúvisí so skutkom, ktorý sa odohral v roku 2021. / *Poznámka vyšetrovateľa:* Trvám na odpovedi na položenú otázku.

Odpoveď obvineného: Nebudem odpovedať."

states, prominent world journalists-turned-fiction-writers of the twentieth century, such as Ernest Hemingway, Gabriel García Márquez or Tom Wolfe, lived through eras of instability, transformation, and tension⁵¹—conditions that also define recent Slovak history. The murder of Ján Kuciak revealed that boundaries and principles—whether in the realms of literature and journalism or in matters concerning the democratic rule of law, societal norms, and political values—long regarded as sacrosanct were, in fact, merely illusory.

The current shift of many prominent Slovak journalists into the sub-genres of literary journalism, enabling them to portray the state's current situation, is undoubtedly also linked to the media's adaptation to technological innovations. As traditional formats change, books often remain the only means of presenting complex topics comprehensively, without losing the readers' attention mid-scroll on a smartphone. However, the willingness of the Slovak readership to engage with 200-page books about politicians they see daily in the newspapers and on television raises questions. This phenomenon may be linked to the perception of books as a traditional, reliable, and trustworthy medium. In an era when Slovakia's media landscape is flooded with fake news, propaganda, and hoaxes, declining trust in online content seems understandable.⁵² Yet, the popularity of traditional publications likely also stems from narrative techniques, the transformation of information into stories, and the space these books provide for broader contextualization.

As has been seen in the example of Marek Vagovič's book, being a writer-journalist, or even merely associated with the creation of such works, has become dangerous, akin to the risks faced by investigative journalists themselves.⁵³ Therefore, it can be concluded that, although literary journalism lacks an official academic label in the Slovak context, it has, in recent years, mirrored international trends while primarily responding to the needs of Slovak citizens—both in terms of content and form. It communicates hard data through literary techniques, making complex realities more accessible and comprehensible.

⁵¹ Baym, "Journalism and the Hybrid Condition," 15.

⁵² Sedmáková, "Žáner bez mena," 101.

⁵³ Ján Višňovský and Pavel Bielik, "Aktuálne trendy v tvorbe investigatívnych novinárskych prejavov," *Otázky žurnalistiky*, nos. 1–2 (2022): 29–30.

CONCLUSION

Although literary journalism in Slovakia lacks an official academic designation and thus receives minimal attention from scholars in the fields of literature and journalism, it remains a vibrant and highly productive genre. Its various subgenres are currently experiencing a boom in popularity among readers. Narrative techniques typical of fiction are systematically employed by authors of both journalistic articles and books when working with themes and data that could be communicated without these techniques. The details that Marek Vagovič presents in his book *Umlčani* (The Silenced) could have been conveyed to readers without additional dramatization through dialogue and narrative. However, Vagovič—like other authors such as Bárdy, Soltész, Forró, and Mikušovič—chose to adopt a storytelling approach. On the opening pages of *Umlčani*, he writes: “Jano Kuciak had his mind full of Italians. He had been analyzing their activities for eighteen months, and the conclusion was finally within reach.”⁵⁴ Although this sentence employs certain elements of colloquial style, it could also easily stand in a traditional newspaper article. Yet Vagovič continues: “With the Italians on his mind, he boarded the train at Bratislava’s main station on Tuesday, February 20, 2018. He set off for home along his usual route: first by express train to Galanta and then by car to Veľká Mača. He sat down in a compartment and once again reflected on everything.”⁵⁵

Here, Vagovič weaves together information, dates, and data from the cases Kuciak was investigating with distinctly literary techniques. The reader is given an insight into Kuciak’s inner thoughts, his routines, and his everyday life—not merely described in a detached manner but experienced through Ján himself. Vagovič, along with other Slovak authors, understood that it is precisely a narrative with clearly defined, emotionally resonant characters and well-developed inner worlds that enables Slovak readers to empathize more deeply and engage more fully with the broader context of societal conflicts and tensions. However, such authors intentionally choose literary methods to engage readers more deeply, evoke genuine sentiments, and allow the topics discussed to resonate longer and more deeply in society.

⁵⁴Vagovič et al., *Umlčani*, 14.

⁵⁵Vagovič et al., *Umlčani*, 14.

The murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in 2018 brought a change to Slovak literary journalism, most notably observable in the growing focus on contemporary political issues and figures, and a shift away from questions relating to regional hardships and history. Since 2018, Slovak literary journalism has become somewhat more “journalistic,” with a clear influence from investigative journalism, which, after Kuciak’s murder, became not only the most debated but also the most necessary genre in Slovak journalism, and in Slovak society, which has been plagued by numerous corruption cases and scandals. Ján Kuciak, in his tragically short but prolific career, demonstrated that Slovakia is an environment where intricate stories of corruption and threats to democracy almost write themselves. And there is no shortage of them.

It is, therefore, natural that journalists-turned-writers turn to new, more attractive forms to voice these complex stories, which negatively affect Slovak society. The murder of the young journalist and his partner stirred strong emotions in our country, driving tens of thousands of people to the streets to demand justice. It is reasonable, then, that journalists would cross their own genre boundaries and step into the realm of fiction and its techniques in order to communicate these emotions more authentically.

Acknowledgements This chapter was funded by the European Union through the NextGenerationEU initiative under the Slovak Republic’s Recovery and Resilience Plan, project number 09I03-03-V04-00664.

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War in Ukraine: Contemporary Narratives, Trends, and Experiments

Mariia Tytarenko

In the contemporary informational landscape of Ukraine, we are witnessing the flourishing of the genre of literary reportage at various levels: in the media (and multimedia), the literary community, the publishing sector, as well as in the educational and institutional spheres. Many Ukrainian writers have begun to document and report on the current war, even though they had no prior experience with creative documentary narrative. Consequently, we are witnessing the emergence of texts that blur the boundaries of genre, experimenting with form, language, and the emotional weight of factual accounts. These works strive to capture the realities of life on the front lines and in the rear, serving as testimonies to human tragedies and records of war crimes. As the war persists, war reportage continues to evolve, incorporating new authors, literary techniques, stylistic approaches, as well as new methodologies and tools for documenting testimonies. In this chapter, we aim to present our observations on literary reportage over the first three years of the full-scale war from February 2022 to February 2025. Admittedly, this is merely an attempt to

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capture a particular slice of time in the ongoing transformation of the genre.

Our analysis will examine the shifting media and publishing landscape in Ukraine, trace developments in education, training, and research, and briefly explore the prehistory of literary journalism in Ukraine. We will also contextualize the “Re-renaissance” of this genre in the country. Following this, we will focus on Ukrainian literary reportage since the Russian invasion, analyzing post-invasion genres, including their intersections with poetry, and memorial reportages as a crucial component of wartime portrayals. We will delve into the crafting of narratives that convey the horrors of war, paying particular attention to the method of “fixing in time.” Finally, we will explore the theme of rediscovering the language of war.

NEW MEDIA OUTLETS AND PUBLISHING SPHERE

With regard to the media, most Ukrainian national and local online media outlets have added or distinguished the “reportage” section in their navigation menus. Moreover, some new media outlets that focus primarily on reporting have emerged, the most notable of which include: *Reporters*, *Frontliner*, *Zaborona*. *Reporters*¹ is a part of *The Ukrainians Media* ecosystem that focuses on literary reportage (spun off as a self-sufficient project in 2019) and positions itself as “Ukraine’s main reporting media.” In 2021, *Reporters* began publishing a paper version of the online magazine, and in 2024, the editors announced a full transition to print. *Frontliner*² is an interactive media site about Russia’s war against Ukraine (founded in 2021). The project team defines itself as follows: “We are reporters on and near the frontline.” The Ukrainian online media outlet *Zaborona Media*³

¹<https://reporters.media/en/> is the English-language version of the media outlet. The site has recently become an archive. The editorial board has changed its policy and now positions the magazine “not as an online media with a printed version, but rather as a paper magazine published four times a year and with digital access for our Community.” The project provides selected online reportages to *The Ukrainians* website here: <https://theukrainians.org/category/reportages/>.

²<https://frontliner.ua/en/about-us-frontliner-reporters/> – English-language version of the media. In 2022, the project team received the Free Media Award and has been cooperating with the *New York Times* since its inception.

³<https://zaborona.com/en/> – English-language version of the media. *Zaborona* is the winner of the Free Media Award (2022) and Siebenpfeiffer Award (2022), and its journalists are winners and finalists of the *Ukrainian Honor of the Profession* award.

(founded in 2018) investigates socially significant issues, covers human rights violations, and discusses contemporary culture. The main media formats include reportage, investigations, documentary video projects, comics, and multimedia.

We can also observe a trend of media outlets and institutions collaborating with publishers to compile creative non-fiction books. For example, in 2022, *Reporters*, in partnership with the Laboratoriia Publishing House, published a collection of war reportages written between February 23 and May 9 in 2022, entitled *77 Days of February. Ukraine Between Two Symbolic Dates of the Russian War Ideology*.⁴ Another book of documentary prose, *Girls Cutting Their Locks*⁵ by Yevgeniia Podobna, was published in Ukrainian in 2018 by the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance with Luta Sprava Publishing House (the author was awarded the national Ukrainian Shevchenko Prize for the book).

Creative non-fiction on historical topics can be found in another print magazine, *Local History*,⁶ the first glossy monthly popular science magazine about Ukrainian history (which has been published since 2018). The issues are mostly thematic. Issue #3–4 in 2022 was dedicated to the full-scale Russian invasion. Narrative journalism can be found in the two-volume book *Ukraïner: Ukrainian Insider*, covering numerous investigative journeys around Ukraine, made by the team of the socio-cultural multimedia Ukrainian studies project Ukraïner.⁷ In 2022, Ukraïner published a book of reportage on trips to the de-occupied territories of Ukraine in April–November 2022 called *De-occupation: Stories of*

⁴ Marichka Paplauskaitė, ed., *77 dniv liutoho: Ukraina mizh dvoma symbolichnymy datamy rosiiskoi ideolohii viiny* [77 Days of February: Ukraine Between Two Symbolic Dates of the Russian War Ideology] (Kyiv: Laboratoriia, Reporters, 2022), 218.

⁵ Yevgeniia Podobna, *Girls Cutting Their Locks: A Book of Memories; The Russo-Ukrainian War* (Kyiv: Luta Sprava Publishing, Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, 2020), 344. The book is available in English at <https://uinp.gov.ua/elektronni-vydannya/divchata-zrizayut-kosy-angliyskoyu-movoyu-girls-cutting-their-locks>.

⁶ The journal was founded by the historical research project “*Local History*” (established in 2013), which positions itself as a “multimedia platform about the past and present of Ukraine.” The project’s website is <https://localhistory.org.ua/>. The magazine is published monthly.

⁷ The project’s website is ukraïner.net. The team aims to “understand and articulate who Ukrainians are through thorough research and to communicate this to the world in an accessible media form.” The Ukraïner Publishing House was founded as part of the project in 2021.

Ukrainian Resistance.⁸ And in 2024, it published a multi-genre chronicle of two years of Ukrainian resistance in the war with Russia, *What Shall We Call This War?*⁹

In the literary and publishing sphere, we can similarly observe a sharp increase in publications comprising reportage. Moreover, there are publishing houses on the market that prioritize literary journalism in their publishing portfolio or even specialize in reportage by Ukrainian and foreign authors, such as the reportage and documentary literature publishing house Choven¹⁰ (founded in 2017 by the Lviv Media Forum).

However, the oldest and most influential in the development of Ukrainian literary reportage was the Ukrainian publishing house Tempora (founded in 2001). Starting in 2010, it launched a large-scale translated series of reportage by Polish authors: Hanna Krall, Aneta Prymaka-Oniszk, Jacek Hugo-Bader, Krzysztof Warg, Mariusz Szczygieł, Paweł Piotr Smoleński, Ryszard Kapuściński, Witold Szablowski, Wojciech Górecki, and others. In addition, in 2014–2016, Tempora initiated a series of reconstructed historical reportage about the 1990s in different cities of Ukraine called *The Dashing Nineties*.¹¹

In 2012, Tempora launched the Mike Johansen Contest for feature reporting, titled *Samovydyets* (Eyewitness), which lasted until 2021 and became an all-Ukrainian platform for reporters and a school for aspiring authors in the genre. The winners of the contest were able to publish their own books of reportage, and the texts of the ten finalists were published annually in collections under the umbrella title “*Veni, Vedi, Scripsi*.” The

⁸ Bogdan Logvynenko, *Deokupatsiia: Istoriia oporu ukraintsiu* [De-occupation: Stories of Ukrainian Resistance] (Kyiv: Ukraïner, 2023), 278.

⁹ Bogdan Logvynenko and Vitalii Poberezhnyi, eds., *Yak my nazvemo tsiu viinu?* [What Shall We Call This War?] (Kyiv: Ukraïner, 2024), 309. The book contains essays and reportage, along with documentary photos, illustrations, memes, infographics, and maps of the fighting.

¹⁰ Choven Reportage and Documentary Literature Publishing House (English version), accessed March 1, 2025, <https://choven.org/?lang=en>.

¹¹ *The Dashing Nineties* series consists of four books: Les' Belei, *Likhii dev'ianosti: Liubov' i nenavist' v Uzhhorodi* [The Dashing Nineties: Love and Hatred in Uzhhorod] (Kyiv: Tempora, 2014), 360. Vladyslav Ivchenko, *Likhii dev'ianosti: Yak ne sumuvaly Sumy* [The Dashing Nineties: How Sumy Did Not Mourn] (Kyiv: Tempora, 2015), 268. Oleh Kryshstopa, *Likhii dev'ianosti: Stanislavskiy fenomen* [The Dashing Nineties: The Stanislav Phenomenon] (Kyiv: Tempora, 2016), 300. Maksym Bepalov, *Likhii dev'ianosti: Kuznia kadrov, Dnipropetrovsk* [The Dashing Nineties: The Training Ground for Personnel, Dnipropetrovsk] (Kyiv: Tempora, 2016), 254.

contest was initiated by a young Ukrainian poet, essayist, and translator, Les Beley. In his introduction to the first collection, published in 2013, he claimed:

The genre of literary reportage in Ukraine is almost nonexistent. There are a few authors who write popular travelogues but unfortunately their texts do not match the quality of literary non-fiction. In 2012 Tempora Publishing House tried to change this situation by announcing a contest for the best literary reportage.... This very genre has just been born in Ukraine.... We hope that such a phenomenon as a School of Ukrainian Literary Reportage will soon appear in our country.¹²

Beley was right in his assessment of reportage of that time, but mistaken regarding the tradition of Ukrainian reportage of the 1930s, which has been revealed through recent research (see more in the section “[Prehistory of Literary Journalism in Ukraine](#)”). In the nine years of the contest’s existence, the competition has revealed new names and highlighted already well-known names in Ukrainian reporting, such as: Anastasiia Dziubak, Anna Romandash, Vira Kuryko, Denys Kazansky, Eva Raiska, Yevgeniia Podobna, Nataliia Gumenyuk, Oleh Kryshchop, Olena Maksymenko, Olesya Yaremchuk, Pavlo Stekh, Svitlana Oslavska, Khrystyna Kotsira, Khrystyna Shalak, Yaroslava Tymoshchuk, and others. The majority of these authors have published award-winning reportage books, some of which have been translated into English.¹³

EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND RESEARCH

At the same time as the rise and increasing popularity of translated reportage in Ukraine, various reporting training programs and schools began to emerge. Thanks to Tempora, Ukrainian literary journalism was largely shaped by the tradition of Polish reportage. It was also promoted by the

¹² *Samovydyets, Veni, Vidi, Scripsi: Svit u masshtabi ukrains'koho reportazhu* [Veni, Vidi, Scripsi: The World in the Scope of Ukrainian Reportage] (Kyiv: Tempora, 2013), 3–5. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Ukrainian sources in this work are my own.

¹³ Some of the reportage books by the mentioned authors are available in English, such as: Olesya Yaremchuk, *Our Others: Stories of Ukrainian Diversity*, ed. Olesya Yaremchuk, trans. Hanna Leliv and Zenia Tompkins (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020), 172. Podobna, *Girls Cutting Their Locks*, 344. Anna Romandash, *Women of Ukraine: Reportages from the War and Beyond*, Ukrainian Voices, vol. 41 (Stuttgart and Hannover: ibidem Press, 2023), 160.

Polish Institute in Kyiv, which organized many translation and educational projects with the participation of well-known Polish reporters, such as Mariusz Szczygieł, Jacek Hugo-Bader, and Witold Szablowski, who often visited Ukraine. Furthermore, in cooperation with the Polish Institute and with the support of grants, the Ukrainian Catholic University School of Journalism held a series of practical schools of reportage for students and young journalists from all over Ukraine in 2012–2016, promoting the genre and fostering a new generation of Ukrainian reporters. Since 2010, the author of this article has been teaching the first courses on literary reportage and American New Journalism at Ivan Franko National University, and since 2012, at the Ukrainian Catholic University's School of Journalism and Communication,¹⁴ and also launched a Laboratory of Literary Reportage¹⁵ at the *Litakcent* internet platform. In 2018, *The Ukrainians Media* held two Schools of Reportage for young reporters, and in 2019, as part of the *Reporters Talk* project, organized a dozen meetings with experienced reporters for journalists in the regions of Ukraine.

In 2024, a separate course on Literary Reportage¹⁶ was added to the course offerings of the *Litosvita* School of Creative and Professional Writing (a non-academic educational program open to everyone), with well-known Ukrainian reporters as lecturers along with the Polish guest lecturer Witold Szablowski. Creative non-fiction courses are also offered by various media organizations such as the Media Development Foundation.¹⁷

Despite the boom in practical instruction in reportage at all levels, this development has not been accompanied by similar growth in the academic study of the field. For example, in 2015, the first and perhaps the only

¹⁴These courses were developed by the author of this chapter based on her research on American New Journalism conducted during her participation in the Fulbright Academic Exchange Program at the Department of Journalism, College of Communications, The Pennsylvania State University, in 2008–2009.

¹⁵All three issues can be accessed at <https://litakcent.online/author/cap-mariya-tytarenko/>.

¹⁶The course is available at <https://litosvita.com/litreport/>. Litosvita was founded in 2013 and positions itself as a “pioneer in creative writing in Ukraine.” It has 290 completed courses and 21 thousand graduates.

¹⁷The course, developed by the author of this chapter, is available at <https://www.media-developmentfoundation.org/project/kurs-hudozhnij-reportazh-vid-ideyi-do-publikac-ziyi/>. Media Development Foundation is a center for the development of independent media in Ukraine (founded in 2013) and has conducted over 100 courses for young journalists.

Ph.D. dissertation (in the theory and history of journalism specialization) on literary journalism titled “*New Journalism*” in the media discourse of Ukraine: genesis, genre and stylistic features by Liliia Shutiak was defended.¹⁸ In August 2023, there was a defense of the Ph.D. dissertation (in the specialization of philology) entitled *The Poetics of Creative Reporting in Early 21st-Century Ukrainian Prose*,¹⁹ in which the scholar Mariia Konieva declares that her dissertation “presents the first-ever comprehensive study of creative reporting in 21st century Ukrainian prose.”

Similarly, at the level of educational literature, we can find only a few published Ukrainian manuals on reportage: a practical guide for journalists—*Reportage: Between Facts and Emotions* by Volodymyr Pavliv²⁰—and an online guide for writing literary reportages, *Reporting & Dot*.²¹ In the vast majority of cases, reportage is included in separate sections in general journalism textbooks along with other genres. There are also only a few manuals on writing reportage translated into Ukrainian.²² Furthermore, out of the large corpus of translated books on creative writing, we currently have only one on writing about war: *Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story* by Ron Capps, translated from English into Ukrainian by Olga Pogynaiko in 2021. There is also a lack of professional criticism of the genre (most reviews are fragmentary and cursory

¹⁸ Liliia Shutiak, “‘New Journalism’ in the Media Discourse of Ukraine: Genesis, Genre and Stylistic Features,” [in Ukrainian] manuscript, accessed March 1, 2025, https://www.dnu.dp.ua/docs/ndc/dissertations/K08.051.19/autoreferat_5667355cca9a8.pdf.

¹⁹ Mariia Konieva, “The Poetics of Creative Reporting in the Early 21st Century Ukrainian Prose,” manuscript, accessed March 1, 2025, http://phd.znu.edu.ua/page/PhD/2023/Konieva/2023_disertats_ya_kon_voyi_mar_yi.pdf.

²⁰ Volodymyr Pavliv, *Reportazh: Mizh facktamy i emotsiiamy; Praktychnyi posibnyk dlya zhurnalistiv* [Reportage: Between Facts and Emotions; A Practical Guide for Journalists] (Lviv: Publishing House of the Ukrainian Catholic University, 2015), 120.

²¹ The complete title is *Reporting & Dot: 25 Tips and a Few More Stories for Those Who Are Planning or Already Writing Feature Reportages* (2019). The manual was created with the support of the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Ukraine, and is available at: <https://posibnyk.reporters.media/>.

²² Those are: David Everett, *The Reporter’s Handbook* [in Ukrainian] (Kyiv: IREX ProMedia, 1999). Jean-Dominique Boucher, *Reportage in the Print Media* [in Ukrainian], trans. Alla Lazareva et al. (Kyiv: 2003). *Techniques of Reportage: A Handbook* [in Ukrainian], ed. and trans. Alla Lazareva et al. (Kyiv: 2003). Michael Haller, *Reportazh: Navchal’nyy posibnyk* [Reportage: A Handbook], trans. V. Klymchenko and V. Oliynyk, ed. V. F. Ivanov (Kyiv: Akademiia Ukrain’skoi Presy, Tsentr Vil’noi Presy, 2011), 348.

overviews), and a lack of educational anthologies, either Ukrainian or translated.²³

PREHISTORY OF LITERARY JOURNALISM IN UKRAINE

The discovery of Ukraine's rich reporting tradition marked a major turning point in the field, as it revealed that Ukrainian reportage originated a century ago and has its own short but vibrant history. A landmark in this context was the publication of the first Ukrainian anthology of reportage, *Paths under the Sun* (2016),²⁴ an 860-page volume featuring five travel reportages by six authors of that time. It was published as part of the *Our 20s* series by Tempora Publishing House and contains the best examples of Ukrainian travel reportage from the 1920s. The *Our 20s* series aims to showcase the full diversity of Ukrainian literature from that period, including genres such as literary reportage, detective and romantic fiction, and more. The anthologies revive both well-known and lesser-known writers, drawing attention to the fact that the texts of that time were evolving in line with global trends. More importantly, they remain relevant and compelling even 100 years later. The researchers and authors of the *Our 20s* Tempora series, Yaryna Tsymbal and Oleksandr Stukalo, say that in the late 1930s there was already so much reportage in Ukraine that "we can talk about the formation of a separate genre, which is very similar to New Journalism of the United States."²⁵

Now we are rediscovering the Ukrainian reportage of the 1920s, because for a long time these texts were unknown, and most of the writers of that time belonged to the "Executed Renaissance" of Ukrainian literature and were killed by the Soviets in Sandarmokh.²⁶ Between October 27 and November 4, 1937, 1111 prisoners from the Solovky Labor Camp were

²³The Russian translation of the first anthology *The New Journalism*, compiled by Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson in 1973, was published in St. Petersburg in 2008 (the Ukrainian translation has not yet been released). It bears mentioning that the genre of the book in the Russian translation has been designated as essays, rather than reportage.

²⁴Yaryna Tsymbal, ed., *Sbliakhy pid sontsem: Reporazh 20-kh rokiv* [Paths under the Sun: Reportage of the 1920s] (Kyiv: Tempora, 2016), 860.

²⁵Anastasiia Sydco, "Nashi Dvadtsyaty: Z choho pochynavsyia ukraïnskyi reportazh" [Our Twenties: How Ukrainian Reportage Began], *Medialab*, October 1, 2016, <https://medialab.online/news/nashi-dvadtsyaty-z-chogo-pochy-navsya-ukrayins-ky-j-reportazh/>.

²⁶A digital memorial cemetery of those killed in Sandarmokh with short biographical texts compiled by memory activists in Russia is available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170203075456/http://sand.mapofmemory.org/filter/?type=1>.

executed in accordance with a quota at the Sandarmokh Clearing in Karelia. Among the 290 Ukrainians executed were the founder of the *Berezil* Theater, Les Kurbas; the playwright Mykola Kulish; the poet Mykola Zerov; and many other prominent artists, scientists, and public figures. This group also included authors known for their reportage, such as Geo Shkurupiy and Valerian Polishchuk, featured in the anthology *Paths under the Sun*.

Perhaps the most significant discovery in the reportages of 1920s were the travelogues of Mike Johansen and Sofia Yablonska. Johansen, a prominent figure of the “Executed Renaissance,” is regarded as the father of Ukrainian reportage. His book *The Travels of a Philosopher Under a Cap*²⁷ contains five reportages: on Jewish settlements, the Bulgarian national region, Dagestan, the Dnipro-Bug estuary, and Kazakhstan. His artistic style is characterized by the montage principle of writing, black humor, the grotesque, irony, illogic, the search for a new language, and lexical experiments. “Johansen’s travels are, in some ways, ahead of New Journalism—a literary trend that emerged in the second half of the 20th century that is characterized by the expansion of the authors’ possibilities for self-expression, allowing them to act not only as a commentator but also as a participant in the events described,” Yaryna Tsymbal observes in her dissertation *The Works of Mike Johansen in the Context of the Ukrainian Avant-Garde of the 1920s–1930s*.²⁸

Sofia Yablonska became the first Ukrainian woman to travel around the world and is considered the first Ukrainian travel blogger. In her book *The Charm of Morocco. From the Land of Rice and Opium. Distant Horizons: Travel Essays*²⁹ she describes her travels to North Africa, China, Java, Bali, New Zealand, Tahiti, Bora Bora, and many other places. “Yablonska’s emotional perception of reality prevails over the rational. Rhythm, sound, visual imagery, and action impress and influence the story itself,” Olena Haleta writes in her book *The New Writing*,³⁰ which focuses on the hybrid literary genres of Ukrainian writers of the past and present.

²⁷ Mike Johansen, *Podorozhni filosafo pid kepom* [The Travels of a Philosopher Under a Cap]. (Kyiv: Tempora, 2016), 448.

²⁸ Yaryna Tsymbal, “Tvorchist Maika Iohansena v konteksti ukrains’koho avanhardu 20–30-kh rokiv” [The Works of Mike Johansen in the Context of the Ukrainian Avant-Garde of the 1920s–1930s], manuscript (Kyiv, 2003), 20.

²⁹ Sofia Yablonska, *Char Maroka: Z krayiny ryzhy ta opiyu; Daleki obriyi: podorozhni narysy* [The Charm of Morocco: From the Land of Rice and Opium; Distant Horizons: Travel Essays]. Ed. Vasyl’ Gabor. (Lviv: Pyramid Publishing House, 2015), 372.

³⁰ Olena Haleta, *Nova slovesnist: ukrains’ka literatura v antropologichnii perspektyvi* [The New Writing: Ukrainian Literature in an Anthropological Perspective] (Lviv: Vydavnytstvo Ukrains’koho Katolytskoho Universytetu, 2023), 136.

Therefore, the current flourishing of the genre in Ukraine can be referred to as the “Re-renaissance” of Ukrainian literary reportage (or literary journalism, which in the Ukrainian tradition refers to the same thing, though the latter definition is less commonly used). This resurgence gradually increased its potential under the influence of the Ukrainian revolutions, including the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Revolution of Dignity (or Euromaidan) in 2014 at the final stage of which the Russian armed invasion of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea began. Ihor Balynskiy, a researcher and co-founder of the Choven Publishing House, explains the explosion of reportage in Ukraine in early 2014 as a result of the events of the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity: “As it turned out, reportage is a very convenient tool for describing everything that is happening around us here and now... A lot of media started using reportage and readers reacted positively to it.”³¹ This explosion is reminiscent of the rise of American New Journalism during the revolutionary events of the 1960s and ‘70s, when American journalists and writers sought to capture real life as it was, with all its dramatic changes at every level of society. A similar phenomenon could be observed in Ukraine during a period of increasing turbulence, which eventually escalated into the ongoing phase of Russia’s war against Ukraine.

UKRAINIAN LITERARY REPORTAGE SINCE THE RUSSIAN INVASION

The phase of the most rapid development of the genre, and in particular the emergence of a large corpus of war reportage, has been observed since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022. The persistent auditory backdrop of rockets and Shahed drones over Ukrainian urban centers and above our heads appeared to magnify the voices of war literature—both about the war and emerging from it. This intensification was so dominant that all non-war-related themes were marginalized, becoming irrelevant and indistinguishable in the broader cultural discourse.

Before the full-scale invasion, the topic of war, namely the Anti-Terrorist Operation in Eastern Ukraine (ATO) of 2014–2018 and the Joint Forces Operation (JFO) of 2018–2022, was mostly covered in the prose works of

³¹ Ihor Balynskiy, “Vydavnytstvo ‘Choven’: 5 rokiv novoyi literatury” [The Publishing House “Choven”: 5 Years of New Literature], *Kyiv Daily*, September 1, 2021, <https://kyivdaily.com.ua/igor-balinskij/>.

veterans and combatants, including fiction and documentary books, diaries, memoirs, essays, and poetry. According to the estimates of Hanna Skorina, a researcher and collector of military literature, there are currently more than 1500 books in Ukraine written by veterans or active military personnel.³² She compiled a catalog of books about the Russian war against Ukraine published between 2014 and September 2023.³³ “Now I see the same process as in 2014,” says Hanna,

Books by civilian authors are mostly published. This is understandable, because those who are currently at war will either start writing after they return or keep online diaries on social media or notes in their smartphones, and it is quite possible that these records will become books in the future. Today, most books are published as the testimonies of civilians who survived the occupation, or publications from creative people expressing their reaction to the full-scale war.³⁴

And, if earlier prose of veterans was singled out as a separate niche and as something different from the rest of literature, now that a large number of contemporary Ukrainian writers are at war, military literature has a chance of becoming an organic part of the general literary process, which includes the creation of texts, their publication and distribution, critical discussion, and their broader cultural and social impact.

It is difficult to overestimate the place of war reportage in contemporary Ukrainian literature. It is written by journalists and military officers, as well as writers who fight, volunteer, and participate in humanitarian missions, collect testimonies, and describe their experiences under occupation or forced displacement. It is noteworthy that even those novelists and poets who had

³² Anastasiia Kikhtenko, “20 knyzhok pro rosiisko-ukrains’ku viinu, yaki napysaly viiskovi i tsyvilni” [20 Books about the Russian-Ukrainian War Written by Military Personnel and Civilians]. *The Village Ukraine*, September 2, 2023, <https://www.village.com.ua/village/culture/culture-guide/342711-20-knizhok-pro-rosiysko-ukrayinsku-viynu-yaki-napisali-viyskoviy-tsivilni>.

³³ Hanna Skorina, *Katalog knyzhok pro rosiisko-ukrains’ku viinu: 2014 - veresen 2023* [Catalog of Books on the Russian-Ukrainian War: 2014–September 2023] (Bilka, 2024). The list of books as of January 10, 2023, can be found here: <https://www.istpravda.com.ua/articles/2023/01/10/162274/>.

³⁴ Oleksandr Mymruk, “Voienna literatura—teper tse i ie ukrsuchlit” [War Literature—Now This Is Ukrainian Contemporary Literature], *Chytomo*, February 6, 2023, para. 5, available at: <https://chytomo.com/voienna-literatura-teper-tse-i-ie-ukrsuchlit/>.

never worked with creative non-fiction before, such as the poet and fiction author Myroslav Laiuk, began writing war reportage. In 2022, he wrote reportage about Christmas celebrations at the front for *Reporters*, and based on his trips in the winter and in March 2023, during the most intense battles for Bakhmut, he wrote a book of war reportage and essays called *Bakhmut*.³⁵ Since then, Laiuk has completely switched to writing literary war reportage. The writers and poets Kateryna Mikhalitsyna and Lyubov Yakymchuk,³⁶ as well as Kateryna Yehorushkina,³⁷ intend to publish their first creative non-fiction books about the war in 2025 and 2026. Some authors are testing reportage techniques for the first time in portrait reconstructions of their deceased friends, colleagues, and comrades-in-arms, such as the poet Yuliia Musakovska in her feature about Oleksandr Osadko, who died in the war.³⁸

Thus, the topic of war has become a dominant one in Ukrainian media and literary discourse. “If until February 24, 2022, [the war] was often invisible in our literature, like a shadow that you notice at the edge of the frame, or a humming that the ear inevitably gets used to over time,” the poet Ostap Slyvynsky writes, “then with the beginning of the full-scale Russian aggression, it has filled almost the entire field of vision.”³⁹

³⁵ Myroslav Laiuk, *Bakhmut*, photographs by Danylo Pavlov (Kyiv: Ukraïner, 2023), 254. An abstract translated into English available at: <http://surl.li/cbajcf>.

³⁶ “10 Winning Projects of the Fellowship Program for Non-Fiction Authors Announced,” *PEN Ukraine*, September 30, 2024, <https://pen.org.ua/en/oholosheno-10-proyektiv-peremozhciv-stypendijnoyi-prohramy-dlya-nonfikshn-avtoriv/>. Kateryna and Lyubov have recently won fellowships from the Norwegian Non-fiction Writers and Translators Association and PEN Ukraine, which are aimed to support Ukrainian writers and journalists who work in non-fiction genres and to help document the experience of the war that Ukrainian society has been living through since 2014, in documentary literature. Kateryna Mikhalitsyna has won with the proposal of a book of stories of librarians from different Ukrainian cities about their personal experience of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Lyubov Yakymchuk, with the proposal of a non-fiction book *Tulips of Azovstal* about the Ukrainian military’s self-sacrifice during the defense of Mariupol in spring 2022.

³⁷ Examples of Kateryna Yehorushkina’s creative non-fiction, available in English translation, can be found at: <http://surl.li/qfotcv> and <http://surl.li/gawbxdx>, accessed March 2, 2025.

³⁸ Her portrait in English is available at: <https://theukrainians.org/spec/peopleofcultureng/osadko/>. Another essayistic portrait of Osadko by Iuliia Musakovska was published in *Voïnnnyi stan: antolohiia* [War State: Anthology], preface by Valerii Zaluzhnyi (Chernivtsi: Vydavets Pomerantsev Sviatoslav, 2023), 368 pp., and is also available in English at: <https://chytomo.com/en/julia-musakovska-people-like-these/>, accessed March 2, 2025.

³⁹ *Pomizh syren: novi virshi viiny* [Among Sirens: New Poems of War], ed. Ostap Slyvynsky (Kharkiv: Vivat, 2023), 9.

POST-INVASION GENRES: INTERSECTIONS WITH POETRY

The writer and reporter Myroslav Laiuk believes that “today in Ukraine any event can be a topic for war reportage—from the rear or from the front line, because all spheres of life are affected by the war.”⁴⁰ Thus, in his opinion, reporters can choose from a menu of topics that include the defense of cities by the Armed Forces of Ukraine, military stories, the evacuation and the life of civilians in the war zone, volunteer initiatives, the impact of new technologies on the course of the war, and so on.

The multi-thematic nature of the war optimally correlates with the genre diversity and intergenre diffusion of literary reportage. Ukrainian literary reportage on war is represented in various forms: informational, literary, documentary, descriptive, entertaining, verbatim (or monological), investigative, reconstructive, and profiles. If we take John Warnock’s⁴¹ typology of literary non-fiction, there are examples of: literary journalism, literary documentary, travel writing, autobiography, biography, writing about history, culture, and nature. However, in our opinion, the most interesting are the unexpected hybrid forms of reportage, as well as innovative original formats that emerged under the influence of military realities and are still waiting for generic classification and study. Let us consider some examples.

Poetry was the genre that responded most immediately to the war, capturing the emotions it spawned. The emergence of documentary and reportage poetry—a new hybrid genre shaped by the war—has become increasingly evident. “Poetry in time of war is a document,” writes poet and translator Ostap Slyvynsky in the foreword to the anthology *Between the Sirens: New Poems of War*, which includes poetry by 59 authors written within a year of the full-scale invasion.⁴² Slyvynsky is convinced that these poems can be used to create a poetic chronicle of the war (many of poems in the collection precisely record the time of their composition), and they would be useful not only to historians but also to prosecutors, and they can be read in a courtroom, as the last known poem by the Polish-language

⁴⁰ Citation taken from Myroslav Laiuk’s lecture. His main theses are available at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=983067567188877&set=pcb.983067653855535>, accessed March 2, 2025.

⁴¹ John Warnock, *Representing Reality: Readings in Literary Nonfiction* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989).

⁴² *Pomizh syren*, 8.

Jewish poet Zuzanna Ginczanka,⁴³ who was murdered by the Nazis, was read. Three of the anthology's authors have already been claimed by the war: Maksym Kryvtsov was killed at the front, Viktoria Amelina⁴⁴ was killed by a Russian missile, and Borys Humeniuk is missing in action. These were some of their last testimonies.

Dmytro Lazutkin, a poet, journalist, winner of Ukraine's most prestigious national Shevchenko Prize (2024), who has been serving in the Armed Forces since 2023, and who is a spokesman for the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, calls his current war poetry reportage. The annotation to his latest (twelfth) poetry collection, *We Will Live Forever*, announces: "These are tough texts, very realistic and ruthless. All the events really happened, all the characters are not fictional. This poetry is like the roasted meat of history. The book is based on stories that the author wanted to forget but could not."⁴⁵ In an interview, Lazutkin himself notes that the mode in which he writes has changed—from lyrical to reportage.⁴⁶ His texts employ a range of literary journalistic techniques, such as the use of vivid scenes, authentic voices, precise details, and dynamic shifts in perspective. For example, in the poem *Final Shot*⁴⁷ Lazutkin, as if in a live reporting situation from the stabilization center,⁴⁸ conveys the doctors' attempts to save a soldier whose leg was blown off at the Avdiivka Coke and Chemical Plant. The poet depicts "a

⁴³In January 1946, Zofja Chomin and her son Marian Chomin were tried on charges of collaborating with the Nazis. The case uniquely incorporated Zuzanna Ginczanka's poem "*Non omnis moriar*" as a form of victim testimony, marking a rare instance of a literary work being used as evidence in a criminal trial.

⁴⁴With the outbreak of full-scale war, the novelist Victoria Amelina began writing poetry. In 2024, The Old Lion Publishing House posthumously released her poetry collection *Testimonies*. Additionally, her documentary book *Looking at Women Looking at War: A War and Justice Diary* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2025), 320 pp., was published posthumously on February 18, 2025, in English.

⁴⁵Dmytro Lazutkin, *My budemo zhyty vichno* [We Will Live Forever] (Lviv: VSL, 2024).

⁴⁶"Duzhe vazhlyvo fiksuvaty podii—Lazutkin pro poeziiu pid chas viiny" [It Is Very Important to Record Events—Lazutkin on Poetry During the War], *Radio "Kultura"*, September 6, 2024, para. 7, available at: <http://www.nrcu.gov.ua/news.html?newsID=105196>.

⁴⁷An English translation of the poem is available at: Karla Wagner, *Journeys, Part 1: Interview with Dmytro Lazutkin*, <https://karlawagner.eu/journeys-part-1-interview-with-dmytro-lazutkin/>; or in *Paths of War, Paths of Love* (Folio, 2024), 10–11, translated by Nadiia Telenchuk, <http://surl.li/hphynf>.

⁴⁸Stabilization center is the first frontline medical center to receive wounded soldiers immediately after evacuation from the front line; there, their condition is stabilized for further evacuation to other medical facilities.

general view: the doctor from behind,” “a close-up of the fighter’s young face,” voices of the doctor, of a British reporter Jane, and his own. And instead of the final shot (“everyone wants to see / a fighter of the special operations forces / saying goodbye to life”), he takes us outside along with Jane, where “just past the roadblock / it suddenly starts raining.”⁴⁹

Writing about poetry during the war, Ukrainian poet, journalist, and civic activist Svitlana Povaliaieva notes: “Despite all the artistic means and personal language of each poet, it is somehow reportage. Because even if it’s an experience, not a description of specific events, of Mariupol or Bucha, it’s still a reporting of what we are constantly, incessantly experiencing.”⁵⁰ However, it is evident that the most reportage-like poetry emerges directly from the trenches, from the front lines, capturing the raw experiences and emotions of its authors. Among the well-known and widely read Ukrainian authors who exemplify this are: Borys Humeniuk⁵¹ (missing in action), Anatolii Dnistroviy,⁵² Artur Dron⁵³ (hospitalized), Maksym Kryvtsov⁵⁴ (killed at the front), Ihor Mitrov,⁵⁵ Yaryna Chornohuz,⁵⁶ and others.

MEMORIAL REPORTAGES AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF WARTIME NARRATIVES

A notable block of Ukrainian military non-fiction comprises books dedicated to fallen soldiers (often a combination of memoirs and essays). One such book-requiem written before the full-scale invasion, was *The Death of*

⁴⁹ Dmytro Lazutkin, *Paths of War; Paths of Love* (Kharkiv: Folio, 2024), 10–11, available at: <http://surl.li/hphynf>.

⁵⁰ “Poeziia pid chas viiny: rozmova v ramkakh prezentatsii antolohii ‘Pomizh syren’” [Poetry During the War: A Discussion at the Presentation of the Anthology “Among Sirens”], March 1, 2023, para. 6, available at: <https://pen.org.ua/poeziia-pid-chas-vijny-rozmova-v-ramkakh-prezentatsiyi-antolohiyi-pomizh-syren>.

⁵¹ Borys Humeniuk, *Virshi z viiny* [Poems from the War] (Kyiv: DIPA, 2018), 192.

⁵² Anatolii Dnistroviy, *Dni tryvoh: Poezii* [Days of Anxiety: Poems] (Kyiv: Vikhola, 2023), 152.

⁵³ Artur Dron, *We Were Here: Poetry from the Front Lines of the Ukrainian-Russian War*, trans. Yuliia Musakovska (London: Jantar Publishing, 2024), 100.

⁵⁴ Maksym Kryvtsov, *Virshi z biinitisi: poezii* [Poems from the Loophole: Poetry], 2nd ed. (Kyiv: Nash Format, 2024), 185.

⁵⁵ Ihor Mitrov, *Holos Ukrainy* [Voice of Ukraine] (Kyiv: Luta Sprava Publishing, 2021), 136.

⁵⁶ Yaryna Chornohuz, *[dasein: oborona prysutnosti]* [dasein: Defense of Presence] (Kyiv: Vikhola, 2023), 112. Winner of the Taras Shevchenko National Prize of Ukraine (2024).

*a Soldier Told by His Sister*⁵⁷ by Olesya Khromeychuk, a writer, historian, and director of the Ukrainian Institute in London, about her brother Volodymyr Pavliv, who died at the front in Eastern Ukraine in March 2017. In one of her interviews, Khromeychuk recounts how she was outraged by the obituaries about her brother, which hastily presented unverified facts and also presented them through the prism of distorted and simplistic heroization. She did not recognize her brother in these stories. So, she wrote her book that “required a completely different kind of courage”: “The courage to be vulnerable. I was not ready for this experience. I wasn’t ready to say this is my opinion, this is my experience, this is my pain, without hiding behind science, behind evidence.”⁵⁸ Another complex and heartbreaking requiem book is *Lemberg: Mommy, Don’t Cry* by Olena Cherninko,⁵⁹ a mother’s story about her son Mykhailo (codename Lemberg), who went missing in the war in May 2023. Olena writes that there is not a single made-up word in this book—“only the open truth, like an open wound. And a great faith in life.”⁶⁰

In the literary and media field, there are now more and more books of requiems, portrait reconstructions, and feature stories about those who died in the war. In the Ukrainian discourse, these works are called memorial reportages. There are many memorial online platforms that work with stories about fallen soldiers to present not just dry obituaries, but which actually try to reconstruct portraits in the format of creative non-fiction.

For example, there is a joint special project *People of Culture Taken Away by the War*,⁶¹ which is a collaboration between PEN Ukraine and *The*

⁵⁷ Olesya Khromeychuk, *The Death of a Soldier Told by His Sister*, foreword by Philippe Sands, introduction by Andrey Kurkov (London: Monoray, 2022), 224.

⁵⁸ Tetiana Kharchenko, “Olesya Khromeychuk: ‘Viina—tse te, shcho zalyshytsia z namy na pokolinnia, koly vsi blindazhi budut pokynuti’” [Olesya Khromeychuk: “War Is What Will Stay with Us for Generations, When All the Trenches Are Abandoned”], *Chytomo*, January 28, 2022, available at: <https://korydor.in.ua/ua/stories/olesia-khromejchuk-vijna-tse-te-shcho-zalyshytsia-z-namy-na-pokolinnia-koly-vsi-blindazhi-budut-pokynuti.html>.

⁵⁹ Olena Cherninka, *Lemberg: mamtsiu, nu ne plach* [Lemberg: Mom, Please Don’t Cry] (Lviv: Vydavnytstvo staroho leva, 2024), 223.

⁶⁰ “Poshyky sensiv, spohady ta refleksii materi voina u knyzi Oleny Cherninkoi ‘Lemberg: mamtsiu, nu ne plach’” [The Search for Meaning, Memories, and Reflections of a Soldier’s Mother in Olena Cherninka’s Book ‘Lemberg: Mom, Please Don’t Cry’], *Bukvoid*, February 12, 2024, available at: http://bukvoid.com.ua/events/presentation/2024/02/12/142426.html#google_vignette.

⁶¹ The English-language web page of the project is available at: <https://theukrainians.org/spec/peopleofcultureeng/>.

Ukrainians media (started in 2023). The project declares that it “serves a dual purpose: preserving the memory of individuals whom Ukrainian culture has lost in the war and simultaneously bearing witness to Russia’s genocidal intent.” It comprises portraits of writers, musicians, translators, librarians, artists, photographers, archeologists, conductors, and others (losses continue to be monitored). “Despite their inevitable partiality and inexhaustibility,” the team says, “these reportage-biographical essays form a map that proves valuable in studying the legacies of the heroes of this project.”⁶²

Among the project’s portraits, one can clearly distinguish between those written by authors who knew the heroes and those who did not. In the former, we can see memories, greater emotional attachment, and character revelation from lived experiences (for example, texts by Oleksandra Dovzhyk about Viktoria Amelina⁶³ or Yuliia Musakovska about Oleksandr Osadko⁶⁴), while in the latter, the authors’ lack of acquaintance with the hero is compensated for by reconstructing the characters through the testimonies of relatives, friends, and colleagues of the deceased, as well as by research work (for example, texts by Kateryna Mykhalitsyna about Viktor Petrov⁶⁵ or Yevgeniia Podobna about Pavlo Li⁶⁶). In formulating the task for the project’s authors, the team asks to avoid clichés and sentimentality, so as to strengthen the reporting narrative. The texts of the project are portrait essays that use reportage techniques to varying degrees. For instance, Sasha Dovzhyk opens her text about Amelina with a reportage-style episode from their joint trip, describing a lively dialogue as Victoria searches for lipstick and applies it before meeting with schoolchildren. These vivid scenes are interwoven with the author’s personal memories, excerpts from interviews with the protagonist, and key details from her life story.⁶⁷

⁶² *The Ukrainians*, para. 3, available at: <https://theukrainians.org/spec/peopleofcultureeng/>, accessed March 2, 2025.

⁶³ Sasha Dovzhyk, “Victoria Amelina: How the Light Gets In,” *The Ukrainians*, available at: <https://theukrainians.org/spec/peopleofcultureeng/amelina/>, accessed March 2, 2025.

⁶⁴ Yuliia Musakovska, “Oleksandr Osadko: Building the Future,” *The Ukrainians*, available at: <https://theukrainians.org/spec/peopleofcultureeng/osadko/>, accessed March 2, 2025.

⁶⁵ Kateryna Mikhaliitsyna, “Viktor Petrov ‘The Stork’: A Flight Cut Short,” *The Ukrainians*, available at: <https://theukrainians.org/spec/peopleofcultureeng/petrov/>, accessed March 2, 2025.

⁶⁶ Yevgeniia Podobna, “Pavlo Li: The Leading Role,” *The Ukrainians*, available at: <https://theukrainians.org/spec/peopleofcultureeng/li/>, accessed March 2, 2025.

⁶⁷ Dovzhyk, “Victoria Amelina.”

REQUIEM⁶⁸ is a similar memorial project—an online platform founded in 2023 in a collaboration between *The George Gongadze Prize*, the Institute of Mass Information, and PEN Ukraine for the memory of journalists who died as a result of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine. As stated on the project page dated November 6, 2024, “Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, 92 Ukrainian and foreign journalists have been killed. Unfortunately, this number continues to grow, because the war is still ongoing. With this project, we honor the memory of the journalists who wanted to stop it.” Here, the portraits of murdered Ukrainian journalists are divided into three groups: those who were killed while performing editorial tasks, during service in the ranks of Armed Forces, and under shelling and occupation of Ukrainian cities. There is also a monitoring of losses among journalists in numbers (for the period from 02/24/2022 to 03/03/2024): nine journalists were abducted by the Russian military, 16 journalists have disappeared with their fate unknown, and 10 journalists were killed during their professional activities.

Unlike the previous memorial project, here the reconstructed portraits have a multimedia component that consists of photographs and an interactive map of Ukraine with the locations of the journalists’ deaths. Some of the portraits include video inserts, such as the text by Anastasiia Moholyuk about the deceased military commander and ATO veteran Oleksandr Makhov. In her feature, we read the memoir of the hero’s fiancée Anastasiia Blyshchuk:

But everything changed on Independence Day in 2020. In addition to the official events, there was to be a march organized by ATO veterans, about which I filmed a story. And here I am on the air, in a new dress, seeing Sasha out of the corner of my eye: “Sasha!” He ran up to me, greeted me, kissed me on the cheek, and kept running. I was so confused.... He wrote to me that evening: “I’ve been wanting to kiss you for a long time.”⁶⁹

The author of the portrait found this broadcast and included it in the text immediately after this line. This is one of the most powerful and

⁶⁸The English-language web page of the project is available at: <https://journalistsmemorial.gongadzeprize.com.ua/en>.

⁶⁹Anastasiia Moholiuk, “Oleksandr Makhov: Liudyna, yaka nesla v sobi svitlo” [Oleksandr Makhov: The Person Who Carried Light Within], *Journalists Memorial*, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://journalistsmemorial.gongadzeprize.com.ua/en/oleksandr-mahov/story>.

painful moments of the portrait. Firstly, we saw the moment described by the heroine in a video—right as it happened in the live broadcast. Here, we see the hero alive with our own eyes, which evokes greater empathy because we realize that Oleksandr is no longer alive, and that Anastasiia has lost her fiancé. However, this filmed moment shows them still happy at the very beginning of their relationship. This combination of text and video enhances the sense of presence, contributing to a greater immersion in the tragic story.

The largest Ukrainian memorial project is the *Memorial Memory Platform*⁷⁰ (founded in 2022 by the NGO *Abo* Local Media Development Agency). Since the beginning of the full-scale war, the *Memorial* platform has been telling the stories of fallen heroes and civilians, including children, every day (more than 8500 stories as of November 2024), and creating a new culture of memory in Ukraine by honoring each and every one of them, “turning the numbers of the statistics of the dead into names.”⁷¹ “We want to live in a country that remembers” is the key slogan of the project. It is presented on all social networks, and the portraits of the victims include texts (such as biographies and memoirs) along with photos, video, and audio materials. The *Memorial* team also has special subprojects, such as *Alone*,⁷² a photo project dedicated to the loved ones of fallen Heroes, or *People Who Work with Death*,⁷³ a collection of seven personal experiences in monologues by rescuers, volunteers, doctors, and photographers.

I will focus on the recent memorial reportage “Cheka. The Tuning Fork of Freedom”⁷⁴ about Iryna Tsybukh (codename “Cheka”). Iryna was a combat medic from the Hospitallers, a volunteer medical battalion, a media trainer and a journalist, an ambassador of national memory, who died at age 25 on a mission in the Kharkiv region, and who became a Ukrainian symbol of courage and inner strength during her lifetime. The

⁷⁰The project is available in Ukrainian at: <https://www.victims.memorial/>.

⁷¹This quote is sourced from a post on the project’s official Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/18sKRSCNLS/>.

⁷²The subproject is available in Ukrainian at: <https://naodinci.memorial.ua/>.

⁷³The subproject is available in Ukrainian at: <https://lyudi-yaki-pracyuyut-zi-smertyu.memorial.ua/>.

⁷⁴Aliona Martyniuk, “Cheka: The Tuning Fork of Freedom,” published on November 4, 2024, <https://cheka.kharakter.media/index.htm>. It was created by *Memorial* in partnership with *Kharakter Media*, a media outlet focused on Ukrainian military and veterans that explores all facets of military experience (<https://kharakter.media/>).

experienced reporter Aliona Martyniuk, winner of the Megalizzi-Niedzilski Prize for Aspiring Journalists⁷⁵ from the European Commission in 2023, worked with the team for four months on the reportage. The portrait consists of 15 thematic parts, presented on the website in illustrated blocks with drop-down and audio text. This memorial reportage is a vivid example of narrative journalism in the spirit of American New Journalism. It is a dynamic work of narrative with dialogue, action, alternating points of view, and voices of her family, friends, comrades-in-arms, acquaintances, colleagues, and of Tsybukh herself. The text is full of details and meaningful appeals to the senses, war humor, and important microstories, as well as Tsybukh's diary notes and even her will, which she managed to write before her death. Here's a small excerpt from the reportage (from the "The Work" part) that fully conveys its style and tone:

The crew usually includes medics and a driver. Their task is to take the wounded to the stabilization point and do everything possible to ensure the person survives. This time, there are three wounded. Ira is ready to help.

"Dear, why do you need those boots? They're ugly, covered in blood," the girl says gently to the wounded man while quickly shouting instructions to the driver. "I'm driving very gently," Borsuk calls out from the front seat, handing a thermos of tea to a slightly wounded man beside him...

"Now we're going to give you a nice squeeze of your wound. I know it hurts. Please forgive me. But pain is an emotion. You have to understand that this will stop your bleeding," Ira reassures the wounded man, boldly tightening the tourniquet. "Give me the phone, please. I need to call. To my wife," the wounded man wheezes. The very first thing a wounded soldier asks his wife is: "How is our baby?"⁷⁶

Memorial reportage in Ukraine is emerging as a significant and integral part of its commemorative practices. As the volume of such texts increases, they are being organized into distinct projects (primarily online memorial platforms), enriching the archives of memory institutions, shaping a new culture of honoring the war dead, and, in turn, diversifying artistic narrative techniques.

⁷⁵ Aliona won a prize for her reportage "Pentagon Lights and People Disappearing in the Basements: How Mariupol Residents Survived Russia's 'Filtration Camp,'" available in English at: <https://airpu.org/en/pentagon-lights-and-people-disappearing-in-the-basements-how-mariupol-residents-survived-russias-filtration-camp/>.

⁷⁶ Martyniuk, "Cheka: The Tuning Fork of Freedom," translation from the original source.

CRAFTING NARRATIVES OF WAR'S HORROR: REPORTAGE-FIXATION

There is considerable sensitive content and naturalism in war reportage that could be labeled with an “18+” warning, as was done in the book *77 Days of February*.⁷⁷ War reporters do not choose their words and do not blur the picture—they depict reality as it is, because that is their task. This is adult content. “Contemporary Ukrainian reportage will allow us to tell the world the true story of our war of decolonization if there are enough adults and courageous people in this children’s room to translate these texts for readers from other countries,” writes Bogdan Logvynenko, a journalist and founder of *The Ukraïner*, in the foreword to *Bakhmut*.⁷⁸

In Ukrainian war non-fiction, we often encounter the topic of animals, because they also become participants and victims of war (a theme notably explored by Svetlana Alexievich in her reportage books on war and the Chernobyl disaster). In the book of war reportage by writer-journalist Olena Maksymenko, *Direct Speech: Chronicles of Defense*,⁷⁹ there is a section titled “The Dogs and Cats of War”:

... the tailed ones are rescued, sometimes at the risk of [the soldiers’] own lives; they are taken out of the war zone, kept or placed in good hands. They are given names and helped, treated after injuries, and brought back from the dead. Soldiers buy them food or share what they eat with them. They, in turn, become therapists, alarms (because they often warn of shelling by their behavior), mousetraps, sentries, but above all, brothers and sisters. They are forgiven even for sabotage and walks “to the other side” [of the front line].⁸⁰

The reportage part of Myroslav Laiuk’s book *Bakhmut*⁸¹ begins with the chapter “Animals.” The author sets the background for the events he describes—life both around the war and at its epicenter—using animal imagery to frame the atmosphere and emotional landscape. Shell-shocked cats who cannot hear anything. Large mice that do not run away from people. Dead animals on the fields and military roads. Wounded animals. Abandoned dogs. Wild and hungry dogs that gather in packs and attack

⁷⁷ Paplauskaitė, *77 dniv liutoho*, 218.

⁷⁸ Laiuk, *Bakhmut*, 9.

⁷⁹ Olena Maksymenko, *Pryama mova: khroniky zakhystu* (Kharkiv: Vivat, 2024), 238.

⁸⁰ Maksymenko, *Pryama mova*, 112.

⁸¹ Laiuk, *Bakhmut*, 164.

people. A cat eating a corpse, a fox gnawing on a human body. It's a disturbing and very symbolic opening. And it's about depicting "truer than anything true and alive,"⁸² as Hemingway wrote, of which the best reporting is capable.

War reporting is also by nature very acoustic, because war creates a specific soundscape that cannot be ignored. The text about Iryna Tsybukh, discussed in the previous paragraph, features the following acoustic excerpt from her diary (in the chapter "Bus Stop Donbas"):

It is a story about sound. It is about the sound of cows wounded by shrapnel. The cows were dying for quite some time. We lacked the tactical capability to venture out and help them.... War is cynical, but the death of animals that never had a choice, their suffering before death, is particularly memorable because it is audible. This is what a grueling, long death sounds like. I didn't see them lying dead. Instead, we listened for a few minutes between the shelling, hearing the cows' relentless cries. They had been grazing somewhere in a pasture 200 meters away from the barn, where we sought shelter from Russian drones. Animal despair sounds helpless, and this is how injustice always sounds to me. It echoes the sound of a grueling, drawn-out death. The story of each animal killed in agony and war warrants a separate trial against the Russians, who committed this atrocity against humanity and compassion.⁸³

In the preamble to his book, Myroslav Laiuk says that he chose the method of fixation—"photographing with text." The reportage part of the book is in fact titled "Fixing [in Time]" (and the essay part is titled "Commentary"). The author writes that he fixed what he experienced and saw on the go, transcribed conversations in a car, because reportage should be written quickly: "If you write slower and longer, the text will be better. But it will be less lively."⁸⁴ The author argues that a less literarily perfect reportage under our conditions may become more important than an artistically perfect one, and compares reportage to poetry in terms of its ability to capture emotion—that is, not only the fact itself, but also the emotion of the fact, as well as the fact of emotion. For example, in this

⁸² Ernest Hemingway, "The Art of Fiction No. 21," interview by George Plimpton, *The Paris Review*, no. 18 (Spring 1958), last paragraph, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4825/the-art-of-fiction-no-21-ernest-hemingway>.

⁸³ Martyniuk, "Cheka: The Tuning Fork of Freedom," quoted in English as in the original.

⁸⁴ Laiuk, *Bakhmut*, 20.

laconic dialog in a dugout near Bakhmut, with which Laiuk deliberately ends the reportage section of the book, we read:

A 19-year-old soldier waiting for the order to go to his position is asked:
 “What are you thinking about at this moment?”
 He answers:
 “I want to not be in this moment.”⁸⁵

In another book of reportage, *De-occupation*, which describes trips to the de-occupied territories of Ukraine in April–November 2022, author Bogdan Logvynenko writes that all these texts are also a fixing of the tragedy of occupation and the brave resistance of Ukrainians. He emphasizes that this is a “fixing of events upon which we, Ukrainians, have not yet had time to fully reflect, because we are still at their epicenter.”⁸⁶

In fact, Ukrainian writers often share similar thoughts. On the ninth day of the full-scale war, writer Sofia Andrukhovych wrote: “I feel separated from the ability to put words together and produce reflection.... We are at the core of death, at its heart.”⁸⁷ Another Ukrainian writer, Anastasia Levkova, comments in her diary for March 28, 2022, that now there is “no time for reflection. We, Ukrainians, have no time for long reads—neither to write nor to read—we can only have facts and testimonies.”⁸⁸ Here is one more opinion by the writer Tamara Horikha Zernya: “It is almost impossible to take a step towards artistic generalization when you are inside the events and have no idea how the story will end, but we try to capture it in short sentences and short texts. Preserving the mood and atmosphere, with the great hope that someone will be able to read it in the future.”⁸⁹

Thus, the method of “fixing in time” in reportage becomes key, affecting the text’s fabric, style and structure, and thus outlines the emergence of a potentially new genre subspecies—*reportage-fixation*. It is a genre of rapid response, which is characterized by linguistic economy, sketchy and

⁸⁵ Laiuk, *Bakhmut*, 164.

⁸⁶ Logvynenko, *Deokupatsiia*, 4.

⁸⁷ Volodymyr Rafeenko, comp., *Viina 2022: shchodenniky; esei; poeziia* [War 2022: Diaries; Essays; Poetry] (Lviv-Warsaw: Vydavnytstvo staroho leva, Nova Polshcha, 2023), 230.

⁸⁸ Rafeenko, *Viina 2022*, 71.

⁸⁹ *Voiennyi stan: antolohiia* [State of War: An Anthology], foreword by Valerii Zaluzhnyi (Chernivtsi: Vydavets Pomerantsev Svyatoslav, 2023), 368.

draft narrative, fragmentation, but above all by the accuracy and functionality of details, portraits, places, and emotions. There is no place for symbolism and metaphor, because reality is more intricate and dramatic than artistic representations. As Ukrainian writer Halyna Kruk said at the opening of the twenty-third Berlin Poetry Festival in June 2022: “War makes everything so straightforward that almost no room remains for poetry—only for testimony.”⁹⁰ Hence, creative documentary in war becomes less creative and more documentary.

That is why Ukrainian war reportage often resembles book trailers or teasers for future books. One example of this effect is the short and poignant reportage story “After the Night [Duty]” by Valerii Puzik, a writer, journalist, artist, filmmaker, and soldier of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, published, first on his Facebook page on January 30, 2023, and then in his book of reportage *Hunters for Happiness*.⁹¹ The main technique here is cinematographic, but as the author himself notes, it resembles an art house movie:

It all resembles an art house movie about war. A long, unbearable plot. A handheld camera captures the movement of personnel and close-ups. Tired voices on the air of radio stations. The author’s text sounds rare and barely audible; it breaks through the wind, cold and the roar of the surrounding reality; it echoes through the noise of the road as cigarette smoke blows out through the open car window.

He was supposed to arrive two days ago. He got in touch at the same time. “Drinking coffee and driving on” were his last words. He was missing for two days, and today they said he had hit a mine. His car was found in a field and, consequently, what was left of him. Hungry animals gnawed on his body, spread his insides in the field, which was sown with mines like winter crops. His eyes were open, gray whites, no pupils were visible.⁹²

He ends his text with an eloquent laconic visual and auditory scene that almost turns into poetry:

⁹⁰“I wish that poetry could really kill.” Halyna Kruk’s statement in Berlin, available in English at: <https://pen.org.ua/en/meni-shkoda-csho-poeziia-ne-vbivae-promova-galini-kruk-na-vidkritti-poetichnogo-festivalyu-v-berlini>.

⁹¹Valerii Puzik, *Myslyvti za shchastiam* [Hunters for Happiness] (Kharkiv: Vivat, 2024).

⁹²Valerii Puzik, “Pislia nichnoi” [After the Night (Duty)], published first on his Facebook page on January 30, 2023, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/14TJzbdpLX/>.

Go and look:
 at the smashed houses,
 at the cars in the landings,
 at the shoes scattered by the roads,
 at the human bones gnawed by dogs,
 at the graves in the gardens and yards,
 at the unharvested crops,
 at the fire.
 Listen to the voices.
 Listen:
 “Heaven to Earth. Heaven to Earth.”
 “This is Earth.”
 “Heaven. A new batch has arrived.”
 “What’s the situation?”
 “Four five zero.”⁹³
 “Plus.”
 “Over.”⁹⁴

Obviously, literary reportage cannot be evidence for court decisions, unless it is written in accordance with the necessary established procedures.⁹⁵ This, for example, is the case with the media undertakings of *The Reckoning Project: Ukraine Testifies*,⁹⁶ TRP, founded in March 2022. *The Reckoning Project* brings on-the-ground investigative journalists, who collect witness testimonies from sites of human rights violations, war crimes, and atrocities, together with lawyers. They work jointly to stamp out impunity for war criminals through the courts of law, courts of public opinion, and pathways of available accountability. The collection of reportage *The Scariest Days of My Life*⁹⁷ produced by TRP journalists—an initiative of Ukrainian and

⁹³The title “4.5.0.” holds deep meaning as a code originally used by the Ukrainian military, which translates to “everything is ok, everything is at peace.”

⁹⁴Puzik, “Pislia nichnoi.”

⁹⁵However, one of the most striking exceptions is the book *Chile, Pinochet, and the Caravan of Death* by Patricia Verdugo, which recounts the execution of 75 political prisoners in Chile following the military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet on September 11, 1973. The book primarily consists of interviews, including those with military officers responsible for issuing the death sentences, officers tried for treason, and officers and soldiers who escorted other suspects accused of treason. These testimonies later served as crucial evidence in the legal case against Pinochet.

⁹⁶The English-language web page of the project is available at: <https://www.thereckoningproject.com/>.

⁹⁷*Naistrashnishi dni moho zhyttia: reportazhi The Reckoning Project* [The Scariest Days of My Life: Reportages by The Reckoning Project], compiled by Nataliia Gumenyuk (Lviv: Choven, 2023), 255.

international journalists, analysts, and lawyers documenting war crimes—serves as a historical document capturing the first year of the full-scale war. “We didn’t have time to reflect,” Nataliia Gumenyuk, the compiler of the collection, a reporter and co-founder of TRP, writes in the foreword about the beginning of the full-scale invasion, “but we felt that news journalism alone was not enough, so we had to do more.”⁹⁸ Together with other journalists, she searched for answers to how journalism could be useful through its tools—the ability to check facts, to interview a large number of people, and to tell stories. And in spring 2022, when “the whole country had become a crime scene,” they created TRP and developed a methodology using journalistic documentation as the evidentiary basis for legal proceedings. The TRP team has developed a questionnaire, records in-depth interviews, and communicates only with direct witnesses of the abuses who are ready to testify in future trials. The team works in such a way so as not to retraumatize witnesses, asking questions in a neutral manner so that the defense cannot insist that witnesses are biased and have been pushed to certain conclusions. Based on these testimonies, the team prepares analytical materials that serve as the basis for documentaries and reportage, many of which have been published in major English-language media (*The Atlantic*,⁹⁹ *Vanity Fair*,¹⁰⁰ and *TIME*¹⁰¹) and are included in the book.

Often, writers and reporters join human rights organizations to document crimes and use this material in their non-fiction books. One such organization is Truth Hounds,¹⁰² a Ukrainian civil society organization

⁹⁸ *Naistrashnishi dni moho zhyttia*, 9.

⁹⁹ Anne Applebaum and Nataliia Gumenyuk, “‘They Didn’t Understand Anything, but Just Spoiled People’s Lives’: How Russian Invaders Unleashed Violence on Small-Town Residents,” *The Atlantic*, February 14, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/02/russia-ukraine-war-potemkin-occupation-murder-torture/672841/>.

¹⁰⁰ Nataliia Gumenyuk, “War in Ukraine: How One Besieged Hospital in Ukraine Treated Wounded Citizens, Soldiers, and Invading Russian Troops,” *Vanity Fair*, February 20, 2023, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2023/02/doctors-and-nurses-caught-in-ukraine-war-crucible>. Photography by Anna Tsyhyma. The magazine published a series of reportages by The Reckoning Project.

¹⁰¹ Svitlana Oslavska, “Inside the Basement Where an Entire Ukrainian Village Spent a Harrowing Month in Captivity,” *TIME*, February 27–March 6, 2023, <https://time.com/6255183/ukraine-basement-yahidne-held-captive/>. The journal featured the reportage on its front page in a special centennial issue commemorating the 100th anniversary of *TIME*.

¹⁰² The English-language web page of the project is available at: <https://truth-hounds.org/en/homepage/>.

specializing in documenting and investigating international crimes and serious human rights violations in Ukraine and other conflict-affected regions of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Since its founding in 2014, the organization has conducted over 260 field missions, identified more than 200 suspects in international war crimes, and carried out 55 thorough investigations. In June 2022 Victoria Amelina joined it to document war crimes in de-occupied territories of Ukraine's east, south, and north. But on July 1, 2023, Amelina died from injuries she received during the Russian missile attack on Kramatorsk one week earlier. On February 18, 2025, her book *Looking at Women Looking at War: A War and Justice Diary*¹⁰³ was published by St. Martin's Press. The book includes the stories of Ukrainian women involved in the struggle against Russian occupiers, namely human rights advocate and 2022 Nobel Peace Prize winner Oleksandra Matviichuk, lawyer and military service-woman Yevheniia Zakrevska, and librarian Yuliia Kakulia-Danyliuk.

In 2024, a new cultural and research institution called INDEX (the Institute for Documentation and Exchange)¹⁰⁴ emerged in Ukraine's institutional landscape. Based in Lviv, it aims to connect initiatives documenting Russia's war against Ukraine and to facilitate international exchange by providing fellowships and grants for Ukrainian researchers, cultural practitioners, and their peers abroad. One of the Institute's tasks is to develop innovative approaches to war documentation and digital archiving.

REDISCOVERING WAR LANGUAGE

To capture Ukraine's new reality, one needs not only innovative methods but also a new language. This is something most Ukrainian authors have been discussing since the beginning of the full-scale war. On March 13, 2022 (the 18th day of the invasion), the prominent writer Serhiy Zhadan wrote in his diary: "A lot will definitely be written and sung about this war. I assume it will be a completely different language. A language that is being formed right now, every day, across the country. So far, there is too much pain in it. But there is enough anger. And most importantly, there is enough faith and love."¹⁰⁵ Simultaneously, Sofia Andrukhovych, one of

¹⁰³ Amelina, *Looking at Women*, 320.

¹⁰⁴ The English-language web page of the project is available at: <https://www.index-ukraine.org/en/about>.

¹⁰⁵ Rafeenko, *Viina 2022*, 26.

Ukraine's top women prose writers, writes that words now have a "critical load": "I don't know if I will be a writer again after the war. Words have changed their nature."¹⁰⁶

From the beginning of the full-scale war, Ostap Slyvynsky started compiling the *Dictionary of War*.¹⁰⁷ "When war breaks out, words become superfluous—actions are needed. And then it turns out that the words themselves have changed, crumbled, and acquired new meanings and sounds," he writes in an annotation to the dictionary. The book contains stories in the voices of IDPs (internally displaced persons), volunteers, doctors, military, civil society activists, and artists as a way to record the experiences of heavy losses, irreversibility, pain, and faith in victory. "This is how the war stripped our homes to the bone, / stripped our skin to make it easier to check / whether our hearts still beat beneath," we read in Slyvynsky's poem on the cover of the dictionary. In his essay "Strong Words," the poet argues that these words are not static but are constantly evolving, describing them as being "on a journey." He emphasizes that they "can only be explained through stories, that is, through the movement of narration," and refers to them as "*words-stories*."¹⁰⁸ This concept suggests that a single word can encapsulate a specific, powerful narrative or event, symbolizing a larger story through its meaning, context, and emotional weight. In this dictionary, each word serves as a gateway to a deeper tale of war, resilience, or loss. The book contains about 80 testimonial stories documented by the writers, has been translated into 15 languages, became a bestseller in Japan, and was first presented in 2022 at the Deep Water Literary Festival,¹⁰⁹ where the texts were read by actress Tilda Swinton and other stars.

The chapter "The Language of War" begins the book *Codename for Job: Chronicles of the Invasion*¹¹⁰ by writer and Armed Forces soldier Oleksandr Mykhed. This chapter was first published in *The Financial*

¹⁰⁶ Rafeenko, *Viina* 2022, 232.

¹⁰⁷ Ostap Slyvynsky, *A Ukrainian Dictionary of War* (Sandpoint, ID: Lost Horse Press, 2024), 238.

¹⁰⁸ Rafeenko, *Viina* 2022, 224.

¹⁰⁹ Greg Triggs, "Dive into Deep Water Literary Festival," *The River Reporter*, May 26, 2022, <https://riverreporter.com/stories/literary-festival,55640>. The festival's official website is available at <https://deepwaterfestival.com/>.

¹¹⁰ Oleksandr Mykhed, *Pozvynyi dlia Yova: khroniky vtorohmennia* [Codename for Job: Chronicles of the Invasion] (Lviv: Old Lion Publishing, 2023), 344.

Times under the title “Letter from Ukraine: The Language of War”¹¹¹ on March 4, 2022. The topic of the language of war is a cross-cutting theme throughout the book, so it is not without reason that the English-language version of the book published by Penguin is titled *The Language of War*.¹¹² It also focuses on the language of war in the chapter “+.++”.¹¹³ The author writes that the key concept he has been pondering since the first day of the invasion is the language of war: “What do we do with language? What can language do to us?”¹¹⁴ “With each new horror,” we read in the book, “new levels of horror and experiences are revealed, which require new words to describe.”¹¹⁵ Mykhed gives dozens of definitions of the language of war, including: “The language of war is when, while working on a book, you correct the present tense to the past. Because those about whom you are writing have died”,¹¹⁶ “The language of war is a stream of consciousness in which trauma speaks. Trauma cannot be silent”,¹¹⁷ “The language of war comprises the words people use to say goodbye”,¹¹⁸ it is the language of military passwords, of all shades of pixels, of precise formulations and proper names, and so on.

The author himself writes that he has never liked or written political essays and continues: “But now I want to capture this moment. The moment when the whole country is one. And the only language we can speak is the language of war.”¹¹⁹ It is worth noting that this book is a cross-genre mixture of essays, chronicles, reporting verbatim monologues of the interviewees (three of which begin with “As a child, I dreamt/loved...”) and one memorial portrait, “Requiem for Tarantino,” about the author’s friend Viktor Onysko, who died in the war, written in the present tense, addressing his friend as “you.”

“But art now has a daily purpose—to be a chronicler,” Mykhed writes. “To ruthlessly fixate every criminal step, every act of the Russian

¹¹¹ Oleksandr Mykhed, “Letter from Ukraine: The Language of War,” *Financial Times*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/367ffaf1-0ba8-418d-ba05-e63c70cc0c1b>.

¹¹² Oleksandr Mykhed, *The Language of War*, trans. Maryna Gibson, Hanna Leliv, and Abby Dewar (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Books, 2024), 320.

¹¹³ In army slang, “plus” is a confirmation of information, analogous to the English “roger that.”

¹¹⁴ Mykhed, *Pozhyvnyi dlia Yova*, 197.

¹¹⁵ Mykhed, *Pozhyvnyi dlia Yova*, 196.

¹¹⁶ Mykhed, *Pozhyvnyi dlia Yova*, 335.

¹¹⁷ Mykhed, *Pozhyvnyi dlia Yova*, 197.

¹¹⁸ Mykhed, *Pozhyvnyi dlia Yova*, 199.

¹¹⁹ Mykhed, *Pozhyvnyi dlia Yova*, 17.

occupiers. The reality is non-fiction, a documentary in which there can be no editing or even color correction. Because this is evidence for tribunals. Because these are clots of reality that scream.”¹²⁰

The previously mentioned book of war reportage by the military journalist (from 2024) and photographer Olena Maksymenko is aptly titled *Direct Speech: Chronicles of Defense*.¹²¹ This title reflects the direct voices of the war’s heroes—individuals who, in their own words, do not consider themselves heroes. And the most valuable stories, says Maksymenko, are hidden beneath a layer of modesty, cynicism, and attempts to forget. “However, it is precisely these individual ‘non-heroic’ stories, uneven, fragmentary, mixed with swearing, pauses, cigarette puffs, or nervous laughter, that make up the overall story of our bizarre era.”¹²² Maksymenko recorded most of her conversations with her heroes on the front line, and in between she gives five “intermezzos” about her adventures on the front line, and among them her own memorial text about dozens of people she knew who had already died in the war.

But despite the tragedy and horrors of war, her texts contain considerable humor and self-irony. In general, military humor is a separate phenomenon in war reporting (and military literature in general). Like no other artistic mode, it provides the text with moments of comic relief, infusing it with life and a glimmer of hope. Below, we quote an excerpt from her journalistic trip to the front. The author ironically refers to this specific moment as “distilled dementia”—a nod to her decision to venture there herself. The episode recounts the moment when her car’s headlights suddenly went out on the road:

From Pokrovsk to Konstantynivka, the darkness became absolute. So did the panic. The road was not only invisible in the darkness, but also completely potholed. I was riding blind from all sides. I could only see the turns thanks to the navigator’s arrow. Traveling in a spaceship, bloody hell. Universe, I don’t think I ever told you that I dreamt of becoming an astronaut!¹²³

Maksymenko’s book has a warning on the first page: “Attention! At the front of the battle lines, words are often not chosen, so the text contains

¹²⁰ Mykhed, *Pozyvnyi dlia Yova*, 200.

¹²¹ Maksymenko, *Pryama mova*.

¹²² Maksymenko, *Pryama mova*, 9.

¹²³ Maksymenko, *Pryama mova*, 49.

profanity.”¹²⁴ In fact, profanity, like military jargon, has become the norm in war reporting because it is the real, living language used by the military. In his *Codename for Job*, Mykhed recalls the story of how he and his wife were once visited by the heroes of the defense of the Donetsk airport (given the nickname “cyborgs”) and during dinner, every time they swore, they apologized, saying that it was the language of war.¹²⁵ As for military terminology, Logvynenko’s *De-occupation* and Podobna’s *Girls Cutting Their Locks*, contain a dictionary of military abbreviations that the military often uses in their speech.

In addition to vulgar vocabulary, military jargon, and humor, war reporting can also contain elements of gonzo. Gonzo in the style of Hunter S. Thompson is evident in Illia Yukhymets’s series of gonzo reportages titled *The Path of the Warrior*. This series includes three texts: “Life-Saving Training: How Civilians Are Learning the Basics of Tactical Medicine,”¹²⁶ “The Test Week of the Third Separate Assault Brigade: How Recruits Who Made Their Choice Are Trained,”¹²⁷ and “Jazz and Symphony of Preparation for Being a Warrior: A Reportage from Training in the Lviv Region. Without embellishment.”¹²⁸ The note “without embellishment” in the last title serves as a marker of the text’s distinctive style. However, Ukrainian media rarely experiment with such non-standard genres. Gonzo elements can be found more often in military non-fiction books, including Artem Chekh’s *Point Zero*,¹²⁹ Andriy Lyubka’s *War from the Rear*,¹³⁰ and others. Here, the authors do not hold back either in their

¹²⁴ Maksymenko, *Pryama mova*, 3.

¹²⁵ Mykhed, *Pozyvnyi dlia Yova*, 16.

¹²⁶ Illia Yukhymets, “Life-Saving Training: How Civilians Are Learning the Basics of Tactical Medicine,” *The Ukrainian Week*, January 24, 2025, <https://ukrainianweek.com/life-saving-training-how-civilians-are-learning-the-basics-of-tactical-medicine/>.

¹²⁷ Illia Yukhymets, “Testotyzhnevyyk Tretoi OShBR: yak hotuiut rekrutiv, yaki zrobyly svii vybir” [The Test Week of the Third Separate Assault Brigade: How Recruits Who Made Their Choice Are Trained], *Tyzhden*, January 13, 2025, <https://tyzhden.ua/testotyzhnevyyk-tretoi-oshbr-ia-hotuiut-rekrutiv-ia-zyrobyly-svij-vybir/>.

¹²⁸ Illia Yukhymets, “Dzhaz ta symfoniia pidhotovky do buttia voyna: reportazh iz vyshkolu na Lvivshchyni” [Jazz and Symphony of Preparing to Be a Warrior: A Reportage from Training in Lviv Region], *Zaborona*, June 12, 2024, <https://zaborona.com/reportazh-iz-vyshkolu-na-lvivshchyni-bez-pykras/>.

¹²⁹ Artem Chekh, *Tochka nul': zbirka eseiv* [Point Zero: A Collection of Essays] (Kharkiv: Vivat, 2017), 221.

¹³⁰ Andrii Lyubka, *Viina z tyl'noho boku* [War from the Rear] (Chernivtsi: Meridian Chernowit, 2024), 280.

language or in their black military humor, or in their stunning descriptions of the very absurdity of war.

CONCLUSION: CAPTURING THE TRANSIENT

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we are witnessing an explosion of literary war reportage in the country for obvious reasons. First, the reportage itself is the literature of testimony, of fixation, often written directly at the scene of crimes. Second, it is the reportage that gives names to the nameless, gives voice to the voiceless, shows a person behind each single digit in the number of the dead and injured. (As we know, numbers do not speak for themselves). Moreover, creative documentary narrative is produced quickly and has immediate effects on the reader, on par with essay writing and poetry. Finally, it is literary journalism that “converts” reality into text so that readers may do the opposite, experiencing the story even “truer than anything true and alive,” as Hemingway once wrote.

During more than three years of the full-scale war in Ukraine, dozens of war reportages were published in various Ukrainian media, on memorial platforms, in collective anthologies, as well as in separate books. Many of them have already received Ukrainian and international awards.

Observing the trends, at this time we expect to see a lot of new war reportage books in the near future. For example, from the published list of winning non-fiction book projects of the fellowship program from the Norwegian Non-fiction Writers and Translators Association and PEN Ukraine, we know that by the end of 2025 and in 2026 we are expecting books by Maksym Bupalov (a book of literary reportage titled *Artifacts* about items destroyed, damaged, or stolen during the Russian invasion of Ukraine); by Khrystyna Kotsira (Kutiepova) (a non-fiction book tentatively titled *Missing* about Ukrainians and their families who have gone missing); by Andriy Lyubka (a documentary book about current life in war-torn Ukraine titled *This Is Not to Be Forgotten*); by Svitlana Oslavska (a book of reportage about the occupation tentatively titled *In Their Own Skin*); by Yevgeniia Podobna (a book of literary reportage about the occupation of Bucha in February and March 2022 titled *Shadows on Yablunska Street*); by Petro Yatsenko (a non-fiction book *Hotel War* about Russian POWs in Ukraine as the personification of modern Russia); and others.¹³¹

¹³¹ “10 Winning Projects of the Fellowship Program for Non-Fiction Authors Announced,” PEN Ukraine.

Quite a few new names appeared among the authors of war reportage, in particular writers who had not worked in this genre before. Many of them serve in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, fight on the front lines, or volunteer. Therefore, we can observe interesting metamorphoses within the genre, many new experimental techniques, hybrid formats, unexpected uses of literary tropes, and new vocabulary. Thus, reportage (in particular, trench) poetry, memorial reportage, reportage-fixing in time, and reportage-testimony, which can serve as evidence in courts, have emerged in Ukraine. Often, war reporting is fused with essays, memoirs, chronicles, and obituaries.

The language of war reporting has also been constantly changing: metaphors, epithets, and hyperbole no longer work since reality is stronger and more dramatic than literary tropes. Military slang becomes a living language, and military black humor becomes the tone of voice. The sensitivity in the text is set to maximum: smell, textual acoustics, visual, the tactile, and taste. There is considerable naturalism, which turns into sensitive content that social media would blur, that overly sensitive readers might find difficult to process, and that could potentially retraumatize. New Ukrainian Gonzo transforms into Military Gonzo. Here, reportage cinematography borders on arthouse cinema.

The basic rule of the genre “do no harm” echoes in a new way in war reportage. Authors are looking for ways to depict reality without harming the characters and without putting them and their relatives in danger. The boundaries of what is allowed and what is not acceptable in the text are being rethought. How to interrogate stories without retraumatizing the storytellers. How to deal with sensitive topics such as captivity, occupation, loss of loved ones, loss of home. How to “slip under the skin” of heroes who have no skin left.

The visual and multimedia component works in a new way in media reportage that not only complements the narrative but functionally branches it into several levels. All these changes are happening here and now before our eyes. They reshape literary war reportage, creating a new synthetic genre with its own features, stylistics, formats, and language.

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PART III

Everyday Life: Contemporary
East-Central Europe and
Its Socialist Past



CHAPTER 9

The Aesthetics of Greyness: Post-Socialist Housing Estates in Poland as a Theme in Contemporary Polish Reportage

Katarzyna Frukacz-Lewandowska

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Polish literary journalism has devoted much attention to urban planning in various contexts. Numerous non-fiction books discuss the contemporary reality and the frequently problematic history and irregularities of Polish cities.¹ Among these, a special category comprises works

Translated from Polish by Eleonora Jozsko.

¹A representative example of literary reportage on cities is Marcin Kącki's triptych: *Białystok: Biała siła, czarna pamięć* [Białystok: White Power, Black Memory] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2015); *Poznań: Miasto grzechu* [Poznan: The City of Sin] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2017); and *Oświęcim: Czarna zima* [Auschwitz: A Black Winter] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak Literanova, 2020). Other books on this topic include Wojciech Górecki and Bartosz Józefiak's *Łódź: Miasto po przejściach* [Lodz: A City with a Past] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2020) and Agata Listoś-Kostrzewa's *Ballada o śpiącym lwie* [The Ballad of a Sleeping Lion] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Dowody na Istnienie, 2021)

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which focus strictly on the country's architecture and spatial policy. One author readily associated with this topic is Filip Springer, who represents the young generation of Polish journalists born in the 1980s²—that is, during the declining years of communism in Poland. One of Springer's reportages on architecture and space³ focuses on the most outstanding buildings of Polish modernism after the Second World War. The author links the book's meaningful title, *Źle urodzone* (Ill-Born), with the problematic origin of the buildings he describes:

They were born in a bad time—difficult, painful, dull, and lousy. On top of that, once the times changed, the society associated them only with that communist dullness. Sometimes they even had to bear the label of totalitarianism, which meant banishment by default. And we indeed banished the best buildings of that period: we forgot their existence, ceased to tend them, and always looked away. They existed but became invisible to us.⁴

which describes the postindustrial city of Bytom. One should also mention publications about multiple Polish cities, especially the peripheral ones, such as Marek Szymaniak's *Zapaść: Reportaże z mniejszych miast* [The Collapse: Works of Reportage on Smaller Towns] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2021). Poland's urban problems are no less important themes, as illustrated by Olga Gitkiewicz's *Nie zdążę* [I Won't Make It] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Dowody na Istnienie, 2019). The book provides "examples of specific cities deprived of public transport on a daily basis." Ariel Ciechański, "Review: O. Gitkiewicz—*Nie zdążę* (Eng. I Won't Make It), Dowody na Istnienie Publishing House, Warsaw; 240 pp." *Transport Geography Papers of Polish Geographical Society* 23, no. 3 (2020): 92.

² Thus far, English-language research has barely analyzed the issue of the 1980s generation of Polish literary journalists. In Poland, the topic has already generated standalone studies, see Bernadetta Darska, *Młodzi i fakty: Notatki o reportażach roczników osiemdziesiątych* [The Young and the Facts: Notes on the Reportage by the 1980s Generation] (Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Dziennikarstwa i Komunikacji Społecznej UWM w Olsztynie, 2017). Although classifications tend to label these authors as young journalists, an even younger generation—born in the 1990s—has already begun to emerge.

³ Springer's works addressing architectural, landscape, and urban planning issue form an informal series of books, mostly published or republished by the Karakter publishing house. These titles include, among others: *Zaczyn: O Zofii i Oskarze Hansenach* [Leaven: On Zofia and Oskar Hansen] (2013), *Mein Gott, jak pięknie* [Mein Gott, How Beautiful] (2023), and *Szara godzina: Czas na nową architekturę* [Grey Hour: Time for a New Architecture] (2024).

⁴ Filip Springer, *Źle urodzone: Reportaże o architekturze PRL-u* [Ill-Born: Works of Reportage on PRL Architecture] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Karakter, 2011), 7–8. Orig. quote: "Urodzili się w złym czasie, trudnym, bolesnym, byle jakim i parszywym. I jakby tego wszystkiego było mało, gdy czasy się zmieniły, kojarzono je już tylko z tamtą peerelowską bylejakością. Niekiedy doklejało im też łatkę totalitaryzmu, a to przecież musiało oznaczać banicję. I na taką właśnie banicję zesłano najlepsze realizacje z tamtego okresu—zapomnieliśmy o ich istnieniu, przestaliśmy o nie dbać, nie patrzyliśmy w ich stronę. Istniały,

By “bad times,” Springer means the Polish People’s Republic (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*, PRL)—although officially introduced in 1952, the name symbolizes the entire period of communism in Poland, namely 1944–1989. The architecture of those years, which represents Cold War modernism, formed part of the practices aimed at consolidating the newly imposed political regime. Polish literature coined the term *socmodernizm* (socialist modernism) to signify that ideologically motivated architectural current. The very word, which merges the perspective of politics and aesthetics,⁵ was thus used to evoke typically negative connotations. In a country ruled by communists, the original modernist assumptions regarding functional, humanistic, and hygienic residential spaces became distorted and unfeasible—an impression shared by many.⁶

In this chapter, I aim to problematize the strategies of representing modernist-socialist architecture in selected works of twenty-first-century Polish literary journalism. Thus, I analyze works of reportage by Springer and other authors of the young and middle-aged generation. Their memory and assessment of the PRL period obviously differs from that of older writers, as the latter frequently suffered communist repression in person. Focusing on works by authors born in the 1970s and the 1980s, who view the communist period in Poland from a distance, gives me a chance to objectively reflect on the ways of reviewing and evaluating the architectural legacy of the past political system.

The problematic legacy, discussed in the first part of this chapter, finds its embodiment in post-socialist concrete housing estates—the main motif which journalists employ to explore the contemporary spaces of Polish cities. As shown in the next section, the picture of those estates as recorded in the books of reportage to be discussed here is heavily affected by the aesthetics of greyness. The color in question symbolically reflects both the architecture and the whole remaining reality of life in Central and Eastern

lecz dla nas były niewidzialne.” All the English-language passages from the quoted works of Polish reportage, as well as the translated titles in the bibliographic entries, are own translations.

⁵ See Błażej Ciarkowski, “Recreational Architecture at the Service of Politics—Dissonant Heritage of Holiday Resorts from the Era of the People’s Republic of Poland,” *Journal of Heritage Conservation* 49 (2017): 21.

⁶ See Agnieszka Rek-Lipczyńska and Izabela Kozłowska, “The New Aspects of the Walls of the Blocks of Flats,” in *Colour Culture Science*, ed. Maria Godyń, Bożena Groborz, and Agata Kwiatkowska-Lubańska (Kraków: Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, Faculty of Industrial Design, 2018), 258.

Europe (CEE) under communism. The tendency to revitalize socialist modernist buildings using other colors—treated in the chapter’s final part—which seemingly overcomes that aesthetics, has actually become a social phenomenon that people oppose as firmly as they did that of socialist standardization.

THE DISSONANT HERITAGE OF SOCIALIST MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE

The criticism of Poland’s communist period visibly affects the ambivalent perception of the post-socialist architecture. According to Błażej Ciarkowski, this is why one can consider buildings from the PRL’s times as dissonant heritage: a problematic, typically unwanted, and contested legacy whose social reception entails “a kind of a dissonance caused by the overlapping of different narratives and interpretative threads.”⁷ This view points to the ambiguous—albeit usually negative—reception of socialist modernist urban planning in Poland after the political transformation. In fact, all twentieth-century concrete architecture across Central and Eastern Europe arouses controversy because people see it “primarily as a ‘product’ of wars and totalitarianism.”⁸

Still, the negative evaluation of the PRL’s buildings has other causes beside their unthoughtful attribution to the communist era. In *Źle urodzone*, Springer mentions the distortion of the original ideas which underlay modernism as an architectural style. Alan Colquhoun discusses the constitutive features of modernism and its theoretically apolitical nature, arguing that modern architecture “can be understood to refer to all buildings of the modern period regardless of their ideological basis, or it can be understood more specifically as an architecture conscious of its own modernity and striving for change.”⁹ The ideas of social egalitarianism and functionalism, which condition the “change” mentioned by

⁷ Błażej Ciarkowski, “Unwanted Heritage and Its Cultural Potential: Values of Modernist Architecture from the Times of the Polish People’s Republic,” *MAZOWSZE Studia Regionalne* 22 (2017): 75. For more on dissonant heritage, see J.E. Tunbridge and G.J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1996).

⁸ Mariusz E. Sokołowicz, Aleksandra Nowakowska, and Błażej Ciarkowski, *The Ambiguous Legacy of Socialist Modernist Architecture in Central and Eastern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 3.

⁹ Alan Colquhoun, *Modern Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9.

Colquhoun, underwent a thorough modification in the socialist reality. Consequently, they became synonymous with the dehumanizing unification of citizens and the strict classification of buildings. This is best visible in the high-rise housing estates built in series using large, prefabricated panels from concrete or reinforced concrete.

Contrary to popular conviction, large-panel housing estates existed not only as ideologized architectural solutions which communist Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries implemented during the Cold War. Modernism was a global phenomenon of a much older descent, which paradoxically stemmed from the Western architectural tradition.¹⁰ Moreover, modernist high-rise apartment buildings sprung up in large numbers on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and the reason remained the same regardless of the country: Europe simply had an “urgent demand for housing”¹¹ following the destruction of its cities during the Second World War. Beata Chomętowska describes selected high-rise housing estates from Poland, the USA, England, Scotland, France, and Germany in her book *Betonia: Dom dla każdego* (Concreteland: Home for Everyone). The word *betonia* is a neologism derived from the Polish term *beton* (concrete). In the book, the author quotes an architect from the PRL period, who somewhat ironically summarizes the international position on this type of buildings: “Large panels are neither socialist nor capitalist; they are simply large panels.”¹²

Although large-panel, Central and Eastern European architecture from the second half of the twentieth century aligned with the trend developing simultaneously in the West, Central and Eastern European buildings did have their own distinctive features. According to Justina Muliuolytė, one specific trait of the housing estates located in the cities of the former Eastern Bloc which distinguished them from their Western equivalents

¹⁰ According to William J.R. Curtis, modern architecture in its pioneering phase developed at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the industrialized countries of Western Europe and in the USA. See William J.R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900* (Hoboken: Prentice Hall, 1983), 8.

¹¹ Javier Monclús, Carmen Díez Medina, and Sergio García-Pérez, “Modernist Mass Housing in Europe: Comparative Perspectives in Western and Eastern Cities (1950s–1970s),” in *Urban Visions: From Planning Culture to Landscape Urbanism*, ed. Carmen Díez Medina and Javier Monclús (Cham: Springer, 2018), 73.

¹² Beata Chomętowska, *Betonia: Dom dla każdego* [Concreteland: Home for Everyone] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2018), 339. Orig. quote: “wielka płyta nie jest ani socjalistyczna, ani kapitalistyczna, tylko jest po prostu wielką płytą.”

was the demographic profile of residents, who belonged to the middle, working class.¹³ In turn, Marek Nowak and Andrzej Siatkowski believe that the specific nature of socialist urban planning in Central and Eastern Europe stemmed from demarketization: the region's states nationalized city land and infrastructure, and they centralized the planning process.¹⁴ Finally, Anastasiya Halauniova mentions the clear subordination of Central and Eastern European architecture to political purposes. In this case, the reference to modernist aesthetics was "not only aimed at resolving the 'housing question', but also at crafting loyalty to the communist party and demonstrating societal progress."¹⁵

Thus understood, politicization resulted in the "banishment" mentioned by Springer. In the first years after the fall of communism in Poland, the country discredited the facilities associated with the disgraced architectural current together with their designers and builders. Tomasz Malkowski, a contemporary architect and journalist, aptly summarizes such excluding attitudes in *Żle urodzone*: "Nobody really wondered anymore whether that architecture was good or bad. Everything created in that era simply had to be negated."¹⁶ Currently, Poland is witnessing a

¹³ As Muliolytè states: "All the population in the Soviet Union was middle, working class. Everyone was equally educated, with similar income, lifestyle[,] and equal opportunities." Justina Muliolytè, "Rediscovering Large Scale Housing Estates in Post Socialist Cities," *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 37, no. 1 (2013): 53. The emergence of the so-called "middle, working class" in socialist countries like the Polish People's Republic was a consequence of the measures implemented by the communists to blur the distinction between the upper and lower classes of society. The proletarianization of professions previously reserved for educated strata resulted in the degradation of the intelligentsia, running parallel to the social advancement of workers and peasants—the classes intended to become "the new intelligentsia." Anna Zawadzka links this process to the declared, yet illusory, aim of socialism to "abolish class society in favor of full egalitarianism." Anna Zawadzka, "The Waning of Communism in the People's Republic of Poland: The Case of Discourse on Intelligentsia," in *Reassessing Communism: Concepts, Culture, and Society in Poland 1944–1989*, ed. Katarzyna Chmielewska, Agnieszka Mrozik, and Grzegorz Wołowicz (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2021), 321, 324.

¹⁴ Marek Nowak and Andrzej Siatkowski, "The Late Modernist Community in the Late Socialist Block of Flats: The Issue of Urban Neighbourhood Vitality in Poland," *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 37, no. 1 (2022): 103.

¹⁵ Anastasiya Halauniova, "Good and Bad Concrete: Fugitive Modern and the Aesthetics of Renovation in Poland," *City* 26, no. 1 (2022): 32.

¹⁶ Springer, *Żle urodzone*, 224. Orig. quote: "Nikt już specjalnie nie zastanawiał się, czy to jest dobra, czy zła architektura. Po prostu wszystko, co powstało w tamtej epoce, należało zanegować."

partial rehabilitation of postwar modernism, proved by publications such as Springer's reportages—critical of the PRL's architectural relics yet aware of their cultural value.

The growing interest in post-socialist architecture, which has increasingly become the topic of Polish literary journalism, stems from a generational shift. According to Ciarkowski, "the generation that entered adult life after 1989 often perceives the 'badly born' heritage of the Polish People's Republic only through the perspective of modernist esthetics which is, however, judged by them radically differently than by the generation of their parents."¹⁷ Springer seems to share this opinion as a representative of the young generation of journalists mentioned above, whom Bernadetta Darska calls "the children of democracy" because "they did not experience communism in a conscious way."¹⁸ In the introduction to *Źle urodzone*, the author confesses: "I was born in 1982 and I do not remember the PRL. Nothing bad happened to me in its final phase either. Thus, the specific origin of functionalism did not really matter to me."¹⁹

Such distance toward the communist past partially explains why journalists such as Springer or the slightly older Chomątowska (b. 1976) tend to focus not on the irregularities of Polish socialist modernism, but rather on the architectural innovations, which marked an attempt to circumvent the strict provisions of the socialist housing policy. A considerable number of architects from that era nurtured nonconformism, as proved by the dilemma quoted in *Betonia*: when designing high-rise housing estates, the architects wondered "how to escape the normative aesthetics."²⁰ Lidia Pańków (b. 1977) is another Polish journalist who reveals similar examples of situations where "the coarse Polish reality"²¹—as Springer labels the mass construction of the time—ruthlessly crushed architectural creativity. In her book *Bloki w słońcu: Mała historia Ursynowa Północnego* (Blocks in the Sun: A Short History of North Ursynów), Pańków describes the designers of the eponymous housing estate in Warsaw as people who

¹⁷ Ciarkowski, "Unwanted Heritage," 78.

¹⁸ Darska, *Młodzi i fakty*, 22. The quotation comes from the following fragment: "dzieci demokracji—ci, którzy należą do najmłodszego pokolenia reporterów, nie doświadczili komunizmu w sposób świadomy."

¹⁹ Springer, *Źle urodzone*, 8. Orig. quote: "Urodziłem się w 1982 roku i nie pamiętam PRL-u. Nie spotkało mnie w tamtej schyłkowej jego fazie nic złego. Dlatego ten specyficzny rodowód funkcjonalizmu nie miał dla mnie specjalnego znaczenia."

²⁰ Chomątowska, *Betonia*, 155. Orig. quote: "jak uciec od normatywu."

²¹ Springer, *Źle urodzone*, 154. Orig. quote: "siernięgę peerelowskiej rzeczywistości."

“worked in a disgraced industry but were no slaves to any doctrines.”²² By way of confirmation, the author discusses North Ursynów’s landscape, where its creators managed to slip into their projects “ideas of a social experiment occasionally bordering on futurology.”²³ Pańków contrasts their effort with the simplifying strategy of prefabrication adopted by the communist decision-makers. In a conversation with Pańków, one of the estate’s designers bluntly criticizes the strategy in question:

The construction period itself was good. The bad aspect was the mass production of houses and prefabrication understood as complete simplification.... Prefabrication is a great invention, but Poland linked it with the socialist system. Thus, prefabrication has become boorish and robs a building of its soul. In our design of North Ursynów, we wanted to bring the soul back.²⁴

One manifestation of the “boorish nature” of Poland’s large-panel architecture—and a contemporary accusation even against those architects who pursued more individualized and humanistic designs of housing estates—is the attitude of “consent to greyness,”²⁵ which Springer mentions in *Żle urodzone*. The society perceived the grey color of the building’s facades as a concession to the provisions which governed large-panel building design. Consequently, greyness has become a symbol of the equally grey reality of communist Poland. In the history of twentieth-century Polish literary journalism, the reality in question served as a setting for so-called “small realism” reportage.²⁶ Those texts employed a

²² Lidia Pańków, *Bloki w słońcu: Mała historia Ursynowa Północnego* [Blocks in the Sun: A Short History of North Ursynów] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2016), 310. Orig. quote: “Działali w skompromitowanej branży, ale nie czuli się niewolnikami żadnych doktryn.”

²³ The quote comes from the book’s cover note. Orig. quote: “idee eksperymentu społecznego czasem graniczącego z futurologią.”

²⁴ Pańków, *Bloki w słońcu*, 102. Orig. quote: “Okres na realizację był dobry. Zła w tym wszystkim była fabryka domów i prefabrykacja rozumiana według logiki całkowitego upraszczania.... Prefabrykacja to wielki wynalazek. U nas została skojarzona z ustrojem socjalistycznym. Schamiała, odbiera budynkowi duszę. Myśmy w projekcie Ursynowa Północnego chcieli tę duszę przywrócić.”

²⁵ See Springer, *Żle urodzone*, 182.

²⁶ Polish literary critics coined the term “small realism” to describe a trend in Polish prose of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Writers of that period, constrained by censorship, often focused on everyday subjects without attempting to conduct an in-depth social analysis. In the case of literary journalists writing in the “small realism” convention, their depictions of

description of seemingly common everyday events to disguise forbidden political allusions. As we see today, contemporary works in this genre also actualize the motif of greyness, albeit in different contexts. In the works on socialist modernist architecture which I will analyze, this motif complements the vision of post-socialist housing estates but goes beyond the narrowly defined visual sphere.

GREYNESS AS BLEMISH AND AESTHETICS: THE HIGH-RISE HOUSING ESTATES COMPLEX IN POLISH LITERARY JOURNALISM

In the eyes of Western observers, the historical and geopolitical dimension of greyness contributes to the common image of life behind the Iron Curtain, although some authors criticize this association as a harmful stereotype.²⁷ Greyness has become a double mental shortcut: in the context of the past, it refers to poverty and undeveloped consumer culture in Central and Eastern Europe under socialism;²⁸ nowadays, it signifies the ambivalence and uncertainty of existence in a region which remains in a “seemingly never-ending transition.”²⁹ Moreover, if we agree with Michael Taussig’s assumption that colors are “the product of a colonially split world,”³⁰ then grey aptly represents the consequences of Soviet

ordinary, real-life events frequently “abounded in hidden references to the current political situation.” Katarzyna Frukacz, “Literary Reportage or Journalistic Fiction? Polish Reporters’ Struggles with the Form,” *Literary Journalism Studies* 11, no. 1 (2019): 15.

²⁷ According to Robert Deakin and Gabriela Nicolescu, using the metaphor of grey with reference to post-socialist countries “potentially reinforces unhelpful stereotypes associated with both socialism and eastern Europe.” Robert Deakin and Gabriela Nicolescu, “Socialist Fragments East and West: Towards a Comparative Anthropology of Global (Post-)socialism,” *Critique of Anthropology* 42, no. 2 (2022): 115.

²⁸ See Krisztina Fehérvári, *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 1.

²⁹ Deakin and Nicolescu, “Socialist fragments,” 115. Here, the authors refer to the concept of Eastern Europe as the “grey zone”—a notion which originally denoted the complicated ontology of life in a concentration camp. In the context of post-socialist countries, its meaning has broadened to include “a given area or situation marked by ambiguity or porous boundaries.” Martin Demant Frederiksen and Ida Harboe Knudsen, “Introduction: What Is a Grey Zone and Why is Eastern Europe One?,” in *Ethnographies of Grey Zones in Eastern Europe: Relations, Borders and Invisibilities*, ed. Ida Harboe Knudsen and Martin Demant Frederiksen (London: Anthem Press, 2015), 2.

³⁰ Michael Taussig, “Color and Slavery,” in *What Color Is the Sacred?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 131.

colonialism in the former Eastern Bloc.³¹ Recalling the memory of communism in Poland, greyness evokes associations with gloomy everyday life and an experience of the city as a hostile space of depression and alienation. Kacper Pobłocki states:

My argument is that the greyness in Poland is not, as in the West, a colour poised between white and black, or, in the urban context, a residual, or diluted, coal-like black—the nineteenth century symbol of progress and modernity—but if anything an equivalent of the colonial blue. Grey is the colour of death and absence, of non-existence and exploitation, and it is the opposite of red—the colour of blood and life.³²

This alienating dimension of the Polish urban landscape, dominated by grey post-socialist blocks, appears in another piece of urban reportage by Chomętowska. In her book *Stacja Muranów* (The Muranów Station), the author describes the history of the eponymous housing estate, built after the Second World War on the site of the demolished Warsaw Ghetto.³³ The work discusses the fundamental problem of erasing the traces of the Jewish past from the space of contemporary Muranów,³⁴ where new, large-panel socialist architecture completely replaced nineteenth-century tenement houses. The builders designed the housing estate almost from scratch, in line with the top-down communist guidelines on the reconstruction of Warsaw after its destruction by the Nazi occupying forces. Today, Muranów's entirely different appearance evokes the feelings of unreality and metaphysical emptiness in one of Chomętowska's

³¹ See Frederiksen and Harboe Knudsen, "Introduction," 8.

³² Kacper Pobłocki, "Neither West nor South: Colour and Vernacular Cosmopolitanism in Urban Poland," *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy* 3 (2013): 207.

³³ Nazi Germany established the Warsaw Ghetto in 1940 and razed it to the ground three years later, after putting down the Jewish uprising. See, for instance, Israel Gutman, *Resistance: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994).

³⁴ Other works of reportage also discuss the mechanism of erasing the Jewish history of numerous Polish cities from the collective awareness. Those include Marcin Kącki's book *Białystok: Biała siła, czarna pamięć*, which describes the eponymous city located in north-eastern Poland. According to Jan Miklas-Frankowski, the work touches upon the "oblivion and denial of the memory of the former Jewish inhabitants of the city.... This oblivion, moreover, concerns our entire region, all of Central and Eastern Europe." Jan Miklas-Frankowski, "A City of Amnesia: Marcin Kącki's *Białystok. White Power. Black Memory*," *Baltic Worlds* 13, no. 4 (2020): 62, 65.

interlocutors: “Identical blocks, the sharp smell of asphalt, the heat. This is what a monster city looks like, an inhuman space made to cause fear.”³⁵

The dystopian concept of a monster city employs the metaphor of an enormous living organism: “a place where human individuality and community disappear, while the atomised crowd with its typical pathology of collective hypnosis and moral irresponsibility remains.”³⁶ This literary topos refers to the nineteenth-century anti-urban myth,³⁷ which criticized modernity epitomized by industrial culture and the capitalist societies that it shaped. Associating the grey color with the modern era offers another possible context for interpreting the motif of greyness—paradoxically, also the greyness of the PRL’s high-rise housing estates. Grey is the color of concrete, which constitutes “a legacy of modernism in architecture”³⁸ in the Central and Eastern European cities rebuilt after the Second World War using chiefly this construction material.

Concrete is seen as “the ultimate agent of modernity”³⁹—a belief partially reflected in the strategies for representing socialist modernist architecture evident in the books of reportage discussed here. In *Żle urodzone*, Springer reconstructs the thinking of the employees who worked in the design studio entrusted with the development of Katowice in the PRL’s times. Formerly a chiefly mining city, Katowice lies in Upper Silesia—an industrial region in southern Poland. Highlighting the unconscious indoctrination of the city’s designers and their slightly naive faith that socialist construction would heal Polish urban space, Springer emphasizes concrete as one of the tools in the planned modernization activities:

They demolish old tenement houses to make room for the designs of these very architects. Tenements are shabby, dark, and bourgeois relics of the 19th century—this is what they say and think about them. They want to refresh the city, to let in sunlight and plants. The space must be modern, made of concrete and glass—so as to enchant the miner who rides up after the shift.⁴⁰

³⁵ Beata Chomątowska, *Stacja Muranów* [Muranów Station], 2nd ed. (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2016), 30. Orig. quote: “Lustrzane bloki, ostry zapach asfaltu, gorąc. Tak wygląda miasto potwór, nieludzka przestrzeń, która ma wzbudzać lęk.”

³⁶ Jerzy Jedlicki, *A Degenerate World* (Berlin: Peter Lang Edition, 2016), 28.

³⁷ See, for example, Ariane Smart, “The Darkness and Claustrophobia of the City: Victor Hugo and the Myth of Paris,” *Modern & Contemporary France* 8, no. 3 (2000): 315–324.

³⁸ Sokołowicz, Nowakowska, and Ciarkowski, *The Ambiguous Legacy*, 3.

³⁹ Halauniova, “Good and Bad Concrete,” 29.

⁴⁰ Springer, *Żle urodzone*, 142. Orig. quote: “To pod projekty pracujących tu architektów burzy się stare kamienice. Zapyziałe, ciemne, dziewiętnastowieczne, burżuazyjne—tak wtedy

The communist architects' views paraphrased by Springer contradict the contemporary reception of large-panel housing estates. As demonstrated by Pańków, who analyzes selected blocks from the North Ursynów district, the buildings deviated from their creators' intentions, "evolving into a mockery of the modernist style based on white and grey" and "losing the austere elegance of concrete."⁴¹ In all the works of Polish literary journalism discussed in this chapter, socialist modernist buildings become the antithesis of modernity and a testimony to the maladies of the PRL's economical housing policy, which Chomątowska ironically summarizes in the slogan: "building as fast and cheap as possible."⁴² Tiny living spaces, technological backwardness, sloppy workmanship, and considerable supply shortages have contributed to the "stereotype of the high-rise housing estate as a failed creation by default."⁴³ This view, mentioned in *Betonia*, still persists in contemporary Poland and serves as a justification for the revamping of concrete housing estates. According to Halauniova, their modernization is a typical phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe alike, although the motivations differ:

I argue that, contrary to what occurs in western Europe, modernization of socialist-period housing estates is driven not by classist stigmatization of their inhabitants, but by individuals' conviction that "socialist" concrete itself is "ugly" and of "poor quality." This stems from the architecture's close association with socialism as a political project that "deviated" from western European modernity.⁴⁴

The political associations ascribed to post-socialist architecture resulted in the negative view of concrete as a construction material. Jan Mencwel (b. 1983), a Polish columnist and social activist, accurately comments on this phenomenon as follows: "Among other things, it is due to large-panel blocks—built in all the former Soviet countries, not only in Russia—that

o nich mówią i myślą. Oni chcą przewietrzyć miasto, wpuścić do niego słońce i zielen. Ma być nowocześnie—beton i szkło. Tak, żeby górnik po szychcie wyszedł na powierzchnię i się zachwyił."

⁴¹ Pańków, *Bloki w słońcu*, 161. Orig. quotes: "zmieniły się w drwinę z modernistycznej stylistyki bieli i szarości," "straciły surową elegancję betonu."

⁴² Chomątowska, *Betonia*, 333. Orig. quote: "budować jak najszybciej i najtaniej."

⁴³ Chomątowska, *Betonia*, 480. Orig. quote: "stereotyp blokowiska jako tworu z założenia nieudanego."

⁴⁴ Halauniova, "Good and Bad Concrete," 30.

concrete still evokes associations with communism in our cultural circle.”⁴⁵ This passage comes from Mencwel’s book of reportage *Betonoza: Jak się niszczy polskie miasta* (Concretosis: How They Destroy Polish Cities), which appeared in 2020. The neologism *betonoza* means the process of covering public surfaces—such as squares, pavements, and parking spaces—with concrete at the cost of urban green areas. Cutting down trees in favor of concreting, a practice that originated during the communist period, has paradoxically progressed in Poland in recent years despite the critical stance towards socialist urban policies. According to Mencwel, this is how “[g]rey permanently wins over green.”⁴⁶ Springer also highlights the problem in *Źle urodzone*, where one chapter describes Halina Skibniewska—an architect living in communist Poland who objected to the cutting down of trees to build the housing estates she designed. However, as Springer writes, she often lost her battle with the standardization governing the construction of the socialist blocks:

Soon, Skibniewska faced another task. The authorities wanted to build a new housing estate [Sadyba] in southern Warsaw. However, they defined stringent conditions for the architect: she was to arrange an estate consisting of typical blocks, not to design the buildings themselves. Therefore, she gave up and focused on green areas and utilities. At that time, the place was actually a field with no trees, which made the task even more difficult.... Still, Sadyba would soon become green; only later would it turn grey due to the blocks. Skibniewska looked at them with disgust.⁴⁷

The uniformity of buildings mentioned by Springer remains a significant contemporary charge against large-panel architecture—and the

⁴⁵ Jan Mencwel, *Betonoza: Jak się niszczy polskie miasta* [Concretosis: How They Destroy Polish Cities] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2020), 133. Orig. quote: “Między innymi dzięki blokom z wielkiej płyty, budowanym przecież nie tylko w Rosji, ale we wszystkich krajach byłego Związku Radzieckiego, beton do dziś w naszym kręgu cywilizacyjnym budzi skojarzenia z komunizmem.”

⁴⁶ Mencwel, *Betonoza*, 184. Orig. quote: “[s]zare permanentnie wygrywa z zielonym.”

⁴⁷ Springer, *Źle urodzone*, 172–176. Orig. quote: “Wkrótce Skibniewska podejmuje się kolejnego zadania. Nowe osiedle ma powstać na południu Warszawy—na Sadybie. Przed architekturką postawione są jednak twarde warunki: nie będzie mogła projektować budynków, a jedynie zakomponować osiedle z typowych bloków. Rezygnuje więc i skupia się tylko na zorganizowaniu przestrzeni zielonych i „uzbrojeniu” osiedla w niezbędną infrastrukturę. Zadanie jest o tyle trudne, że Sadyba to de facto pole, nie rosną tu żadne drzewa.... Wkrótce Sadyba będzie jednak zielona, dopiero potem zszarzeje od bloków. Skibniewska patrzy na nie ze wstrętem.”

reason why people still identify the greyness of high-rise housing estates with the social unification pursued by communists. According to Pobłocki, when Poland transformed from a capitalist country to a communist one after the Second World War, “[e]galitarian greyness became the new idiom of the socialist city.”⁴⁸ The mechanism in question covered all of Eastern Europe—a phenomenon expressed by Jack C. Fisher, who considers standardization one of the operating principles of socialist urban planning. According to Fisher’s article from the 1960s, the uniform plan of East European cities stems from the assumption that “the quality of the residential areas and their social composition is to be everywhere the same.”⁴⁹ In the PRL, the actual cause of the homogeneity thus understood of large-panel blocks was the specific system of architect remuneration, which Springer explains in *Żle urodzone*:

The shorter they [an architect] worked on a design, the more cubic meters they delivered. Therefore, adaptation of typical designs to local conditions proved the most profitable. That is why most high-rise housing estates in Poland look the same. Each deviation from the template meant more office time and fewer cubic meters of buildings designed per month. This relationship affected the [architects’] salaries: those who made untypical designs earned less.⁵⁰

The identical and hence depersonalized appearance of socialist modernist housing estates is a motif that runs through all the pieces of Polish literary journalism analyzed in this chapter. In *Bloki w słońcu*, Pańków writes that the PRL’s housing created “the killing monotony of the urban landscape,”⁵¹ deprived of any landmarks or distinguishing features. In another passage, the author expressly connects this standardization with the omnipresent greyness of North Ursynów: “For the boys from Służew nad Dolinką [another housing estate], Ursynów is the place where one can get lost. [It is] low, with all the blocks identical—grey cubes arranged in

⁴⁸ Pobłocki, “Neither West nor South,” 212.

⁴⁹ Jack C. Fisher, “Planning the City of Socialist Man,” *Ekistics* 15, no. 89 (1963): 205.

⁵⁰ Springer, *Żle urodzone*, 217. Orig. quote: “Im krócej pracuje nad projektem, tym więcej metrów szczęciennych oddaje. W efekcie najbardziej opłacało się adaptować projekty typowe pod lokalne warunki. To dlatego większość polskich blokowisk wygląda tak samo. Każde odstępstwo od schematu oznaczało więcej czasu nad deską kreślarską, a w efekcie mniej kubatury oddanej w miesiącu. A to przekładało się na pensje. Ci, którzy budowali nietypowo, zarabiali mniej.”

⁵¹ Pańków, *Bloki w słońcu*, 52. Orig. quote: “zabójczą monotonię miejskiego krajobrazu.”

different layouts.”⁵² Chomętowska depicts large-panel architecture in an analogous way. One chapter of her book *Stacja Muranów* discusses the history of the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, which stands in Muranów and commemorates the victims of the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The author contrasts the memorial with the surrounding socialist development: in her imagery, the residential blocks serve as a mismatched, dissonance-provoking background in the *ekphrases* of photographs which show well-known persons paying homage to the murdered Jews at the monument. Moreover, the concrete buildings of today’s Muranów confuse foreign tourists, who typically expect to see tangible traces of the former ghetto’s architecture when visiting the district:

The visitors arrive, spot the monument, look around, and cannot understand what they see. All around them there are blocks, the same as those in any other East European country, perfectly amorphous and anonymous.... If the driver suddenly vanished and left the group alone, the visitors would probably wander among the blocks trying to find a way back. And they would keep passing even more blocks, so similar to the previous ones that only the lack of the monument [the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes] in between would prevent the group from thinking that they were going in circles.⁵³

In the works of reportage discussed here, the amorphous and anonymous blocks reflect both the PRL’s grey reality and its influence on the citizens’ psyche. Another Polish journalist, Renata Radłowska (b. 1973), mentions this mechanism in her book *Nowohucka telenowela* (The Nowa Huta Soap Opera). The book presents the residents of Nowa Huta, a working-class district of Kraków, built in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In the past, Nowa Huta attracted the attention of the eminent Polish literary journalist, Ryszard Kapuściński, who revealed the dark side of living in

⁵² Pańków, *Bloki w słońcu*, 149. Orig. quote: “Dla chłopaków z osiedla Służew nad Dolinką Ursynów to miejsce, gdzie można się zgubić. Niski, wszystkie bloki takie same—szare kubiki poustawiane w różnych układach.”

⁵³ Chomętowska, *Stacja Muranów*, 104. Orig. quote: “Przybysze wysiadają, widzą pomnik, rozglądają się dookoła i nic nie rozumieją. Ze wszystkich stron otaczają ich bloki, takie same jak w każdym innym kraju Europy Wschodniej, doskonale amorficzne i anonimowe.... Gdyby teraz kierowca zniknął i zostali sami, pewnie kluczyliby między blokami, próbując znaleźć drogę powrotną. Ciągłe mijaliby kolejne, podobne do tamtych pierwszych tak bardzo, że gdyby nie brak pomnika między nimi, byłiby przekonani, że kręcą się w kółko.”

the district.⁵⁴ Initially designed as an independent city,⁵⁵ Nowa Huta has several Central and Eastern European equivalents; according to Fisher, those include Sztálinváros (today's Dunaújváros) in Hungary, Dimitrovgrad in Bulgaria, Havířov in Czechoslovakia (today's Czech Republic), and Titograd (today's Podgorica, the capital of Montenegro). To Fisher, all of these are model socialist cities, whose role in each country was to serve as "its showcase where socialist theory should be visible in spatial terms."⁵⁶ Importantly, the image of high-rise housing estates, which considerably contributed to that spatial demonstration of socialism, is not the dominant topic of Radłowska's book. The socialist development, however, provides the setting for the eponymous "soap opera": a series of stories about Nowa Huta's residents collected by the author. In one of those stories—the portrait of a woman representing the first wave of the district's residents—the greyness of large-panel buildings involuntarily translates into the mental greyness of their inhabitants:

There were people all around her, just the same as she was: a bit disappointed and overwhelmed, yet somewhat proud of themselves. Grumbling and reminiscing in equal measure. And a tad grey because of their grey blocks. At the beginning, the blocks were actually brighter and reflected light; then, everything faded and became normal in Nowa Huta's terms.⁵⁷

A similar correlation appears in the thoughts of a man who clearly contrasts Nowa Huta's gloomy, monochromatic landscape with the colorful center of Kraków:

The tram set off and carried Paweł to Nowa Huta. The further away from the center he was, the stranger, darker, and more restless it all became. The

⁵⁴ In 1955, Kapuściński—back then a young journalist—published a famed text entitled "To też jest prawda o Nowej Hucie" [This Too is the Truth about Nowa Huta], which contradicted the propaganda's narratives falsifying the reality of life in that district. See Katarzyna Zechenter, "Evolving Narratives in Post-War Polish Literature: The Case of Nowa Huta (1950–2005)," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 85, no. 4 (2007): 671–672.

⁵⁵ See Zechenter, "Evolving Narratives," 661.

⁵⁶ Fisher, "Planning the City," 207–208.

⁵⁷ Renata Radłowska, *Nowohucka telenowela* [The Nowa Huta Soap Opera] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2019), 109–110. Orig. quote: "Ludzie byli dookoła niej. Tacy sami jak ona. Trochę rozczarowani, trochę przytłoczeni. Trochę dumni z siebie. Trochę narzekający. Trochę wspominający. Trochę poszarzali od szarych bloków (na początku były jasne i odbijały światło; potem wszystko wyblakło—po nowohucku zrobiło się normalne)."

streets grew wider, and the sidewalks vanished. Even the people changed their looks: from well-fitting, colorful clothes to grey and brownish ones, stretched at the seams. In the city center, people carried nice shopping bags; in Huta, their shopping bags were worn out and often made of rags.⁵⁸

Listening carefully to her interlocutors, Radłowska highlights their involuntary attachment to the grey surroundings and the outsiders' inability to understand that attitude. As an example, the author quotes a dialog between Nowa Huta's resident and her son persuading her to move:

Irena visited her son and lived in his beautiful home for several months. "Stay here, Mum," he asked, but she insisted on coming back because she had her own life in Huta. The man felt amazed that she wanted to trade such beauty for greyness. "You don't understand, and you won't understand," she used to say.⁵⁹

Such manifestations of local patriotism reveal one more pattern, slightly paradoxical yet recurrent, in the books of reportage discussed here: grey-ness as the ontological foundation of life in the PRL also underlies human identity in a specific way. This relationship applies particularly to people brought up in communism but is not exclusive to those generations. Grey-ness serves as an identity factor also among representatives of contemporary subcultures closely linked with the urban landscape of high-rise housing estates, such as rappers, graffiti artists, and skaters. Pańków discusses those groups in separate parts of her book about North Ursynów, the title of which is not accidental as the phrase *bloki w słońcu* actually comes from a Polish hip-hop song.⁶⁰ According to the author, hip-hop culture in Poland rests on two pillars: first, the omnipresent grey-ness recalled in the genre's lyrics and the music videos; and second, the

⁵⁸ Radłowska, *Nowohucka telenowela*, 173. Orig. quote: "Tramwaj ruszał i uwoził Pawła do Nowej Huty. Im dalej od centrum, tym dziwniej, mroczniej, niespokojniej. Ulice się rozlewały, chodniki zanikały. Ludzie zmieniali ubrania—z kolorowych i dopasowanych na szare, bure, rozwleczone na ściegach. W centrum chodzili z ładnymi reklamówkami, w Hucie nosili zakupy w szmacianych torbach albo też w reklamówkach, tyle że mocno sponiewieranych."

⁵⁹ Radłowska, *Nowohucka telenowela*, 156. Orig. quote: "Irena odwiedzała syna, mieszkała w jego pięknym domu przez kilka miesięcy. On ją prosił: 'Zostań, mamuś'. Ona, że musi wracać, życie ma swoje w Hucie. On zdziwiony, że takie piękno chce zamienić na szarość. 'Nie rozumiesz, nie zrozumiesz', mówiła."

⁶⁰ See Pańków, *Bloki w słońcu*, 235.

“awareness of the place,”⁶¹ as the rappers themselves declare strong attachment to their neighborhood—the street, courtyard, or district. Thus, the concrete housing estates where members of this subculture grew up together with millions of other Poles can easily play the role of Polish hip-hop’s *milieu* and “symbol of urban Poland.”⁶²

Consequently, large-panel buildings of socialist modernism become much more than just problematic relics of communism: they serve as a significant cultural artifact. Jarosław Trybuś, an art historian and architecture critic, confirms this thesis in an excerpt from his book *Przewodnik po warszawskich blokowiskach* (A Guide to Warsaw’s High-Rise Housing Estates), quoted in *Źle urodzone*. Trybuś argues that “blocks and high-rise housing estates occupy their own position in our [Polish] culture—not only in the architectural and urban culture, but also in the social one.”⁶³ Greyness, so strongly associated with those buildings, acquires a similar status, albeit not only in Poland. As mentioned above, grey is a common feature of Central and Eastern Europe’s architectural heritage, and thus a peculiar hallmark of the region and an integral part of its culture. Moreover, one can perceive greyness as an aesthetic value which influences the sphere of affects and emotions. Krisztina Fehérváry puts forward precisely this argument in relation to Hungary:

In Hungary, gray is far more than a color. It is an aesthetic quality that powerfully links material environments with political affects. Gray evokes not just a landscape dominated by concrete block housing, but a whole array of impressions and sentiments.⁶⁴

The sentimental approach to the history preserved in grey, large-panel buildings and the resulting status of this heritage as a component of local identity manifest themselves diversely in Polish literary journalism. In *Bloki w słońcu*, Pańków refers to these attitudes when she presents grass-roots projects devoted to commemorating the PRL’s reality, such as the proposal to establish an alternative open-air ethnographic museum

⁶¹ Pańków, *Bloki w słońcu*, 229. Orig. quote: “świadomość miejsca.”

⁶² Miłosz Miszczynski and Przemysław Tomaszewski, “‘Spitting Lines—Spitting Brands’: A Critical Analysis of Brand Usage in Polish Rap,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, no. 6 (2014): 742.

⁶³ Springer, *Źle urodzone*, 184. Orig. quote: “bloki i blokowiska mają swoje miejsce w naszej kulturze nie tylko architektonicznej i urbanistycznej, ale też społecznej.”

⁶⁴ Fehérváry, *Politics in Color and Concrete*, 1.

gathering artifacts from the former, socialist North Ursynów.⁶⁵ Different motivations accompany the attempts to revitalize post-communist high-rise housing estates, which Chomątowska describes in *Betonia*. One of the book's chapters discusses a Warsaw-based association which aims at changing the social perception of concrete housing estates. An architect involved in this institution's works explains their motivations as follows: "Our activities were not triggered by a sentimental attachment to the blocks. Just the opposite: [the activities were triggered by] a huge complex about high-rise housing estates."⁶⁶ As the text concludes, the association's members received assistance in getting rid of that complex from East German specialists "who shared with the Poles their experience in revitalization beyond the insulation and painting of buildings."⁶⁷

In this quotation, Chomątowska signals the problem of modernizing grey housing estates by covering the buildings with colorful facades. The method became widespread in Poland at the turn of the twenty-first century as a means of revitalizing the negatively perceived socialist modernist architecture. Additionally, this procedure reflects a broader social tendency which stems from an attempt to erase the memory of the PRL. Thus motivated, painting of residential blocks touches upon another aspect of the reception of post-socialist housing: the oscillation between greyness and color—a process which Pobłocki deems to represent "the very taproot of the East European urban experience."⁶⁸

COLOR AS WEAPON AND DISEASE: A REPORTORIAL STUDY OF PASTELOSIS

Fehérváry considers color a rhetorical device used in the political discourse of the 1990s to legitimize the victory of capitalism over socialism.⁶⁹ After the Cold War, the motif in question became a symbolic weapon for fighting greyness. As already mentioned, the color grey represented the nature of life behind the Iron Curtain, marked with a deficit of "colorful" consumer goods typical of Western culture. According to Pobłocki, listening

⁶⁵ See Pańków, *Bloki w słońcu*, 268–270.

⁶⁶ Chomątowska, *Betonia*, 480. Orig. quote: "Impulsem do naszych działań nie był sentyment do bloków. Wręcz odwrotnie: wielki kompleks blokowiska."

⁶⁷ Chomątowska, *Betonia*, 482. Orig. quote: "dzielili się z Polakami doświadczeniem w rewitalizacji wykraczającej poza ocieplenie i pomalowanie bloków."

⁶⁸ Pobłocki, "Neither West nor South," 214.

⁶⁹ See Fehérváry, *Politics in Color and Concrete*, 1.

to Western music or decorating rooms with posters of foreign artists actually meant collecting cultural artifacts, “whose role was to link the here and now to an ‘elsewhere’,”⁷⁰ a tendency which became widespread among the PRL’s citizens. Consequently, color epitomized a nonsocialist reality which remained tangibly inaccessible. In those circumstances, color functioned as “a fingerprint from that ‘elsewhere’, or, put differently, a stimulant that ‘spiced up’ the solemn ‘grey’ reality.”⁷¹

Using Poland as an example, Pobłocki identifies another function of color: in his opinion, color serves as a means of narrating the transformations of urban life in post-socialist countries.⁷² He argues that greyness—which reflected the concept of social egalitarianism as promoted by communists—aroused a specific feeling of liberation from the capitalist past, at least in the PRL’s first years. Grey contrasted with garish consumption and class divisions—associations evoked by capitalism. Afterwards, however, people began to identify the grey reality with omnipresent bleakness and the compulsion to maintain solemnity, which affected the nature of public behavior. According to Pobłocki, the color-oriented modernization activities implemented during the country’s political transformation marked an attempt at eliminating greyness, thus understood, from the space of Polish cities:

Since 1989, greyness-as-liberation has practically vanished from urban life in Poland—but greyness-as-solemnity remains deeply entrenched. And these are the origins of the often noted (and often denounced as kitschy) grass-roots urban practices that seek to revitalize “dead” urban space by painting it in gaudy colours.⁷³

This passage refers to the practice of applying other colors to the previously grey housing estates and other buildings representing the architecture of twentieth-century socialist modernism. The Polish discourse concerning post-socialist urban planning refers to this mechanism as *pastelozna* (“pastelosis”). As Sara Nikolić explains, this is not a scientific term but “a pejorative nickname for what is in front of our very eyes in almost

⁷⁰ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 195.

⁷¹ Pobłocki, “Neither West nor South,” 214.

⁷² See Pobłocki, “Neither West nor South,” 205.

⁷³ Pobłocki, “Neither West nor South,” 214.

every larger Central European city.”⁷⁴ The scholar highlights the phenomenon’s broad range, namely the entire region of the former Eastern Bloc. To describe its nature, she uses judgmental phrases such as “degeneration”⁷⁵ and “symbolic violence” against a city.⁷⁶

The notion of pastelosis gained popularity in Poland following the publication of Springer’s book *Wanna z kolumnadą: Reportaże o polskiej przestrzeni* (Bathtub with a Colonnade: Works of Reportage on Polish Space) in 2013. The book’s texts expose the absurdities and pathologies of the country’s spatial policy: malpractices of real estate developers, infrastructural irregularities, and the lack of sufficient legislation on landscape protection. The author encloses these processes in an ironic quasi-dictionary definition: “Spatial order is something every Pole has heard of but none has seen for a long time.”⁷⁷ The introduction goes even further: “This book shows that Polish space is ugly and everything suggests that it will soon become even uglier.”⁷⁸ Springer’s statements reveal his clear engagement in the topic he describes. Kamila Czaja refers to this interventionist attitude as “humanizing the space,” which she explains as follows: “In *Wanna z kolumnadą*, space is hurt like a human.”⁷⁹

Czaja’s comment applies to all the reportages included in *Wanna z kolumnadą*, particularly to the book’s chapter entitled “Pastelozą—studium przypadku” (Pastelosis: A Case Study). In the text, Springer discusses the thermal insulation of buildings, a process which Poland commenced in the 1990s. The method involves covering buildings—predominantly large-panel housing estates—with Styrofoam boards and new, pastel facades. The author explains that in such cases, “‘pastel’ simply means ‘other than white,

⁷⁴ Sara Nikolić, “*Pastelozą*—Refurbishing of the PPR Heritage,” *Urban Development Issues* 63 (2019): 52.

⁷⁵ Nikolić, “*Pastelozą*,” 53.

⁷⁶ Nikolić, “*Pastelozą*,” 54.

⁷⁷ Filip Springer, *Wanna z kolumnadą: Reportaże o polskiej przestrzeni* [Bathtub with a Colonnade: Works of Reportage on Polish Space] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2013), 9. Orig. quote: “Ład przestrzenny to jest coś, o czym każdy w Polsce słyszał, ale nikt od dawna tego nie widział.”

⁷⁸ Springer, *Wanna z kolumnadą*, 7. Orig. quote: “Ta książka jest o tym, że w Polsce jest brzydko i wszystko wskazuje na to, że wkrótce będzie jeszcze brzydziej.”

⁷⁹ Kamila Czaja, “Rzecznik miejsc pokonanych: Przestrzenie Filipa Springera [The Spokesman for Defeated Sites: Filip Springer’s Spaces],” in *Strychy/piwnice: Inne przestrzenie* [Attics/Cellars: Other Spaces], ed. Alina Świeściak and Sandra Trela (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2015), 211. Orig. quote: “W *Wannie z kolumnadą* przestrzeń jest skrzywdzona niczym człowiek.”

grey, or beige.' Any other [color] is acceptable."⁸⁰ Therefore, the renovated buildings display bright and frequently mismatched colors, which community councils or housing cooperative boards choose randomly from paint companies' palettes. Springer employs antithesis to contrast such colors with the modernist aesthetics that underlies Polish large-panel architecture:

Modernists, who invented big blocks, favored white and grey. They believed that huge buildings dominated the space so much that adding strong color features [to the buildings] would be visual barbarity. A great facade was to serve only as the background for a district's life, not as its main component. Most of those who designed Polish high-rise housing estates understood this [principle], but those who came [afterwards] to modernize those buildings forgot about the rule.⁸¹

This passage corresponds with the views of Agnieszka Rek-Lipczyńska and Izabela Kozłowska, who believe that the colors referred to as pastelosis actually squandered the idea of monumentalism, pursued by socialist modernism. The authors write: "Color was used with almost childlike naivety and covered ... large tracts of the buildings [,] taking away the remains of the seriousness associated with the attempt of their aspirations to wear the monumental architecture title."⁸² At the same time, the two scholars highlight that the "pastel" revitalization trend has gradually slowed in Poland. Commonly criticized by architects, the tendency subsequently fell into considerable social disfavor due to Springer's influential book. Therefore, recent years have seen a number of projects aimed at "repairing the image of the Polish housing estates."⁸³

Although Springer's reportage presents the arguments put forward by both critics and supporters of pastelosis, the resulting overall image of this phenomenon is unequivocally negative. The pejorative tone stems from an original stylistic device: the author employs the language of a medical case

⁸⁰ Springer, *Wanna z kolumnadą*, 71. Orig. quote: "‘pastelowy’ znaczy tyle co ‘niebiały’, ‘niezary’, ‘niebeżowy’. Każdy inny jest akceptowalny."

⁸¹ Springer, *Wanna z kolumnadą*, 71. Orig. quote: "kolorami modernistów, którzy wymyślili wielkie bloki, była biel i szarość. Uważali, że wielkie domy dominują w przestrzeni na tyle, że dodawanie do nich silnych akcentów kolorystycznych byłoby już wizualnym barbarzyństwem. Wielka elewacja miała być jedynie tłem dla życia osiedla, a nie jego głównym elementem. Rozumieli to w większości projektanci polskich blokowisk, zapomnieli ci, którym przyszło te osiedla modernizować."

⁸² Rek-Lipczyńska and Kozłowska, "The New Aspects," 258.

⁸³ Rek-Lipczyńska and Kozłowska, "The New Aspects," 261.

study. Consequently, the mass-scale process of covering buildings with bright colors becomes a disease: “a genuine, nationwide infection.”⁸⁴ Along with the chapter’s title, the metaphor appears also in such subheadings as “medical history,” “risk groups,” “diagnostic problems,” or “possible complications.” Springer unfolds the semantic field of a disease already at the very beginning, when he formulates a thesis concerning the phenomenon’s sources: “They tried to invent a medicine for greyness. They thought that painting it over would cause an improvement. But they thought wrong. Rumor has it that the deadliest poisons emerge while developing new medicines.”⁸⁵

Nikolić explains the causes of pastelosis in a similar manner: “With a name that bears an uncanny resemblance to a bacterial infection, *pasteloza* and its manifestations arose from the need for aesthetisation.”⁸⁶ However, the aesthetic motifs gave way to hidden political and historical motivations, namely the social need to erase greyness—as the PRL’s material heritage—from the Polish urban space. In his chapter, Springer quotes a vice president of the board of a housing cooperative, who explains that the need for colors comes from the residents themselves: “They do not want sad surroundings.”⁸⁷ Another interlocutor, a technology manager supervising the painting of blocks, confirms this opinion. The specialist clearly dissociates himself from the modernist aesthetics because it reminds him of communism:

Today some designers try to return to those grey shades, but I tell you what, I don’t like it. I have an aversion to greyness because my generation lived in greyness, and now I can fight it, so I do. Color calms me down; it has a psychological effect. I see no point in returning to greyness. Today, people tend to reminisce about those [communist] times in general and say that those were good days. Apparently, they have a short memory.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Springer, *Wanna z kolumnadq*, 76. Orig. quote: “prawdziwa, ogólnonarodowa infekcja.”

⁸⁵ Springer, *Wanna z kolumnadq*, 65. Orig. quote: “Próbowano wynaleźć lekarstwo na szarość. Pomyślano, że jak się ją zamaluje, to będzie lepiej. Pomyślano źle. Najgroźniejsze trucizny powstają podobno w trakcie opracowywania leków.”

⁸⁶ Nikolić, “*Pasteloza*,” 52.

⁸⁷ Springer, *Wanna z kolumnadq*, 73. Orig. quote: “oni nie chcą, żeby było smutno.”

⁸⁸ Springer, *Wanna z kolumnadq*, 77–78. Orig. quote: “Teraz niektórzy projektanci próbują wracać do tych szarości i ja panu powiem, mnie to się nie podoba. Ja to do szarości mam uraz, z takiego pokolenia jestem, co w szarości żyło, a teraz mogę z nią walczyć, to walczę. Kolor mnie uspokaja, działa psychologicznie. Nie widzę sensu, by do szarości wracać. Teraz się w ogóle wraca do tamtych czasów i mówi, że to było dobre. Ludzie mają krótką pamięć.”

However, the architects and experts quoted in the text express a diametrically opposed opinion. They include Jarosław Trybuś, whose views previously appeared in *Żle urodzone*. In the “pastelosis” chapter of *Wanna z kolumnadą*, Springer once again quotes Trybuś’s publication on Warsaw’s high-rise housing estates: “The worst result emerges when poor architecture—and most blocks are just that—is forcefully transformed into eminent buildings by painting. This cannot succeed.... Such thoughtless application of colors to blocks resembles putting a dress on a monkey: it will always be ludicrous.”⁸⁹

Thus, the social reception of pastelosis generates a visible dissonance. Ordinary people—especially those who lived under the previous political system—often accept the color revitalization. By contrast, experts oppose this tendency even more frequently, but their objections rarely meet with understanding among housing cooperative members or investors. The dissonance in question provides the subject matter for the case study contained in *Wanna z kolumnadą*. These reception differences also reveal a paradox which sheds new light on the attitude to socialist modernist architecture in contemporary Poland. In free market conditions, a color which operates on the edge of good taste can arouse no less controversy in urban planning than did the communism-evoking greyness.

CONCLUSIONS

The books discussed in this chapter, written by journalists born in the 1970s or the 1980s, focus on—or at least refer to—the setting of post-socialist housing estates. These works belong to a much broader reflection on the contemporary evaluation of postwar modernism in Polish architecture. The discussion is gradually moving beyond academic research, as proved by Tomasz Plata in *Polityka*—a popular nationwide weekly. In his 2018 article, “Bloki nostalgii” (Blocks of Nostalgia), Plata describes the growing interest in the PRL’s architectural heritage within the public discourse and various fields of art. The author characterizes this tendency using phrases such as “modernist Renaissance”⁹⁰ or the “return to

⁸⁹ Springer, *Wanna z kolumnadą*, 71. Orig. quote: “Najgorzej, jeśli marną architekturę, a przecież większość bloków taka właśnie jest, chce się przekształcić na siłę za pomocą malowania w wybitne budynki. To się nie może udać.... Takie bezmyślne kolorowanie bloków to jak ubieranie małpy w sukienkę. Zawsze będzie groteskowe.”

⁹⁰ Tomasz Plata, “Bloki nostalgii” [Blocks of Nostalgia], *Polityka* 28 (2018): 68. Orig. quote: “modernistyczny renesans.”

modernism.”⁹¹ Among the works which stimulate “the process of revitalizing the memory of the modernist project concerning architecture for the masses,”⁹² Plata lists Chomątowska’s book *Betonia* and Pańków’s book *Bloki w słońcu*. Springer also earns a mention as an author who began this topic in Polish literary journalism.

However, the reception of the works analyzed in this article goes beyond the stimulation of social debate on the urban landscape shaped by concrete and large panels. As shown by the “pastelosis” chapter of the book *Wanna z kolumnadą*, journalistic works can assume the role of prime movers and lead to tangible changes in the reality that surrounds us. Springer’s chapter helped to effectively publicize the controversial aesthetics of buildings whose colorful facades ostentatiously distanced themselves from the communist past. One can already observe the first results of this literary exposure. Warsaw’s Radisson Blu Sobieski Hotel—formerly Jan III Sobieski Hotel, after Poland’s famous king—appears in Springer’s text as possibly the first case of “infection” with pastelosis.⁹³ Built in the early 1990s and painted in bright, mismatched colors, the hotel became regarded as an icon of Polish postmodern architecture—a style whose heyday in Poland coincided with the country’s political transformation after the fall of communism. As the building was controversial and long considered the epitome of kitsch, it was repainted white and grey in 2023. Importantly, this symbolic return to the modernist style failed to please everyone. Warsaw’s conservator, Michał Krasucki, protested against the hotel’s new facade as follows:

Painted this way, Sobieski is nothing. Just another of the hundreds of Polish corner buildings at squares, having nothing to do with being an icon (whether we like it or not) of Polish postmodernism and the period of transformation.... I would like us not to base our assessment of past architecture on our tastes and preferences..., but to apply to it [the past architecture] the criteria proper to architectural criticism. We judge every piece of architecture also according to its time, and in the case of symbols, by the role it historically played.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Plata, “Bloki nostalgii,” 70. Orig. quote: “powrót do modernizmu.”

⁹² Plata, “Bloki nostalgii,” 68. Orig. quote: “proces rewitalizowania pamięci o modernistycznym projekcie architektury dla mas.”

⁹³ See Springer, *Wanna z kolumnadą*, 65.

⁹⁴ Tomasz Żylski, “Czy biały Sobieski może być ładniejszy? Wokół dyskusji o zmianie koloru elewacji warszawskiego hotelu [Can the White Sobieski Be Prettier? Around the Discussion

Thus, greyness continues to arouse social controversy in Poland owing to its political and historical associations. Although narrowing down the semantic field of grey—and the landscape of large-panel housing estates—to a synonym of life in the PRL is a generalization, such attitudes seldom raise astonishment. Nikolić rightly states that the “instrumentalization of architecture for political and demagogic purposes is as old as architecture itself.”⁹⁵ The works of reportage by Springer and other Polish authors who explore the post-socialist urban space clearly demonstrate the instrumentalization in question. Still, they remain far from a simplifying critique of the grey, communist architecture or the equally dull human existence of those days.

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⁹⁵ Nikolić, “*Pastelozą*,” 54.

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CHAPTER 10

Baltic Narratives About the Soviet Past: The Documentary Cinema of Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen and Giedrė Žickytė

Zane Balčus and Renata Šukaitytė

INTRODUCTION

Paradigmatic shifts in journalism and non-fiction cinema occurred in the West in the 1960s and 1970s due to the liberal spirit and creative forces of the time, as well as technological innovations. These gave rise to new movements described as “new journalism” (an expanded form of classical “literary journalism,” encompassing narrative journalism, creative non-fiction, the non-fiction novel, literary non-fiction, literary reportage, and many other movements¹), and a new type of non-fiction filmmaking (best represented by the “*cinéma vérité*” and “direct cinema” movements). Jane Chapman suggests observational documentaries of the 1960s and 1970s

¹For more details, see John C. Hartsock, *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 3.

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“can be viewed as a form of journalism” and even “a form of visual journalism, which involves a quest for the real facts or information behind the headlines.”² At this time, Western filmmakers of different nationalities and backgrounds engaged in personal, poetic, reflexive, and experimental creative practices while telling stories about ordinary people, drawing attention to social issues and using personal narratives to explore themes that contrasted with the didactic television documentaries that had prevailed for decades.³ These films foregrounded the filmmaker’s involvement in the creative process and captured actual events and emotions with a level of subjectivity and artistry that went beyond the mere presentation of facts. In the 1960s and 1970s documentarists in the Baltic states could not enjoy the same creative freedom as their counterparts in Western countries, because their cultural space was cut off from the processes of the outside world and permeated by censorship in the Soviet Union. However, Lithuanians Almantas Grikevičius, Robertas Verba, and Henrikas Šablevičius; Latvians Uldis Brauns, Aivars Freimanis, and Ivars Seleckis; and Estonians Mark Soosaar and Andres Sööt developed the Baltic poetic documentary cinema tradition by creating their influential films.⁴ Their works were characterized by an ethnographer’s sensibility with minimal verbal expression and were rich in metaphors. The visual language they employed, moreover, to tell the stories of the everyday routines of ordinary people, did not correspond to the lives of the ideal Soviet person.⁵ They avoided addressing the topics promoted by Soviet nomenclature and the use of authoritative voice-over narration, filmic features which prevailed in non-fiction films under communism. This creative strategy was

² Jane Chapman, *Issues in Contemporary Documentary* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 19.

³ Among the films with innovative creative approach were: *Chronique d’un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*, Jean Rouch, Edgar Morin, 1961, France), *Le Joli Mai* (*The Lovely Month of May*, Chris Marker, Pierre Lhomme, 1963, France), *Titicut Follies* (Frederick Wiseman, 1967, USA), *In the Year of the Pig* (Emile de Antonio, 1968, USA).

⁴ Among the most prominent films are: *Laikas eina per miestą* (*Time Walks Through the City*, Almantas Grikevičius, 1966); *Šimtamečių gados* (*The Dreams of the Centenarians*, Robertas Verba, 1969); *Kelionė ūkų lankomis* (*A Trip Across Misty Meadows*, Henrikas Šablevičius, 1973); *235 000 000* (Uldis Brauns, 1967); *Kuldīga Frescoes* (*Kuldīgas freskas*, 1966) and *Lomī* (*Catch*, 1969, both directed by Aivars Freimanis, cinematographer Ivars Seleckis); *Kihnu naine* (*Woman from Kihnu*, Mark Soosaar, 1974), *Ruhnu* (*Ruhnu*, Andres Sööt, 1965).

⁵ A documentary film *Laika tilti* (*Bridges of Time*, co-production of all three Baltic states) by Latvian director Kristīne Briede and Lithuanian director Audrius Stonys was released in 2018 about this generation of filmmakers.

chosen very purposefully by younger filmmakers to nurture a documentary discourse alternative to the one developed by their established colleagues producing ideologically sound Soviet documentaries. These are best represented by the genre of “soviet chronicles,” films in the genre of TV reportage, produced in the studios of the Soviet Republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in the period from the 1940s to the 1980s, about the important events in the political and social life in these republics, their most prominent people, and their achievements. Creative non-fiction practices in the Baltic states continued to flourish in the 1980s and 1990s (during significant political changes in the Soviet Union and after its collapse), maintaining the tradition of “poetic documentaries.” The filmmakers also developed personal essayistic narratives as well as investigative and observational approaches for depicting the social and political reality they lived in (for instance, films by Šarūnas Bartas, Algimantas Maceina, Juris Podnieks, Laila Pakalniņa, and Edmundas Zubavičius). Film festivals in the West took notice of this nonconformist creative documentary practice, which at that time, according to Moritz de Hadeln, the director of the Berlin International Film Festival, was “clearly the best in this field in the whole Soviet Union. It matches the quality of the best of the Western schools.”⁶ He also recognized that Baltic filmmakers had “strong personalities and a style, a vision and a specific sensitivity.”⁷ Creative non-fiction films produced in the Baltic states in the 1990s, during the period when Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia had just regained their independence and were restoring their statehoods, began reflecting on these crucial historic events as well as on the individual and collective traumas of living under a totalitarian regime. These narratives undoubtedly broadened the small nations’ view of a dramatic era and added new narratives to Europe’s historical and cultural memory.

The Baltic documentarians who began their careers in the new millennium were influenced by global trends and matured in an environment that was culturally and socially diverse and guided by the neoliberal market economy, in which film was perceived as art as well as a creative industrial commodity. Therefore, it was clear to them that “consumer entertainment

⁶ Moritz de Hadeln, “Preface,” in *Les Documentaires Des Republiques Sovietiques Baltes: Une Retrospective / Die Dokumentarfilme Der Baltischen Sowjetrepubliken: Eine Retrospektive / Documentary Films of the Baltic Soviet Republics: A Retrospective*, ed. Erika de Hadeln, Moritz de Hadeln, and Hans-Joachim Schlegel (Nyon, 1987), 14.

⁷ de Hadeln, “Preface,” 14.

was an important aspect of the business of filmmaking, even in documentary,”⁸ especially when films needed intermediaries (broadcasters, distributors, sales agents) to secure production budgets and audiences. These paradigmatic shifts gradually blurred the visible boundaries between fiction, documentary, experimental, and even animated film genres, expanding the notion of “truth” and “sobriety” in non-fiction media by offering more nuanced, subtle, and multi-layered perspectives on the world. Another important development that affected the documentary milieu (especially in Europe) was the steadily growing number of women directors and producers of feature documentary films, influencing their thematic and stylistic diversity.

In this chapter, we examine the creative non-fiction films of two renowned Baltic documentary filmmakers—Lithuanian director Giedrė Žickytė and Latvian director Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen—both of whom have journalistic and film training and are recognized for their distinctive visual style and captivating well-crafted narratives about life under the communist regime, as well as the Soviet legacy in Baltic societies. Both started their cinematic careers after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁹ Their films are successfully screened at international festivals, on TV channels, and on streaming platforms. They are appreciated by viewers in their home countries and abroad, especially by those who have not lived in a totalitarian system but are curious about it.

To involve the audience in the “aesthetics of experience”¹⁰ of daily life during communism and after its fall, these two filmmakers employ different creative non-fictional narrative techniques. For example, in the documentaries *Mans mīļākais karš* (*My Favorite War*, 2020, Norway/Latvia) and *Bekons, sviests un mana mamma* (*My Mother's Farm*, 2008, Latvia/

⁸ Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

⁹ Burkovska-Jacobsen lives and works in Latvia and Norway. She left Latvia after graduating from high school in 1990. She first studied TV and video production, then completed an undergraduate course in film directing in Lillehammer. She became a freelance filmmaker and co-owns the production company Bivrost Film, which creates content for the Norwegian, Latvian, and EU market. Žickytė graduated from Vilnius University in 2002 with a degree in journalism. In 2004, she completed postgraduate studies in TV and film directing at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theater. In 2007, she completed her master's degree in visual arts at the Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts. She is a member of the European Film Academy. In 2014, she founded the Moonmakers production studio.

¹⁰ The term was coined by John C. Hartsock and explained in *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience*.

Norway), Burkovska-Jacobsen uses various cinematic materials (animation, voice-over narration, newspaper clippings, family archive footage) to develop narratives that focus on her personal experiences and her family's life during the oppressive regime and after its fall, offering insights into history through a personal lens. These films are microhistorical, as the autobiographical perspective places personal memory at the center of historical investigation.¹¹ Burkovska-Jacobsen grew up in Soviet Latvia and spent part of her young adulthood there. This fact explains her choice to talk about the Soviet era and major political changes in the 1980s and 1990s from a personal perspective. Meanwhile, Žickytė was a child when Lithuania and other Baltic states regained their independence in 1990. In *Šuolis* (*The Jump*, 2020, Lithuania/ Latvia/ France), *Meistras ir Tatjana* (*Master and Tatyana*, 2015, Lithuania), and *Kaip mes žaidėme revoliuciją* (*How We Played the Revolution*, 2012, Lithuania), she uses a different strategy to talk about the same historical period and life during that time. She tells her stories from the point of view of the protagonists of her films—bright, talented, and nonconformist figures (mainly Lithuanian artists of the late Soviet era) whose creative practices and lifestyle were an expression of their resistance to the regime. In these films, montage plays an essential role in constructing the narrative from various archival materials (television footage, videotapes of independent cameramen, photographs, personal notes of the characters) alongside the filmed memories of artists, cultural workers, and people from the inner circle of the main characters, which are supplemented by the comments of experts.

Although in originating from small countries, these films may be liminal and marginal, from an epistemological point of view they are valuable and play an important role in refreshing national and European collective memory by creating emotive and personal narratives about totalitarian regimes in Europe and communicating them to people who did not directly experience the actual events and situations. With this research, we seek to answer the following questions: (1) How does the intersection of the subjective, analytical, and critical approaches in the films contribute to the aesthetic experience of everyday life in the Soviet period? (2) How do the cinematic approaches and narratives in the films differ from traditional reportage-style documentaries, which Bill Nichols categorizes as “the

¹¹ Efrén Cuevas, *Filming History from Below: Microhistorical Documentaries* (New York: Columbia University Press/Wallflower, 2022), 36.

expository,”¹² and other Baltic documentaries, which fall into the category of creative non-fiction film? Sheila Curran Bernard and Philip Gerard’s theoretical concepts of creative non-fiction as well as Efrén Cuevas’s work on microhistorical documentaries serve as the foundation for our research.¹³

“CREATIVE NON-FICTION” AND “DOCUMENTARY”

Before we analyze the selected sample films, the key terms of this chapter, namely “non-fiction” and “documentary,” will be briefly discussed. According to Bernard, audiovisual non-fiction lies “on a spectrum between journalism and art, encompassing some of both.”¹⁴ Aufderheide identifies entertainment as an additional component on the spectrum.¹⁵ More broadly, documentary film has been considered alongside other “discourses of sobriety,” such as science, economics, politics, and religion.¹⁶ This situates non-fiction narratives within an expansive discursive field, highlighting different perspectives on their rightful place. As Gerard rightly observes: “On the face of it, the term nonfiction does not make much sense. No other genre suffers under this metaphysical definition by negation.”¹⁷ The term “non-fiction” is frequently used in documentary film theory alongside “documentary,” though distinctions exist in the usage of these terms. It was British filmmaker John Grierson who originated “documentary” as a term for non-fiction film; he also coined the phrase “creative treatment of actuality,” a frequently used (though contested) description of documentary film practice.¹⁸ In some instances,

¹² Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

¹³ For more details, see Philip Gerard, *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life* (Cincinnati: Story Press Books, 1996) and 2nd ed. (Long Grove: Waveland Press Inc., 2018); Sheila Curran Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling: Creative Nonfiction on Screen*, 3rd ed. (Waltham: Focal Press, 2010); 4th ed. (Waltham: Focal Press, 2016); 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2023); Cuevas, *Filming History from Below*.

¹⁴ Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling*, 5th ed., 5.

¹⁵ Patricia Aufderheide, “The Changing Documentary Marketplace,” *Cinéaste* 30, no. 3 (2005): 24.

¹⁶ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 3–4.

¹⁷ Philip Gerard, *Creative Nonfiction*, 2nd ed., 3.

¹⁸ John Grierson, “The Documentary Producer (1933),” in *Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*, ed. Jonathan Kahana (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 216.

“documentary” is negatively contrasted with non-fiction films or series that are genuinely captivating, suggesting that documentaries tend to prioritize the presentation of a subject and the articulation of an argument, often to provide information in a manner similar to educational films.¹⁹ Bernard suggests that the problem may lie in different perceptions of what it means to tell stories and specifically documentary stories, and how non-fiction-based narratives differ from narrative or feature films. While not all non-fiction films are narrative driven, acknowledging that many non-fiction films are part of narrative cinema broadens the discourse on creativity, enriching the conversation.²⁰ These discussions illustrate the particular importance of the term “creativity,” which functions as a tool for storytelling, especially when it refers to real events.

Debates surrounding terminology in non-fiction cinema and the issue of creativity reflect similar discussions in non-fiction writing, where terms like “creative non-fiction” and “literary journalism” are intertwined. Gerard supports Lee Gutkind’s choice of the term “creative non-fiction,” which was developed to attract interest from those involved in both creative writing and journalism, highlighting it as a relatively new term.²¹ Conversely, John C. Hartsock favors the term “literary journalism” (and “narra-descriptive journalism”), which follows its historical usage in the early twentieth century in the USA and its recognition as “new journalism” during the 1960s and 1970s. Hartsock underscores the coexistence of other terms, such as creative non-fiction and the impossibility of establishing a unified terminology.²²

In this chapter, we will adhere to the term “creative non-fiction” to describe a broader domain to which cinematic non-fiction also belongs. However, “documentary” will be used interchangeably with non-fiction, as the theorists referenced in this article use both terms. Consequently, concepts such as “narrative,” “creativity,” and “storytelling” resonate strongly with non-fiction works created in other forms of non-fiction expression. We follow Sheila Curran Bernard’s arguments that creative non-fiction films rely heavily on the creative “*arrangement and selection of*

¹⁹ Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling*, 5th ed., 1.

²⁰ Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling*, 5th ed., 1–2.

²¹ For more details, see Lee Gutkind, “Creative Nonfiction: A Movement, Not a Moment,” *Creative Nonfiction*, no. 29 (2006): 6–18; and Gerard, *Creative Nonfiction*, 6–7.

²² Hartsock, *Literary Journalism*, 3.

the content: on whom and what they focus; what they leave out; how they convey content visually and aurally; and how they are structured.”²³

Documentary films are subjective, regardless of how balanced the narrative is or how neutral and honest the filmmakers strive to be. The filmmaker chooses which stories to tell and how to tell them, which materials to include, and which to leave unused. Subjectivity is not the opposite of objectivity since all forms of communication are inherently subjective.²⁴ The positioning of the filmmaker within the narrative raises even more questions. First-person films foreground this discussion, as the filmmaker’s presence is explicitly revealed.²⁵ According to Bernard, regardless of how explicit or implicit the filmmaker’s presence may be, these films require compelling and nuanced storytelling while maintaining credibility through believable and truthful content.²⁶ Films can often be categorized as either plot driven or character driven: in a character-driven film, the action of the film emerges from the goals and aspirations of the characters, while in a plot-driven film, the characters are secondary to the events that constitute the plot.²⁷ When considering the five hallmarks of what makes non-fiction creative, Bernard uses categories proposed by Gerard, and this versatile set of tools is highly relevant in documentary filmmaking and valuable for further analysis of the films discussed.²⁸ These five elements for crafting creative non-fiction go beyond plot-driven approaches: (1) from a storytelling perspective, a narrative must present both an apparent and more profound subject; (2) the story is freed from timeliness—it does not have to follow a topical story immediately, but it can grow and gain significance over time; (3) the narrative should tell a compelling story; (4) it also incorporates the filmmaker’s reflections, thus allowing for intriguing connections between subjects and characters, all from a distinctive storytelling perspective; (5) it must be well-crafted as a piece of writing.

²³ Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling*, 5th ed., 3.

²⁴ Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling*, 5th ed., 5.

²⁵ The active involvement of the filmmaker in the narrative construction had become more prominent by the 1990s, and the subjective self-inscription was considered a particular filter. This shift has been attributed to the changing cultural and social environment in the West since the 1960s and technological advancements. In Latvia and Lithuania, during the Soviet period’s centralized film production system, personal expression in non-fiction filmmaking was the exception rather than the norm. Only in the early 1990s did first-person narratives become more widespread.

²⁶ Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling*, 5th ed., 5.

²⁷ Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling*, 5th ed., 31.

²⁸ Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling*, 5th ed., 7–9.

Bill Nichols elaborates on the documentarist's position within the narrative based on the modes of representing reality.²⁹ According to him, the reflexive, participatory, and performative approaches (modes) involve an explicit presence of the filmmaker, either by establishing a discursive position on filmmaking or by actively engaging in the film's narrative. The participatory mode centers on the dynamic relationship between the filmmaker and the subject, where the filming process involves interviews or other types of close engagement. This approach is frequently combined with archival footage, providing a framework to explore historical topics in depth. On the other hand, the performative mode emphasizes the filmmaker's personal, expressive engagement with the subject, prioritizing emotional resonance and the viewer's response over objective representation. It aims to evoke feelings and reactions, moving away from strict neutrality. The positioning of the filmmaker within the narrative has been further advanced and contested by Stella Bruzzi, who argues that documentaries are "performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable, and informed by issues of performance and performativity."³⁰ However, this position's insistence that every documentary should be perceived as an act of performance can be problematic, especially when considering films narrated from the explicit (including first-person) position of the filmmaker. In such cases, performativity would lose its function as a defining quality of these very personal films, as performativity is perceived as an overall condition of documentary cinema, following Bruzzi's argument.³¹

In the films discussed in this chapter, the narrative device of recounting events after a significant passage of time—thereby introducing a temporal and emotional distance—emerges as a particularly prominent element. Interpreting these works through the lens of microhistorical documentary practice adds an additional layer of contextual depth to their storytelling. Efrén Cuevas further elucidates the distinctive qualities of such films:

these documentaries are characterized by a reduced scale of observation, focusing on specific individuals, families, or social groups, generally of an ordinary or marginal nature, far removed from the big figures and events of

²⁹ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 99–138.

³⁰ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.

³¹ Veerle Ros et al., "Toward a Cognitive Definition of First-Person Documentary," in *Cognitive Theory and Documentary Film*, ed. Catalin Brylla and Mette Kramer (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 226.

public history. However, the objective behind this reduced scale is not to conduct a strictly ethnographic or observational study located in the present of the filmmaker but to explore the past and to place the “micro” analysis in relation to relevant macrohistorical contexts, thereby making these documentaries historiographically representative in their own right.³²

Cuevas’ analysis is based on a microhistorical approach to historiography located in the notion of “history from below,” which originated in the 1960s questioning of well-established traditions of historical inquiry. A growing field, the rise of microhistory coincided with the shift in documentary filmmaking in the 1970s and 1980s and the emergence of new approaches to storytelling. With these new approaches, filmmakers questioned the omniscience characteristic of the expository documentary mode, employing self-reflexive techniques such as filming themselves and, in so doing, breaking away from the objectivist stance most often associated with documentary film.³³

HISTORICAL, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

It is essential to provide some contextual information about life in the Baltic states during Russia’s occupation, as this period is reflected in the cinematic works of Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen and Giedrė Žickytė. Dramatic upheavals and euphoria marked the lives of the Baltic peoples in the twentieth century. The modern democratic Baltic states were established after World War I in 1918. World War II, however, marked a tragic decade for the Baltic nations, during which, in addition to mass deportations, killings, and emigration, they endured Soviet, German, and then renewed Soviet occupation and were subjected to foreign regimes from 1940 to 1990. A characteristic feature of Stalin’s system was terror, used primarily by the NKVD (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and its secret police, which were responsible for arrests, detentions, and surveillance. The arrests and deportations initially targeted political leaders, high-ranking civil servants, military and police officers, and other social groups deemed unnecessary or threatening to the new regime. However, terror soon permeated society at large, and anyone could potentially be labelled

³² Cuevas, *Filming History from Below*, 31.

³³ See Chapter 1 “Microhistory and Documentary Film” in Cuevas, *Filming History from Below*, 14–40.

an “enemy of the people,” with the corresponding dire consequences.³⁴ The Baltic states experienced two major waves of deportations (in 1941 and 1949), during which tens of thousands of residents were simultaneously sent to Gulag camps in distant regions of the Soviet Union.³⁵

During the civic movements towards independence in the late 1980s, the memoirs of Gulag survivors and political prisoners played an instrumental role in forming a new national memory and the post-Soviet identity of the Baltic nations.³⁶ Despite the genocide of the local citizens, the Soviet regime was not labelled as an occupying criminal regime in the Baltic states until the late 1980s. These historic themes and the suppression of creativity, spiritual life, and inner freedom during the Soviet occupation are reflected in the films examined in this chapter, as these events, directly and indirectly, influenced the filmmakers and the people around them.

Restoration of independence enabled the reevaluation, reflection, and mediation of the traumatic memories of the recent past. In the 1990s, films began to emerge in the Baltic countries that explored historical themes, with directors from various generations addressing experiences such as those of deportees, soldiers on both sides of the front line, and dissidents, as well as the tragic fate of Jewish communities, the final front of World War II in Western Latvia, and other significant topics. The new millennium was marked by the growth of history “consumption” and “commodification,” predominantly mediated in film and TV. This new tendency in the non-fiction domain is remarkable in the Baltic countries and is addressed by different generations of filmmakers, as has been

³⁴ Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 130–31.

³⁵ The first wave of deportations was linked to the regime change and the removal of individuals deemed undesirable by the occupying authorities. In 1949, however, a quota was established to deport 30,000 families (resulting in the deportation of approximately 95,000 people in March) from the Baltic states, primarily to facilitate land reforms and expedite the implementation of collectivization. Lithuania suffered the most from these post-war deportations. (Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, 145–46.)

³⁶ Violeta Davoliūtė and Tomas Balkelis, “Introduction,” in *Maps of Memory: Trauma, Identity and Exile in Deportation Memoirs from the Baltic States*, ed. Violeta Davoliūtė and Tomas Balkelis (Vilnius: Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, 2012), 10.

discussed by regional film researchers (Inga Pērkone,³⁷ Renata Šukaitytė,³⁸ Zane Balčus,³⁹ and Mikonis-Railienė et al.⁴⁰). The generation of filmmakers whose families had been affected by deportations, arrests, or persecutions (e.g., Dzintra Geka, Pēteris Krilovs) had a particular interest in history. At the same time, we can observe that historical themes deeply interested members of the generation that was in its formative years during the independence movements (e.g., Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen, Ivo Kalpenieks, Askolds Saulītis, Vytautas V. Landsbergis, Algimantas Maceina), when such narratives began to circulate and were openly discussed. In contrast, younger filmmakers (e.g., Giedrė Beinoriūtė, Kārlis Lesiņš, Aistė Stonytė, Giedrė Žickytė) researched the past in archives and collected the stories of people who had experienced the recent past and shared their knowledge with their audience.

These films often provide a context which can seem too general and familiar to national audiences but is deliberately presented like that, having an international audience as its focus. This trend reflects, among other things, an effort to raise awareness about the Soviet occupation and subsequent repressions—an issue that Russia has continued to deny or ignore since the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴¹ This international engagement

³⁷ Inga Pērkone, “Tu, lielā vakara saule!” Esejas par modernismu Latvijas filmās (Rīga: Neputns, 2013); Inga Pērkone, “Aizturēto asaru eposs: Dzintras Gekas esejas par genocīdu,” Kino Raksti, June 14, 2023, <https://www.kinoraksti.lv/domas/latvijas-filma/aiztureto-asaru-eposs-dzintras-gekas-esejas-par-genocidu-1113>.

³⁸ Renata Šukaitytė, “Contemporary Lithuanian Documentary Cinema: A Critical Overview of Main Film Directions,” *Apertūra*, Fall (2021): 1–23; Renata Šukaitytė, “History in Lithuanian Women’s Creative Documentaries: Critical and Personal Approach,” *Panopticum*, no. 30 (2023): 118–37.

³⁹ Zane Balčus, “Dokumentālais kino—studijas, autori, tēmas un stili,” in *Latvijas kinomāksla: Jaunie laiki, 1990–2020*, ed. Inga Pērkone and Dita Rietuma (Rīga: Dienas Grāmata, Latvijas Kultūras akadēmija, 2021); Zane Balčus, “Filmmakers as Onscreen Characters in Recent Latvian Documentary Cinema,” *Culture Crossroads* 18 (2021): 55–65; Zane Balčus, “Microhistories of the Crossroad Street films,” *Panopticum*, no. 30 (2023): 51–61.

⁴⁰ Anna Mikonis-Railienė, Renata Šukaitytė, Mnatas Martišius, and Renata Stonytė, *Politinis lūžis ekrane: (po)komunistinė transformacija Lietuvos dokumentiniame kine, videokronikoje ir televizijoje* (Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2020).

⁴¹ Eneken Laanes makes such an observation about the film *Tõrjutud mäletused* (*Memories Denied*, 2005), which features female experiences of deportation. This can be seen as a trend in many other films about the topic produced in Baltic countries. Eneken Laanes, “Trauma keelde tõlgitud: Kultuurideülesed mäluvormid eesti laagrija küüditamismälestustes,” *Keel ja Kirjandus*, no. 4 (2017): 251–52, <https://doi.org/10.54013/kk713a1>.

serves as a step toward global recognition of the suffering endured by the Baltic countries, and it has been possible to make it even more visible after their accession to the European Union in 2004.

Targeting foreign audiences is also seen as part of the effort to develop the international market for the national films, the process which began with Latvia and Lithuania joining pan-European film funding mechanisms, developing international co-productions, and benefiting from the EU audiovisual market after accession.⁴² The orientation toward Western practices and the need to acquire skills for integration into the European film market was discussed in the Baltic countries in the late 1980s when changes within the Soviet Union during Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* became apparent. Denmark was instrumental in integrating media, television, and film professionals from the Baltic states and other former Soviet bloc countries into the European industry, and various initiatives were launched to connect regional professionals with partners from European countries and beyond.⁴³

The films by Burkovska-Jacobsen and Žickytė represent this international dimension, which is strongly present in Baltic documentary cinema. Most of their films are international co-productions. An international dimension is also apparent in the circulation of their films around international film festivals, which is part of the phenomenon of "the economy of prestige."⁴⁴ For example, Burkovska-Jacobsen's *My Favorite War* premiered at the prestigious Annecy International Animation Film Festival and received the main award at the Contrechamp competition. The film was shown at more than 40 festivals, distributed in cinemas and online. *My Mother's Farm* was also screened at several festivals. Meanwhile, Žickytė's *Jump* was widely screened at international film festivals and received the award of Best Documentary Feature at the Warsaw International Film Festival in 2020. It was also Lithuania's entry in the international feature

⁴² Latvia has been a member of the Eurimages fund and the MEDIA Programme of the EU since 2002. Lithuania joined The MEDIA Programme in 2003 and in 2007 became a member of the Eurimages fund.

⁴³ Among the initiatives were the Balticum Film & TV Festival (1990), the establishment of the Baltic Media Center (1994), and the setting up of the Baltic Sea Forum for Documentaries, a pitching platform (1997), which became a significant event for connecting the creative ideas of filmmakers, among those from Baltic countries, with potential funders from the West. Balčus, "Dokumentālais kino," 233–34.

⁴⁴ James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

film category of the Academy Awards. *Master and Tatyana* won the SKY ARTE Award at the 2015 Trieste International Film Festival. *How We Played the Revolution* has been screened at international film festivals and is available on Dafilms, IndieFlix, and other VoD platforms.

ILZE BURKOVSKA-JACOBSEN: FILMING AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In her films *My Mother's Farm* and *My Favorite War*, director Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen uses first-person narration and her own voice to create autobiographical narratives, encompassing the time from World War II to the second decade of the twenty-first century. In the genre of microhistorical documentary films with an autobiographical perspective, to which these films belong, the interconnectedness of personal memory and public history is foregrounded. Personal memory becomes the foundation for an exploration of history, forming a specific connection between lived memory and public history.⁴⁵ These films underscore the central role of family in the authors' self-construction and how the specific historical situations and traumas are reflected in the family dynamics. They strongly connect to Cuevas's assertion that autobiographical documentaries—particularly those created through interaction with family members and as part of public discourse—contribute to the shaping of collective memory. In this social dimension of autobiography, the family provides a fundamental context for socialization,⁴⁶ which the films of Burkovska-Jacobsen vividly depict.

The possibility of creating autobiographical films has been debated by film and literary scholars. Literary scholar Philippe Lejeune has argued that autobiographical narrative encompasses an “autobiographical pact”—a unity among the author, the central character, and the narrator.⁴⁷ The possibility that a filmmaker might occupy both sides of the camera, simultaneously capturing and analyzing themselves, has been regarded with some skepticism, especially by literary scholars. Elizabeth Bruss expressed that the autobiographical pact “seems to be shattered by film; the autobiographical self decomposes, schisms, into almost mutually exclusive elements of the person filmed (entirely visible; recorded and projected) and

⁴⁵ Cuevas, *Filming History from Below*, 35–36.

⁴⁶ Cuevas, *Filming History from Below*, 37.

⁴⁷ Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.

the person filming (entirely hidden; behind the camera eye)."⁴⁸ However, the film's potential for creating new realities has been recognized by other scholars, notably those from film studies. From the point of view of literary and film scholar Rachel Gabara, filmic autobiography "troubles our conventional notions of coherent identity and provides us with new forms in which to explore and represent fragmented identity."⁴⁹

Michael Renov suggested that autobiography challenges the very notion of documentary. Traditionally based on facts and verifiable knowledge, documentary loses its foundation when an autobiographical perspective is adopted as the narrative strategy, as this introduces the distinct subjectivity of the filmmaker and the partial, contingent nature of self-knowledge, both displayed in autobiographical films.⁵⁰ This debate about the potential of autobiographical subjectivity in documentary films is even more relevant when contextualized within changing practices in Baltic documentary filmmaking in the early 1990s, when autobiography and other forms of personal expression become evident in documentary cinema. Thus, the autobiographical form challenged the objectivist paradigm of the documentary.

The autobiographical framework is explicit in both films, but it is more prominent in the animated documentary *My Favorite War*. This is a distinctly introspective film in which the director Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen uses World War II as a narrative beacon to recount her own story and that of her family over several decades. The film adopts the subjective mode of animated documentary, where objectivity is challenged by creating unexpected combinations of visual and aural representation, exploring larger social issues through the personal expression of the filmmaker.⁵¹ The director skillfully combines animated imagery with documentary footage, where animated sequences occupy the main visual space. The film includes

⁴⁸ Elizabeth W. Bruss, "Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, edited by James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 297.

⁴⁹ Rachel Gabara, "Mixing Impossible Genres: David Achkar and African Autobiographical Documentary (2003)," in *Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*, ed. Jonathan Kahana (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 927–28. Gabara's article discusses the debate on autobiography in cinema.

⁵⁰ Michael Renov, "First-person Films: Some Thesis on Self-Inscription," in *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives, New Practices*, ed. Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2008), 41–42.

⁵¹ Annabelle Honess Roe, *Animated Documentary* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 19.

some archival materials to illustrate specific historical moments or elements of popular culture, but primarily relies on visualizing the Soviet past in animation, using representations modelled on factual materials, actual historical figures, and different visual attributes (e.g., flags, school uniforms).

Burkovska-Jacobsen is the narrator of the film, exploring in the first-person her experiences growing up and forming her own identity during the Soviet era. *My Favorite War* starts with an ironic voice over (in which she recounts how she grew up in a country where all her choices had already been made for her, and the country had pronounced itself the happiest in the world) that sets the overall tone of the film. Throughout the film, she shows the contradictions between this self-proclamation and the actual feelings of the people living there. The film's narrative shows the span of the development of the director's personality and shifting beliefs in the Soviet system: beginning from being a believer in the system (she genuinely desires to join the ranks of the Little Octobrists and Pioneers⁵² in order to better integrate into the school and social life around it), to becoming someone who questions it (and so becomes aware of discrepancies between the slogans and real life), to finally having her voice in making changes during the *perestroika* period in the late 1980s. Through personal reflections, visualized with animation, archival footage, and documentary scenes, the film incorporates common tropes associated with Soviet life, such as Pioneer symbols, parades, commemorative portraits, civil defense training (an integral part of the Cold War era), and other iconographic imagery and scenarios. Notable among these is the experience of queuing for goods in stores that were almost always empty. Karl Schlögel notes that the experience of waiting in line was a defining social theme that influenced the attitudes and everyday lives of entire generations of Soviet citizens. He suggests that queuing served as a formative ritual, shaping individuals to fit the expectations of Soviet society.⁵³ The film accurately illustrates the ideological indoctrination of the Soviet era, especially as it was implemented in education to shape young Soviet citizens.

⁵² Little Octobrists (for school children up to 9 years of age) and Pioneers (from 9 to 14 years old) were Soviet communist youth organizations serving as the first steps to joining the Komsomol, an organization for young people (14–28 years old) that was spreading Communist ideology and preparing members of the Communist Party.

⁵³ Karl Schlögel, *The Soviet Century: Archaeology of a Lost World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 532–33.

In *My Mother's Farm*, the Soviet past is subtly woven into the narrative through small details, background visuals, and references, presenting it as something the director's mother wished to escape from. The contrasts between past and present emerge not so much visually as they do textually, particularly through stories of the mother's farmer neighbors and their paths to their current situations. During the Soviet era, the director's mother worked in the district's agriculture administration in town but always wanted to return to the countryside where she had spent her childhood. She finally achieved this in the late 1980s, during a period of change, when her daughter—the director—was old enough to live independently in the city while attending high school. The trope of the countryside is vivid in both films, and it reflects the image of Latvian identity, which, since the second half of the nineteenth century, has included a strong sense of belonging to the rural environment and the importance for someone to have their own piece of land.⁵⁴ The farm life of the director's childhood in *My Favorite War* and her mother's longing for her own piece of land in *My Mother's Farm* reconstitute that identity.

Conversely, in *My Mother's Farm*, animation is not used, but instead the narrative is constructed from footage the director had shot since the 1990s, public archival footage, newspaper clippings, advertising, and still images. Private archival materials, which are usually classified as marginal, are especially prominent in the microhistorical documentary context,⁵⁵ and that is the case in this film. The film traces the story of the director's mother, Tāle Kalna, capturing her life through the period of transition from the collapse of the Soviet Union to her chosen path to be a farmer in newly independent Latvia. It thus serves as an important record of neoliberal transformations in the country and is illustrated by the footage shot by the director over nearly two decades.

Initially, the mother's enthusiasm and determination to overcome any obstacle to her running her farm were strong. However, over time, this determination was tempered by the harsh reality when conditions were becoming increasingly difficult, and her advancing age made it hard for

⁵⁴ Even though after World War I and the founding of independent Latvia in 1918 a large part of the population lived in the cities, this image persisted in the interwar period. Andrejs Plakans, "History, the Remembered Past and Master Narratives," in *The Soviet Past in the Post-Socialist Present: Methodology and Ethics in Russian, Baltic and Central European Oral History and Memory Studies*, ed. Melanie Ilic and Dalia Leinarte (New York: Routledge, 2016), 136.

⁵⁵ Cuevas, *Filming History from Below*, 44.

her to fully engage in farming. These events reflect the broader challenges Latvian agriculture faced at the beginning of the renewed independence period and the economic difficulties it brought. Despite these challenges, the film's focus is not on comparing the two time periods but rather on the mother's character, revealing a motivated and energetic woman who cares not only for her own well-being but also for that of those around her. She aims to improve the quality of life for her community, resulting in changes such as a bus route finally running along her remote country road and cultural performers visiting the local community center.

The films touch upon yet another significant theme common to many families of the people from Baltic countries—the repressions of the Soviet regime.⁵⁶ The director's grandfather, her mother's father, experienced exile and, upon his return to Latvia from Siberia, continued to feel its effects, including limited opportunities to pursue his preferred occupation. The director and her mother's perspectives belong to the relatively underexplored area of “secondary” or “collateral” repression of trauma, as they are channeling the feelings and experiences of living alongside an individual who was a direct victim of repression. These secondary victims also felt the consequences of repression, and in telling their story, the film contributes to understanding the effects of repression from a multigenerational perspective, something important for understanding the moral conflicts and dilemmas faced by family members or close relatives.⁵⁷ Burkovska-Jacobsen addresses these conflicts and dilemmas, particularly in the film *My Favorite War*, where she recounts her grandfather's struggles to organize his own art exhibit; his requests were always met with rejection. Harmonious family relationships and open dialogue were not possible as her grandfather and father held different views—the former being a victim of the system, and the latter its supporter. Furthermore, contrary to her beliefs, her mother had to join the Communist Party to keep her job,

⁵⁶We are following here the growing consensus for the adoption of a wider meaning for the term “repression,” which moves beyond earlier accepted narrow definitions of communist “terror” that had primarily focused on the elite purges, mass arrests, non-judicial executions, imprisonment, forced deportation, and relocation, to include practices commonly used by communist regimes—sustained police surveillance, loss of educational and employment opportunities, confiscation of property, and eviction. Kelly Hignett and Melanie Ilic, “Introduction,” in *Women's Experiences of Repression in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, Kelly Hignett, Melanie Ilic, Dalia Leinarte and Corina Snitar (New York: Routledge, 2018), 3–4.

⁵⁷Hignett and Ilic, “Introduction,” 3–4.

a move which increased tension in the family. As a child, to avoid any potential consequences, the director herself had to learn to remain silent and self-muzzling, which made it a challenge to find friends with whom to speak freely.

In both films, the director employs a circular narrative structure where the beginning and ending mirror each other, returning to a similar situation that is imbued with new meaning and knowledge gained through the film. This approach demonstrates the transformations that have taken place over the years in the country. The opening scene of *My Mother's Farm* features the director's mother at a train station, returning to Latvia after spending the winter with her daughter's family in Norway. By the film's end, this same scene is enriched with the viewer's deeper understanding of the mother's life journey. In *My Favorite War*, the first scene depicts the director's vivid childhood memory of a trip to the seaside with her parents, illustrating the state's closed borders: at that time, residents were forbidden from freely walking along the western coastline, as the regime sought to prevent any escape attempts. By the film's end, the director walks along the same beach with her children, wading into the water—a powerful representation of the changes she has experienced over her lifetime. The sea, symbolizing both literal and metaphorical borders, reflects former Soviet-imposed restrictions while also suggesting the changed perspective. In the film's final documentary sequence, the calm, bright blue water and the distant Baltic Sea horizon evoke what Anna Mrozwicz describes as a “horizon of hope,” depicting the possibilities of crossing borders, connecting to others as if uniting the characters with other parts of the world, which was not possible during the Soviet period.⁵⁸

Although autobiography typically appears to be a narrative constrained by the progressive trajectory of a story from birth to a later moment in life, Burkovska-Jacobsen's films, like many film autobiographies, offer reflections and meditations that diverge from linear narration and provide multiple and even conflicting ideas about the self.⁵⁹ She connects different time periods, various reflections about herself and her family, and contrasting views, thus presenting multilayered and emotional narratives about the past from the point of view of the present. Together, the two films provide

⁵⁸ Anna Mrozwicz, “A transnational regioscape in the making: The Baltic Sea in Christian Petzold's *Barbara* and Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen's *My Favorite War*,” *Folia Scandinavica* 34 (2023): 133, <https://doi.org/10.14746/fsp-2023.34.10>.

⁵⁹ Renov, “First-person Films,” 45–46.

a comprehensive portrayal of Burkovska-Jacobsen's life and that of her family across the eras: the first Latvian independence, the Soviet period, and restored independence, offering through a personal lens an emotive view of the broader collective experiences in the region during these times.

GIEDRĖ ŽICKYTĖ: STORIES OF RESISTANCE AND NONCONFORMITY

Giedrė Žickytė's *How We Played the Revolution* and her other documentaries, namely *Master and Tatyana* and *The Jump*, obviously fit into the category of creative non-fiction if we look at the scheme that Gerard proposed for identifying creative non-fiction writing,⁶⁰ and which Bernard adapted to define creative documentary film.⁶¹ They have the essential characteristics outlined by the filmmakers mentioned above: they have an apparent subject (life in a totalitarian system and tactics to rebel against it), they narratively combine the recent past and the present (in a manner free from "journalistic" timeliness, that is, the story grows and gains significance gradually, not immediately), they tell a compelling story (with charismatic characters, a clear plot, well-developed dialogues, and a storyline), and they are reflexive and showcase the director's artistry. All three films focus on the late Soviet era (the 1970s–1980s), but they look at that time from the perspective of current life. Another element that connects the films is the personality type of the main characters: bright, courageous, and nonconformist people, whose creative practices, brave acts, and transgressive lifestyles express their resistance to the oppressive regime. We can describe *How We Played the Revolution*, *Master and Tatyana* and *The Jump* as "montage cinema" or "archive-based documentary" because in each the narrative form is constructed from archival material (such as TV footage, video shots, personal records of characters, photos, clippings from newspapers) along with on-camera recollections of the characters and people from their inner circle as well of cultural and political figures who lived at the time. Archival materials are used for the purposes Bernard describes as prevalent in creative non-fiction: as "evidence of the past," as an augmentation of "a filmmaker's exploration of the present," and even

⁶⁰ Gerard, *Creative Nonfiction*, 2nd ed., 7–11.

⁶¹ Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling* (Focal Press, 2010) and further editions.

to create a humorous effect.⁶² Expert commentaries are also integrated into the narrative, but they have no didactic function; instead, they serve to develop an immersive and compelling narrative.

With her film *How We Played the Revolution*, Žickytė became known as a talented storyteller of intriguing tales who is capable of establishing a great bond with Lithuanian and foreign audiences of all ages. As Lina Kaminskaitė-Jančorienė stated, we can consider this work “exceptional, because it brings to light previously unseen footage from personal archives” adding “one should consider it attractive to the younger generation, because it uses a simplified cinematic language and a playful form to tell the same story that their parents have repeatedly rhapsodized, in which the latter are not only unconditional patriots but also ‘rocking’ young people (...).”⁶³

Employing the phenomenon of the cult rock band Antis and its leader Algirdas Kaušpėdas, the film playfully reveals the course of Lithuania’s Singing Revolution and its achievements in the late 1980s—Lithuania’s independence and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The band’s grotesque theatrical performances at Roko maršas (The Rock March, a rock music festival held in the years 1987–1989), easy-to-remember melodies, and witty lyrics criticizing the Soviet system attracted both young and old audiences as well as the provincial and the urban population. When the Sąjūdis reform movement of Lithuania⁶⁴ invited the band’s leader to join their initiative in 1988, Antis became a phenomenon and an instrument of

⁶² Sheila Curran Bernard, and Kenn Rabin, *Archival Storytelling: A Filmmaker’s Guide to Finding, Using, and Licensing Third-Party Visuals and Music* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1–2.

⁶³ Lina Kaminskaitė-Jančorienė, “Kaip mes žaidėme revoliuciją: Praryta antis, arba Kaip mes kuriame / atsimename istoriją,” *Kinas*, December 1, 2011, <https://www.zurnalaskinas.lt/musu-kinas/2011-12-01/Kaip-mes-zaideme-revoliucija> 2011.

⁶⁴ Founded in June 1988, the Lithuanian Reform Movement Sąjūdis began as a public movement and soon developed into a political organization under the leadership of musicologist and professor Vytautas Landsbergis. Active members of Sąjūdis were primarily from the intelligentsia, including writers, philosophers, economists, and journalists. They raised civic and political awareness by publishing independent newspapers and organizing public discussions and mass events on painful and controversial historical and political issues that were kept under wraps during the Soviet occupation. The organization played a decisive role in the Lithuanian people’s struggle for independence, which began amid Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies. For further details, see the information provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania: <https://mfa.lt/en/news/928/sajudis-20-years-on-lithuania-today-2008-issue-12-p.13-15:28618>.

soft power. By focusing on the involvement of Antis and Kaušpėdas in political transformations and revolution, the film shows that the line between politics and art can be rather thin. It is no coincidence that the film opens with a fragment of The Rock March of 1988, in which we see the performers of Antis and members of Sąjūdis on stage together, singing the national anthem and holding Lithuania's interwar tricolor flags in their hands. According to Gintautas Mažeikis, "the Rock Marches demonstrated not only a revival and a singing revolution, but also the rise of subcultures," "fluctuations, ruptures and mimicry"—a process necessary for the revision, critique, and creative interpretation of the colonial condition.⁶⁵ These transformations that the rock music and other youth subcultures generated in the late 1990s reinforced and complemented the activities of Sąjūdis from 1988 to 1991.

Žickytė constructed the narrative of the Singing Revolution from carefully selected archival footage with a strong emotional charge, representing the economic stagnation, the political farce, and the chaotic "*perestroika*" reform; the vacuum in social and cultural life and the musical subcultures that filled the void; and the civic movements and the political events that they triggered, which brought Lithuanian society into a new era. The dynamic puzzle of archival images includes comments and reminiscences by active members of the Sąjūdis movement, organizers of The Rock March, architect and Antis band leader Kaušpėdas, and his wife Audronė Kaušpėdienė, who was involved in the band's organizational work. What also accelerates the narrative are records of Antis's live performances and clips of their music.

The film's narrator and commentator on the historic transformations is the philosopher Leonidas Donskis, a neutral observer of the events of the time, whose calm narrative manner, reminiscent of someone reading a fairy tale, allows the viewer to be deeply immersed into the history of Antis and the epoch. We observe Donskis sitting in a car driving around Vilnius and listen to his insights into the cultural and political context of the time as well as the relationship between the artist and the audience, which he called "a silent conversation" made possible by peoples' ability "to comprehend ambiguities" and "to be able to read the language of puns." Kaušpėdas was proficient at playing games of ambiguity with the audience, which were difficult for the Soviet political bosses to grasp, and this made

⁶⁵ Gintautas Mažeikis, "Pogulaginė sąmonė ir atžangos dialektika," *Darbai ir dienos* 65 (2016): 68, <https://doi.org/10.7220/2335-8769.65.3>.

him and his colleagues even more passionate. At the end of the film, the director shows the transformation of the protagonist from the critic of the “intelligentsia grimace” during the Soviet era, the “flag bearer” of Sąjūdis, to a passive capitalist consumer in a free and autonomous Lithuania. *How We Played the Revolution* is a reflexive type of creative documentary with a playful structure that encourages viewers to create an individual relationship with history, politics, and heroes. It is one of Lithuania’s most famous historical and political documentaries.

Žickytė demonstrates her strong relationship to the subject she is researching, which is also reflected in the interviews for the films. Her parents were young in the last decade of communism. She was born in 1980 and, therefore, could not personally experience this dramatic period, whose legacy she nonetheless feels. That is why she tells stories that took place in the recent past but are closely linked to her present. She tells her audience about events and situations in which she and her family were involved as observers and participants. She made her documentary film about Antis and the Lithuanian struggle for freedom because her parents are architects from Kaunas and were friends with band members, who are also architects. The director knew these people and grew up listening to the band’s music. Meanwhile, her film about the acclaimed Lithuanian photographer Vitas Luckus and his wife Tatyana was inspired by one of her professors at Vilnius University, Skirmantas Valiulis, who gave her the task of interviewing a foreign friend of the photographer, who had released the first ever album of Luckus’s works in the Netherlands in 1993. Thus, Žickytė’s films contain a subtly articulated personal vision, a fusion of the subjective and objective narrative styles that Alistair Fox⁶⁶ and Scott MacDonald⁶⁷ ascribe to personal cinema. She lets the viewers experience what the characters in her films went through and helps to create the meaning of these experiences.

With her films *Master and Tatyana* and *The Jump*, Žickytė further develops microhistories, in which the personal memories (of the film’s characters and the memories of others about them) are demonstrated to play a significant role in the collective memory of the Soviet past. According to Cuevas, most microhistorical documentaries bridge cinema and

⁶⁶ Alistair Fox, *Jane Campion: Authorship and Personal Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

⁶⁷ Scott MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

professional written history. They “examine the past” from their author’s perspective (aiming to not just disseminate preexisting knowledge), and “show the places” and “the protagonists of their stories” through archival footage and photos, and/or direct interviewing and close observation, all of which “provide access to the past with a powerful emotional charge.”⁶⁸ However, these films are the result of a thorough research process in archives and fieldwork. For example, *Master and Tatyana* tells the story of the unusual life of one of the most talented and innovative Lithuanian and Soviet photographers of the time, Vitas Luckus (1943–1987), and his partner Tatyana (Luckienė-Aldag), who was his muse and model. After Luckus’s tragic death, Luckienė-Aldag left for the United States, taking his photographic archive with her. This film brings Tatyana back to the Lithuanian and world art scene after over thirty years and broadens access to this impressive photographic heritage. To make this film, the director travelled to the state of Maryland to film Tatyana and gather her reflections, memories, and Luckus’s works, which, throughout the film, are shown and examined with a magnifying glass. Žickytė collected information about her film’s protagonists and their daily lives at the time through interviews with the couple’s friends, as well as with Luckus’s Lithuanian and foreign colleagues, to convey to the audience the price a talented nonconformist artist had to pay under communism. He was never allowed to travel outside the USSR, was regularly interrogated and persecuted by the KGB, and was denied a solo exhibition.⁶⁹ To create a sense of Luckus’s artistic uniqueness and dramatic life under an oppressive regime, Žickytė worked carefully in the Lithuanian audiovisual archives, selecting footage that reflected social and cultural life in Vilnius in the 1970s and 1980s.

Simas Kudirka (1930–2023)—the main character of *The Jump*—was less well known to the Lithuanian public than Luckus, but his name frequently appeared in the news in the USA in the 1970s. He was a Lithuanian-Soviet sailor who, on November 23, 1970, made a desperate leap from a Soviet fishing vessel anchored off the coast of Martha’s Vineyard across calm waters onto an American boat and asked for political asylum. There are some similarities between these two characters. Both refused to join the Communist Party and cooperate with the KGB to gain benefits and as a result, both suffered greatly. However, in *The Jump*, the

⁶⁸ Cuevas, *Filming History from Below*, 6.

⁶⁹ It was only in 2013 (during the production of this film) that Vitas Luckus’s retrospective solo exhibition was held at the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius.

director employs slightly different materials and techniques for storytelling than in the previously discussed film. We observe the reconstruction of the actual jump and the subsequent events (his return to the Soviets, his beating, arrest, and imprisonment) via reenactments of all of these events by Kudirka and the memories of the American sailors involved. The story was developed based on rich archival materials collected from various American TV channels, newspapers, and fragments of the Hollywood television drama *The Defection of Simas Kudirka* (directed by David Lowell Rich, 1978) based on this story, as well as commentary from American politicians and political analysts, the Lithuanian diaspora, and other witnesses to the event. Despite his years in the Russian Gulag, Kudirka managed to realize his dream—to obtain asylum in the USA with his family—thanks to his mother's efforts, American civil society, and the commitment of American politicians. However, Žickytė's non-fiction does not resemble the Hollywood drama of a poor Soviet man who managed to realize his dream in the USA. Kudirka's experience was different. Therefore, the last episodes show him in a home in a Lithuanian province, where he and his wife spent the last years of their lives in independent Lithuania, his long-held dream. In this film, as in the previous one, the director uses historical knowledge and archival sources to support her arguments about the events and their participants and the fundamental problems of those who lived in the Soviet era.

CONCLUSION

The films of Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen and Giedrė Žickytė tell the stories of people whose lives, shaped by specific historical circumstances, have become witnesses of their times. Their creative non-fiction is important for the sense of life during the Cold War era that they provide to those who did not live through or remember this period. These filmmakers empathetically and attentively interpret the complex everyday realities of the era through profound and emotive cinematic narratives and characters. Our research on the films of the two directors reveals that they fit into the creative non-fiction category outlined by Gerard and Bernard. Their films have the same apparent subject (living under a totalitarian regime and struggling against it), they combine the recent past and present in the narrative, and they tell compelling microhistories (with engaging social actors, informative dialogue and monologues, and fragmentary storylines) in a reflexive way. Despite these similarities, each documentarian uses a

slightly different creative non-fiction narrative technique; for example, Burkovska-Jacobsen uses animation, which is not used in Žickytė's films. Although each narrative focuses on a particular individual, the films address the broader historical, political, social, economic, and cultural context that shapes these individuals' lives. These films are not reportage-like ("expository" as Bill Nichols calls it) historical documentaries, in which the filmmaker's perspective is well articulated and authoritative. They do not recount historical events in a classical TV documentary style but observe and reflect on them based on data gathered through research and the memories and experiences of their film characters, themselves, and the people around them. This perspective adds depth and meaning to the film and allows the filmmakers to tell their stories through a carefully chosen interpretive lens. Their point of view may not always be overtly stated but is sometimes woven into the film through the tone of voice, facial expressions and gestures of the characters, or cinematic techniques such as editing, the use of archive materials, and sequencing—creating a carefully crafted narrative. The films examine history on a micro level and place these individuals' stories in a broader macro-historical context.

To summarize, the films by Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen and Giedrė Žickytė discussed in this chapter represent a paradigmatic shift in non-fiction cinema, which sees the abandonment of the reportage style in favor of a poetic, reflective, and critical style that engages with contemporary issues and historical events and reflects on a broader theme of humanity. The new generation of filmmakers, including those mentioned above, creatively mixes observational and poetic styles and employs personal perspectives, experimental narrative techniques, and rich visual language to express, revive, discuss, reinterpret, and reassess national and global history from their subjective, contemporary perspective.

Acknowledgements Zane Balčus's research is funded by the Research Council of Lithuania (LMTLT), project "Baltic Documentary Cinema: Modalities and Challenges of First-Person Filmmaking," agreement No. S-PD-24-103.

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The Ugly Truth About Slovakia? On Andrej Bán's and Martin M. Šimečka's Reportages

Mária Stanková

REPORTAGE IN SLOVAKIA

Reportages have an important place in Slovak culture. They were connected with writers' social engagement in the very first literary works that were written in Slovak during the Slovak national revival, which was the period of formation of the modern nation in the first half of the nineteenth century. In fact, this tradition can be traced back to an even earlier period starting in the eighteenth century, when writers attempted to codify the literary language as the national language.

The prominence of reportages in Slovak culture can be attributed to the strong interconnection between journalism and literature, both in terms of genre and the context of Slovak history. Many renowned writers in Slovak literature have engaged in journalism. Reportage is often described as a “royal genre” by Slovak scholars of the mass media and

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practicing journalists.¹ In Slovak journalism, there is no clear distinction between journalistic and literary reportage, and in Slovakia “literary journalism” is not a traditional concept in theoretical or practical terms. Instead, the term “reportage” is preferred. This, however, does not mean that literary journalism does not exist in the cultural and scholarly contexts.

This chapter focuses on two books of reportage: *Slon na Zemplíne: Príbehy Slovenska* (An Elephant in Zemplín: Stories of Slovakia) by the reporter and photographer Andrej Bán, and *Príhody tuláka po Slovensku* (The Adventures of a Wanderer in Slovakia) by the journalist and writer Martin M. Šimečka. These books were chosen because they are examples of quality literature that deal with present-day Slovakia; they are interwoven with political and social criticism, which gives them an important place in the tradition of reportage in Slovak culture. The history of reportage in Slovak journalism and literature is presented in the first part of this chapter, followed by an analysis of the above-mentioned books.

REPORTAGE AS A “ROYAL GENRE” AND ITS PLACE IN SLOVAK JOURNALISM

Reportage occupies a distinctive place in Slovak genre studies. Since the latter half of the twentieth century, scholars working in stylistics and media studies have situated reportage among the most significant and utilized journalistic genres despite the ongoing debate surrounding its character, which is often shaped by the polarities between literature and journalism and between objective reporting and subjective portrayal.

Genre studies occupy a well-established position within the Slovak academic landscape, with a longstanding scholarly tradition behind them. Contemporary researchers frequently cite foundational works on journalistic genres, highlighting their enduring theoretical relevance and the robustness of their genre classifications. In a recent textbook titled *Úvod do štúdia žurnalistických žánrov v tlačových médiách* (An Introduction to the Study of Journalistic Genres in Print Media), which employs an original approach to the genre and was written by a group of authors from the University of Prešov, there are references to works by Jozef Mistrík, Emil Kadnár, and Štefan Veľas that had been published in the 1970s and 1980s. This continued reliance on earlier scholarship may explain why recent texts

¹For example, scholars like Marián Gladiš and Martina Bodnárová and journalists like Marek Vagovič and Zuzana Botiková.

on reportage tend to revisit established interpretations rather than providing a thorough historical analysis of the genre in a Slovak context. Having said that, there is a comprehensive monograph by František Schildberger titled *Podoby české literární reportáže* (Images of Czech Literary Reportage), published in 2020, that can help with the study of Slovak literary journalism. It provides information about the history of the genre within the context of Czechoslovakia and could inspire Slovak scholars to produce a similar book.

Slovak studies of journalism genres are based on the binary distinction between news journalism and opinion journalism. Consequently, this differentiation can be interpreted as a contrast between objective and subjective methodologies; this is a distinction that applies similarly to reportage. This difference results in a further distinction between journalistic and literary reportages in Slovak studies of journalism genres, where reportage is defined as a conjunction of journalism and literature (fiction) with an emphasis on personal testimony.²

The origin and rise of reportage in Slovak culture is related to travelogues. The relationship between reportage and travelogues is mentioned in both older and more current sources.³ From the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, Slovak writers and journalists documented foreign cultures and the sociological aspects of distant countries in order to introduce them to Slovak readers. Travelogues were initially published as books, such as *Cestopis obsahující cestu do Horní Itálie a odtud přes Tyrolsko a Bavorsko* (A Travelogue Covering a Journey from Northern Italy through the Tyrol and Bavaria) by the poet Ján Kollár in the mid-nineteenth century. There were other travel reportages from the same period, such as Jozef Miloslav Hurban's *Cesta Slováka ku bratřím slavenským na Moravě a v Čechách* (A Slovak's Journey to the Slavic Friars of Moravia and the Czech Lands) and Ľudovít Štúr's *Cesta do Lužic vykonána z jara 1839* (A Journey to Lužice in the Spring of 1839). At the turn of the twentieth

² Andrej Tušer and Mária Foltrichová, *Teória a prax novinárskych žánrov I.* (Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 1998), 38; Daniela Slančová et al., *Úvod do štúdií žurnalistických žánrov v tlačových médiách* (Prešovská univerzita v Prešove, 2022), 309–310.

³ Karel Štorkán, *O reportáži prakticky i teoreticky* (Prague: Novinář, 1985), 18; Jozef Mistrík, *Štylistika* (Bratislava: SPN, 1997), 477; František Schildberger, *Podoby české literární reportáže* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2020), 13; Slančová et al., *Úvod do štúdií žurnalistických žánrov v tlačových médiách*, 309; Peter Kubinyi and Mária Stanková, *Recept na reportáž. Teoreticky aj prakticky o tom, ako zvládnuť tento novinársky žáner* (Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2023), 25.

century, the novelist Martin Kukučín wrote books about his travels in southern Europe (*Rijeka—Rohić—Záhreb* [Rijeka–Rohić–Zagreb] and *V Dalmácii a na Čiernej Hore* [In Dalmatia and Montenegro]), South America (*Prechádzky po Patagónii* [Walks in Patagonia]), and France (*Dojmy z Francúzska* [Impressions from France]).

This sociological aspect of travel writing was reflected in the first Slovak reportages in the early twentieth century. This era is frequently referred to as a time of “opening windows” to Europe and the wider world; it saw the conclusion of the First World War and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In its wake, Czechoslovakia emerged as a new and democratic state which afforded Slovaks the opportunity to pursue studies in their native language. The development of culture was based on a new school system; there had been no Slovak elementary schools in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but there were 158 such schools in 1918 and 3202 by 1936.⁴ High schools were also established, with there being forty-nine of them in 1936 from there having been none during the Austro-Hungarian Empire.⁵ In 1919 Comenius University’s medical faculty was founded, and in 1921 the law and arts faculties followed. There was a new law on libraries, requiring that they be in every municipality; in 1935 there were 4063 libraries with more than 800,000 books.⁶ These changes led to a significant reduction in illiteracy, which decreased from 7.39 percent in 1921 to 4.06 percent in 1930.⁷

The formation of the new state also led to the establishment of new cultural institutions, including the Slovak National Theater in 1919, and the revival of older institutions, such as the Slovak National Museum. *Matica slovenská*, a Slovak national and cultural association founded in 1843, also played a key role in this period for Slovak scholarship, especially in the fields of linguistics and ethnology. These factors and processes facilitated the accelerated integration of Slovaks into the European community, where they assimilated into the dominant modern culture.⁸ The media system was also booming in the interwar period, during which time 1754

⁴ Robert Letz, *Slovenské dejiny IV* (Bratislava: Literárne informačné centrum, 2010), 285.

⁵ Letz, *Slovenské dejiny IV*, 286.

⁶ Letz, *Slovenské dejiny IV*, 290.

⁷ Letz, *Slovenské dejiny IV*, 287.

⁸ Martin Vašš, “Kultúrne centrá Slovenska v medzivojnovom období,” in *Studia Academica Slovaca 51*, ed. Jana Pekarovičová and Miloslav Vojtech (Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2022), 285.

newspapers and journals were published, of which 1059 were in Slovak.⁹ There were sixty-two daily newspapers and 425 weeklies as well as expanded publishing opportunities for writers and poets.¹⁰ At this time, writers and journalists primarily published their texts in newspapers and magazines; there was also a significant number of daily political publications (major political parties had their own newspapers) as well as many cultural magazines focusing on literature, society, and art. These developments provided a larger platform for reportage.

At this time, the phenomenon of sociological travelogues was associated with leftist authors; one such author was Peter Jilemnický, who produced a book of reportage about a two-year sojourn in the Soviet Union titled *Dva roky v krajine Sovietov* (Two Years in the Country of the Soviets). Laco Novomeský—a poet, politician, and writer—wrote from Spain about the civil war and published his reportages in the *Slovenské zvesti* daily newspaper. Left-wing intellectuals were influenced by communism. Jilemnický, Novomeský, and other socialist writers used their texts as a tool to inform their readers about social problems and possible (communist) solutions.

Writers of different political persuasions also published reportages with their own solutions to national social problems. The nationalist Jozef Cíger Hronský wrote about his experiences in the United States in *Cesta slovenskou Amerikou* (A Journey through Slovak America) in 1940. There were a lot of Slovak immigrants in the United States, and many of them had culturally and politically engaged lives in various associations and societies. Hronský had been in the United States in the 1930s with a delegation from *Matica slovenská* to see how Slovaks were living there. The delegation spent about six months there and “visited six main areas where many Slovaks settled—New York, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago, Scranton, and Detroit. They wanted to map the lives of American Slovaks, and they visited ninety-eight towns and cities in the United States and in Canada where Slovaks lived. They delivered 609 lectures for 170,000 attendees.”¹¹

Following the onset of Communist Party rule in Czechoslovakia in 1948, the state demonstrated a willingness to support writers and

⁹ Letz, *Slovenské dejiny* IV, 290.

¹⁰ Letz, *Slovenské dejiny* IV, 290. See also Stanislav Šmatlák, *Dejiny slovenskej literatúry* (Bratislava: Literárne informačné centrum, 2007), 265–271.

¹¹ Nina Hrabovská Francelová, “How did Slovak America taste at the turn of centuries?” *The Slovak Spectator*, August 9, 2018, <https://spectator.sme.sk/culture-and-lifestyle/c/how-did-slovak-america-taste-at-the-turn-of-centuries>.

journalists under certain conditions. Some of them played an important yet regrettable role in the “monster trials” of the 1950s, which involved regular journalists as well as prominent writers and reporters working for the regime.¹² One of those affected was Ladislav Mňačko, who is still considered one of the most important figures in Slovak journalism. As a journalist, he participated in two monster trials. One of them concerned the partisan commander Viliam Žingor in 1950; the other involved Ladislav Galan, a director of mills and bakeries in Košice in 1951.¹³ The historian Jozef Leikert described Mňačko’s attitude to the trials with information from his interview with the writer.¹⁴ Mňačko wrote about the trials for the *Pravda* daily newspaper, and he wrote a pamphlet with the title *Proces proti velezradným fabrikantom, veľkostatkárom a zapredancom* (A Trial against Treasonous Factory Owners, Landholders, and Traitors) in 1950. The pamphlet was written as a guide for readers on how to interpret and explain the trial of Žingor. Initially a staunch supporter of communism, Mňačko participated in and documented the monster trials. Later realizing the shortcomings of Communist Party rule, he became an equally ardent opponent of the party. One of his most famous books, *Oneskorené reportáže* (Belated Reportages), is a testimony to his political turn and an apology for his actions under his previous political conviction. The book is important because Mňačko, one of the first university lecturers of genre studies and journalism, described his texts in this book as “converted reportage,” meaning something between literature and journalism.¹⁵

¹² In the show trials at the beginning of the 1950s, “approximately 25,000 persons were sentenced for political reasons in Slovakia, out of which 45 were sentenced to death.” UPN, “Political Trials in Slovakia (1948–1954), 2016” *Ústav pamäti národa*, <https://www.upn.gov.sk/data/files/10-2016-EN-p-trials.pdf>. The most well-known trials involved Viliam Žingor (November 1950), Milada Horáková (June 1950), Rudolf Slánský (November 1952), and the “bourgeois nationalists” (April 1954). This last trial is worth mentioning because all of those sentenced—Gustáv Husák, Daniel Okáli, Ladislav Novomeský, Ivan Horváth, and Ladislav Holdoš—were active journalists and columnists. These trials also took aim at the church, with there being a trial of Catholic bishops in January 1951. For more information, see Branislav Kinčok, *Politické procesy na Slovensku v rokoch 1948–1954* (Bratislava: Ústav pamäti národa, 2019).

¹³ Žingor was executed in December 1950. Galan was freed after Mňačko’s intervention. See Jozef Leikert, *Taký bol Ladislav Mňačko* (Bratislava: Luna, 2008), 211–212.

¹⁴ Leikert, *Taký bol Ladislav Mňačko*, 211–226.

¹⁵ Ladislav Mňačko, *Oneskorené reportáže* (Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo politickej literatúry, 1963), 5; Mária Stanková, “Obrátené Oneskorené reportáže Ladislava Mňačka,” in *Slovenská próza 18.–20. storočia*, ed. Miloslav Vojtech, Zuzana Kákošová, and Dagmar Garay Kročanová (Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2021), 189–192.

In addition to social reportages, the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a resurgence of travel reportage. Numerous significant writers were afforded the opportunity to travel internationally with the approval of the Communist Party. Many authors thus documented their journeys, often incorporating expressions of gratitude toward the regime. This phenomenon can also be seen in books by poets. In 1952, Andrej Plávka published the book *V krajine šťastných ľudí* (In the Country of Happy People) and two years later *Rumunská jar* (The Romanian Spring). The poet Rudolf Fabry wrote about his travels in Egypt in *Sálām älékum—Rozprávania o starom a novom Egypte* (As-salamu Aleykum—Stories of Old and New Egypt). The novelist František Hečko wrote about the Soviet Union in his 1953 book titled *Moskva—Leningrad—Jasná Pol'ana* (Moscow—Leningrad—Yasnaya Polyana). Mňačko wrote reportages including *Dobrodružstvo vo Vietname* (An Adventure in Vietnam) and *Albánska reportáž* (An Albanian Reportage). The novelist Dominik Tatarka published a book of reportages titled *Človek na cestách* (A Man on the Move).

After the end of Communist Party rule in 1989, significant changes occurred in the media landscape and in publishing opportunities. The Velvet Revolution, the protest movement in Czechoslovakia in November 1989, also led to major changes in the media. This period was marked by political restructuring, the emergence of nascent capitalism, the liberalization of markets, increased globalization, expanded travel opportunities, and the rise of the tabloid press. These things all had a significant impact on the form and content of news coverage. Before November 1989, there had only been the official media, which was mostly controlled by the Communist Party. According to media scholar Vladimír Holina, the changes in the media system after the Velvet Revolution can be seen as changes in relation to the political system, the institutional base of the mass media, media ownership, legal positions, and the economic conditions of media existence.¹⁶ The main trends in the media system after November 1989 were privatization, emancipation, politicization, commercialization, concentration, internationalization, and tabloidization.¹⁷ The newly established democratic and pluralistic print media system led to

¹⁶Vladimír Holina, "Journalism and Journalism Education in Slovakia since 1989: Newspapers and Magazines," in *Žurnalistika XXI–XXII*, ed. Juraj Vojtek (Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 1996), 4.

¹⁷Samuel Brečka, Branislav Ondrášik, and Richard Keklak, *Médiá a novinári na Slovensku* (Bratislava: Eurokódex, 2010), 9.

a threefold increase in the number of press titles. New sectors, such as advertising and erotic literature, emerged, while regional and local publications also saw significant growth. Newspapers improved in both content and design, with larger formats becoming common for newspapers and magazines. The average circulation of newspapers, particularly dailies, however, declined as their cover prices rose. Unlike magazines, newspapers experienced a significant loss of readership.¹⁸ Readers were influenced by the political and social changes of the time, gaining the freedom to select newspapers that matched their political orientation; however, some readers faced financial hardships, which limited their ability to purchase newspapers in spite of the broader range of options.¹⁹ There was also a significant increase in the number of magazines, from only 192 in 1989 to almost 500 in 1994. The number of magazines featuring entertainment coverage increased, as did the number of sociopolitical and economic magazines.²⁰ Weeklies such as *Plus 7 dní* and *Život* offered jobs and financial resources for reporters, and they could write about anything in a new, open, and easy-to-understand style; writers had their own photographers and the possibility to travel around the world. These weeklies also had different histories; *Život* had been part of the media system since the 1950s, whereas *Plus 7 dní* was established in 1990. Since the 1990s, both magazines have informed their readers about a wide range of topics, including politics and culture, in Slovakia and further afield with the help of reportages and photos.

REPORTING WANDERERS AND WANDERING REPORTERS: ANDREJ BÁN AND MARTIN M. ŠIMEČKA

This section focuses on two books of reportage: Bán's *Slon na Zemplíne: Príbehy Slovenska* and Šimečka's book *Príhody tuláka po Slovensku*. Both authors have a clear view of the current social situation in Slovakia and in Europe, and both are prominent journalists and commentators on the

¹⁸Vladimír Holina, "Zmeny mediálnej situácie na Slovensku po roku 1989," *Otázky žurnalistiky* 42, no. 2 (1999): 104. For more on changes in the media system between 1989 and 1995, see Eugen Gindl, "Médiá," in *Slovensko 1995: Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti*, ed. Martin Bútora and Péter Hunčík (Bratislava: Nadácia Sándora Máraiho, 1996), 219–236.

¹⁹Vladimír Holina, "Zmeny mediálnej situácie na Slovensku po roku 1989 – II," *Otázky žurnalistiky* 42, no. 3 (1999): 183.

²⁰Ivan Sečík, "Vývoj systému periodickej tlače na Slovensku," *Otázky žurnalistiky* 38, no. 4 (1994): 268.

political and social situation. Both have won important journalistic awards. Bán and Šimečka are connected with the *Denník N* daily newspaper; they are fierce opponents of the Slovak government and have published columns, political opinion pieces, and reportages.

Andrej Bán was born in 1964; he is known as a reporter, photographer, and writer. He has been in conflict zones in places such as Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Israel. He was awarded the Tatra banka Foundation Award for literature in 2018 for his above-mentioned book, which was also the first Slovak book published by Absynt, an independent publisher founded in 2015 that specializes in contemporary non-fiction and autobiographical fiction. Its *Prekliati reportéri* (*The Cursed Reporters*) series presents writers such as Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Svetlana Alexievich, Ryszard Kapuściński, and Åsne Seierstad.²¹

Bán is a co-founder of the *Človek v ohrození* (*People in Peril*) nonprofit organization. Before *Denník N*, he wrote for *tyždeň* magazine. In 2020 he received the Order of Ľudovít Štúr (2nd Class), the third highest state decoration, from Slovak president Zuzana Čaputová. He is also a multiple winner of Slovakia's Journalists Award and has received the Biela Vrana (*White Crow*) award for civic courage and defense of the public good. His books of photography include *Iné Slovensko* (Another Slovakia), *Kosovo, Na juh od raja* (South of Eden), and a book on the Balkans titled *Trochu oheň, trochu voda* (A Little Fire, a Little Water). In November 2024, he published a photographic book titled *Ukrajinské leporelo* (A Ukrainian Concertina Book).

Martin M. Šimečka, born in 1957, is a political commentator. He is a longstanding journalist connected with the mainstream Slovak and Czech print media. He was the editor-in-chief of the *Domino Fórum* weekly

²¹ Juraj Koudela, a co-founder of Absynt, said that “publishing original Slovak titles was our intention from the start. Soon after we published our first books, we showed them to the acclaimed Slovak reporter Andrej Bán, who has covered wars and conflicts throughout Europe. We gave him copies of Polish reportage books to show how his colleagues in Poland write and told him we would be open to cooperation if he wanted to write something for us. And the result is *Slon na Zemplíne* (An Elephant in Zemplín), published in 2018. In February of that year, when Bán was in the middle of writing his book, the murders of the Slovak investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová made headlines around the world, shaking confidence in Slovak justice and exposing links between the Mafia and the country's top officials. So these events quite naturally took centre stage in the book.” Julia Sherwood, “‘Thirst for a Deeper Understanding’: An Interview with the Founders of Absynt,” *Asymptote*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2019/07/17/thirst-for-a-deeper-understanding-an-interview-with-the-founders-of-absynt/>.

newspaper, the *SME* daily newspaper, and *Respekt*—a Czech weekly magazine. Before 1989 he had participated in the Czechoslovak dissent, as had his father, the philosopher Milan Šimečka. In 1990, Šimečka started the Archa publishing house, and later he worked as a journalist. He is also a novelist. In 1994, his novel *The Year of the Frog* won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Since 2016 he has mainly written for *Denník N*. His book of essays, *Medzi Slovákmi* (Among the Slovaks), received the Dominik Tatarka Award, a literary prize for authors who exemplify humanism. The *Príhody tuláka po Slovensku*, which will be discussed here, was adapted into a play by Divadlo Astorka Korzo'90 in May 2024. On February 15, 2024, the SMER political party filed a criminal complaint against Šimečka based on an allegation that he had defamed the nation.²² In January of that year, Šimečka had criticized Slovak prime minister Robert Fico in a discussion titled *Ako zachrániť demokraciu* (How to Save Democracy) organized by *Denník N*.²³ SMER's approach to Šimečka was also influenced by the fact that he is the father of the leader of the Slovak opposition, Michal Šimečka.

I DID NOT WANT TO WRITE THIS BOOK, BUT ...

A brief overview of the history of travel writing and reportage in Slovakia shows a strong tendency among Slovak writers and journalists to focus on the outside world; however, there is also a long tradition of reporting on

²²Spectator Staff, "Smer Files Complaint against Journalist, Attacks Two Others," *The Slovak Spectator*, February 15, 2024, <https://spectator.sme.sk/politics-and-society/c/smer-files-complaint-against-journalist-attacks-two-others>. The frequency of political figures initiating legal proceedings against journalists has increased significantly in recent times. In October 2024, Fico filed a lawsuit against Peter Bárdy, the editor-in-chief of the *Aktuality* news portal for using his image on the cover of a book titled *Fico—Posadnutý mocou* (Fico: Obsessed with Power). Similarly, in September 2024, the Minister of Culture, Martina Šimkovičová, filed a complaint against Michal Hvorecký, a writer and journalist, for calling her a "neo-fascist" in his text titled *Prírodu a kultúru zverili neofašistom* (Nature and Culture Entrusted to Neo-Fascists). For more information on Šimečka's case, see "SMER files criminal complaint against journalist Martin M. Šimečka," Mapping Media Freedom, accessed January 30, 2025, <https://www.mapmf.org/alert/31266>.

²³Robert Fico is serving his fourth term as the prime minister of Slovakia. He is the founder and chairperson of the SMER political party. SMER, officially also referred to as "Slovak Social Democracy," was founded in 1999. The party held power from 2006 to 2010 and again from 2012 to 2020. In the September 2023 parliamentary elections, SMER emerged victorious, becoming the leading party in the Slovak parliament. It currently holds six of the fifteen government ministries as well as the office of prime minister.

and from Slovakia, as demonstrated by Mňačko. The analyzed books by Bán and Šimečka can be placed within this tradition of writing about Slovakia, although both authors emphasize the difficulties involved in writing about their homeland. In the statement “I did not want to write this book, but I have to,” there is the seed of a research problem. Although Šimečka said he was reluctant to write about his homeland, his published travelogue provides a detailed account of his journey through Slovakia. This motif is important in both books discussed here. Authors have a complicated relationship with the country and its people: they regularly comment on Slovakia in newspapers, but do not write about it in books. Šimečka uses it to frame his reportage at the beginning of the book: “I did not mean to write this reportage either, but it also became a part of a great adventure, in which an accident played a leading role.”²⁴ At the end of the book, he states: “I did not mean to write this reportage. But when my journey became one of the biggest adventures in my life, I decided to catch it in words before it would pass into fading memory.”²⁵ Bán works with this motif more implicitly, but he also uses it in his prologue, where he confessed: “It is like this country was closed to me. The last chapter, full stop. And I am afraid to start opening this package.”²⁶

It is worthwhile here to ask some questions: how is contemporary Slovakia perceived by journalists? Does the author's relationship with the country present any difficulties? If so, what are the underlying reasons? Do the books discussed here reflect their sense of belonging to Slovakia? Or do they convey the opposite sentiment?

Both books are analyzed and interpreted to address these research questions. Several topical issues served as a framework for the research methods used. Three of these frameworks are primarily connected to the authors and their self-reflections within the books. The books explore the relationship between the authors and their country of birth, their connection with their compatriots, and the roles the authors assume—as pilgrims,

²⁴ “Nemal som v pláne ani túto reportáž, ale aj ona sa napokon stala súčasťou veľkého dobrodružstva, v ktorom hlavnú úlohu zohrala náhoda.” Martin Milan Šimečka, *Príboby tuláka po Slovensku* (Bratislava: N Press, 2022), 11.

²⁵ “Nemal som v úmysle napísať túto reportáž, ale keď už sa moja púť vyvinula v jedno z najväčších dobrodružstiev môjho života, rozhodol som sa ju slovami zachytiť skôr, než sa mi scvrkne do blednúcej spomienky.” Šimečka, *Príboby tuláka po Slovensku*, 77.

²⁶ “Akoby som mal túto krajinu v sebe raz a navždy uzavretú. Posledná kapitola, bodka. A bojím sa ten balíček, ten uzlík začať otvárať.” Andrej Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne: Príbehy Slovenska* (Žilina: Absynt, 2018), 9.

reporters, and tourists. These perspectives offer an insight into how writers perceive and portray their environments and identities. The other two frameworks are based on sociological and historical aspects of Slovakia. They examine the influence of politicians and political decisions on everyday life as well as the broader historical context of a small nation grappling with significant challenges. These include the legacy of Communist Party rule, the turbulent period of “Mečiarism,” and the political era shaped by Fico.²⁷ Together these frameworks provide a comprehensive view of individual and collective experiences within Slovak society.

This chapter focuses on two books, which, while similar in many aspects, differ in style and length. First, the books have different intentions. Bán’s book is the first piece of reportage on Slovakia authored by a local journalist and published by Absynt. As such, it is informative, descriptive, and narrative-oriented. By contrast, Šimečka had previously written a book about Slovakia; in *Príboby tuláka po Slovensku*, he primarily focuses on recounting his experiences walking throughout Slovakia during the summer of 2022. Bán instead provides a narrative spanning three decades of exploration within the country. It is important to note that Bán’s work is characterized by its complexity, informativeness, and descriptiveness, resembling more a series of photographs with a focus on details as well as the bigger picture. Šimečka’s book, by contrast, is succinct and presents a concise report based on personal feelings, opinions, and sharply expressed thoughts, utilizing metaphors and symbols as if in a poem. A similarity between the authors was noted by Ondrej Gažovič, who stated that Bán’s *Slon na Zemplíne* belongs to the same literary camp as Šimečka’s *Medzi Slovákmi* because they both convincingly reveal the diverse corners of the soul of Slovakia and the people who live there.²⁸

²⁷ Vladimír Mečiar was the prime minister of Slovakia from 1992 to 1994 and from 1994 to 1998. His time in power is referred to as “Mečiarism,” which can be defined as a “system of a semi-authoritarian state that limited the rights of the opposition, violated the constitution, tried to censor the press, tried to suppress the civil society and its organizations, and tried to suppress any greater rights of ethnicities and nationalities.” George W. Bush Institute, “Interviews with Martin Bútora,” <https://www.bushcenter.org/freedom-collection/martin-butora-meciarism-and-the-civic-campaign>.

²⁸ Ondrej Gažovič, “Slon na Zemplíne, Bán na Slovensku,” *Knižná revue*, November 22, 2018, <https://www.litcentrum.sk/recenzia/slone-na-zempline-ban-na-slovensku>.

US AND THEM: WHERE AM I?

The specific positions of both authors concerning Slovakia constitute a significant element in both literary works. In the case of Šimečka, this is more prominent as his parents were Czech. Bán is Slovak, yet he spent a significant amount of time outside Slovakia. In *Slon na Zemplíne*, Bán compares Slovakia to a small apartment for episodic stays between his assignments in war zones; the apartment must stay shrouded in darkness, preventing him from confronting the truth in daylight and reflecting on his repressed emotions about it.²⁹

The polarization of society into categories of “us” and “them” is a significant aspect of Slovak culture.³⁰ A specific feature of this opposition is bidirectionality; both sides can feel and act like “us.” For Šimečka and Bán, “us” means the voters of democratic parties. For voters of nondemocratic parties, these democratically oriented voters are “them.” It is therefore possible to work with Šimečka’s metaphor of being “among the Slovaks,” which he used as the title to his 2017 book. Šimečka expressed his lack of assurance about belonging to Slovakia in an interview with Ján Štrasser, where he stated: “I am a Slovak who was born to Czech parents, and I overcame this paradox by appropriating my Slovak homeland emotionally and intellectually. And all my life I have been trying to understand it.”³¹ Šimečka does not express that he is one of “us” because of his nationality; instead, he emphasizes that he is “among the Slovaks,” rather than “being Slovak” himself. This could be interpreted as a strategy to act as an outside observer.

²⁹ Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne*, 242.

³⁰ The dichotomy of “us” versus “them” is one of the most prominent themes in Slovak literature, and it has persisted from the beginnings to the present day. See Marta Fülöpová, “My, Oni—a Tí ešte horší: Vytváranie negatívnych národných obrazov v slovenskej próze 19. storočia,” in *Studia Academica Slovaca* 48 (Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2019), 28–44; Jana Pátková, “Století cest na Slovensko: na okraj jedného česko-slovenského dialogu,” *Česká literatura* 71, no. 2 (2023): 195–211; Marcela Antošová and Veronika Čilingová, “Timeless message of Dominik Tatarka in his work ‘The Demon of Conformism,’” *European Journal of Science and Theology* 13, no. 3 (2017): 47–58; Joanna Goszczyńska, “My a oni. My alebo oni. My vůči nim. Slovenský kultúrny priestor očima cizích cestovateľů,” in *Fenoméni cestopisu v literatúre a umení strednej Európy*, ed. Jiří Hrabal (Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2015), 177–186.

³¹ “Som Slovák, ktorý sa narodil českým rodičom, a tento paradox som prekonal tým, že som si svoju slovenskú vlasť citovo a intelektuálne privlastnil a celý život sa jej pokúšam porozumieť.” Ján Štrasser, *Život na tekutých pieskoch: Rozhovory s Martinom M. Šimečkom* (Bratislava: N Press, 2024), 407.

Šimečka also uses the motif of being “among the Slovaks” in the part of his book where he describes wandering in Slovakia as a greater adventure than his foreign trips because he was “walking as an outsider over the centuries and yet as a native;” he “meets people who speak the same language but who are connected only by an abstraction called the ‘state,’ a shared fear of bears, and anger at the government.”³² His statement about Slovakia is based on two connected issues which play a significant role in Slovak society. The fear of bears can be seen as a synecdoche representing the cultural divide between liberals and conservatives. Like the fear of migrants during the 2015 crisis, this fear is politically exploited to scare and mobilize voters. Both fears reflect broader societal tensions and the strategic use of fear in Slovak politics. Bears symbolize the conflict between rural conservatives, who see them as a threat to their livelihoods, and urban liberals, who emphasize conservation. Similarly, the fear of migrants was used to amplify concerns about cultural identity and security. These fears create “us versus them” narratives, tapping into anxieties about identity, safety, and autonomy. This strategy polarizes society, mobilizes voters, and hinders constructive dialogue and compromise.

Bán also frequently employs the dichotomy of “us” and “them,” although he does not always use these exact terms. Each narrative within his book is based on the juxtaposition of good and evil. He employs phrases like “our people” and “our man,” which can be viewed as a nuanced form of “us” in contrast to “them.” These expressions are further loaded with negative connotations due to their association with illicit agreements among wealthy individuals linked to prominent politicians in Slovakia. Such collocations are commonly employed in media discourse when addressing political matters. As a journalist, Bán has authored numerous investigative reports, and he tackled some topics within the book; he assumes a significant role in crime investigation. By employing different investigative methodologies, he arrives at the same conclusion as

³² “Aj ja som prešiel Grónskom, túlal som sa po Patagónii, Mongolsku či Rusku a žasol nad inakosťou tamojšej prírody. Ale prechádzať slovenskou krajinou je dobrodružnejšie, lebo ňou kráčam ako cudzinec v čase ponad stáročia a zároveň domorodec. Stretávam sa s ľuďmi, ktorí hovoria rovnakým jazykom, ale pojmú ich len akási abstrakcia menom štát, spoločný strach z medveďov a hnev na vládu.” Šimečka, *Príhody tuláka po Slovensku*, 63. The issue of the brown bear became an important political topic in Slovakia and some other European countries. For more information on this topic, see Lara Williams, “Why Wolves and Bears Are Big Political Issues in Europe,” *Bloomberg*, August 2, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2024-08-02/why-grey-wolves-and-brown-bears-are-big-political-issues-in-europe>.

Šimečka, who shed light on the connections between “them” and the political elites of Slovakia.

Šimečka is known as a critic of Slovak society, and his role has become more obvious since the elections in September 2023, when SMER regained power and Fico became prime minister for the fourth time. Šimečka expressed his opinion of people who voted for the government by stating that he had no sympathy for them.³³ In a later discussion with fellow critics and journalists, he said: “I do not need to understand them at this point, because I have learned enough about them from my communications and meetings. And I am tired of it. I can talk to them, and meet them, but not discuss politics anymore.”³⁴ This attitude is also present in his book. Four years earlier, Bán stated that “an investigation of Slovakia in the third millennium involves asking who is voting for SMER and why.”³⁵ The position of Bán and Šimečka among the Slovaks is problematic because they are both journalists from Bratislava. The opposition of “us” and “them” in political and media discourse often focuses on differences between the capital city and the rest of the country.

Bán writes about people who do not like to chat with journalists when he expresses their fear of talking about problems, but he reaches a clear conclusion that “the problem is probably not only with the journalists but also with the reality they describe.”³⁶ Šimečka also faced a similar situation, and he said: “A tramp is welcome in Slovakia, a journalist is not.”³⁷ During his wanderings, he realized: “People like the old wanderer because he is harmless and he reminds them of the ancient duty to help travelers.”³⁸ The role of the observer, however, benefits both authors considerably. It affords them a secure environment to perceive, experience, and critique

³³ Martin M. Šimečka, “Prečo nemám pochopenie pre voličov vládnej koalície,” *Denník N*, May 14, 2024, <https://dennikn.sk/3990664/preco-nemam-pochopenie-pre-volicov-vladnej-koalicie/>. This article aroused interest and critical reaction by other journalists, which led to the discussion mentioned in the next footnote.

³⁴ Braňo Bezák, “Šimečka, Markoš, Marec v debate o rozdelenej spoločnosti: Kto sme my, kto sú oni a čo s tým,” *Denník N*, June 21, 2024. <https://dennikn.sk/4059651/simecka-markos-marec-v-debate-o-rozdelenej-spolocnosti-kto-sme-my-kto-su-oni-a-co-s-tym/>.

³⁵ Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne*, 179.

³⁶ “Problém zrejme nebude len v novinároch, ale aj v realite, ktorú opisujú.” Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne*, 111.

³⁷ “Tulák je na Slovensku vítaný, novinár nie.” Šimečka, *Príboby tuláka po Slovensku*, 34.

³⁸ “Ľudia majú radi osamelého starého tuláka, lebo je neškodný a oživuje v nich archaickú potrebu pomôcť podozrivým.” Šimečka, *Príboby tuláka po Slovensku*, 26.

their homeland and its inhabitants. As Gažovič mentioned in his review, Bán does not shy away from those who tolerate the state of the country or who are responsible for it.³⁹

FROM INDIFFERENCE TO ANGER AND SO ON

Šimečka gave his book *Medzi Slovákmi* a subtitle that translates into English as “a brief history of half-heartedness from Dubček to Fico, or how I became a patriot.” The “half-heartedness” which Šimečka refers to marks a lack of interest in social and political processes that both he and Bán attribute to Slovaks. The relationship between Slovaks and their government—and politicians in general—often oscillates between apathy and anger. Apathy reflects a lack of motivation to engage with or influence political change, whereas anger is an emotional response that is often expressed in an informal setting such as a pub. This dynamic is epitomized by the stereotypical image of an irate Slovak man passionately criticizing the state of politics over drinks. Both apathy and anger feature prominently in literary depictions. Šimečka captures this through his discussions of geopolitical issues with Slovak men in rural villages. Conversely, Bán sheds light on the same phenomenon from a different perspective, highlighting former prime minister Mikuláš Dzurinda’s remarkable ability to engage in meaningful political debates in pubs. This duality highlights the complex and often contradictory nature of how Slovaks engage with politics.⁴⁰

Using examples of anger and indifference, Bán illustrates Slovak attitudes, pointing to apathy toward animals, instances of dominance and rudeness in human interactions, and the pervasive resignation expressed in the phrase “Nevertheless, I cannot change it.”⁴¹ He also applies this critique to himself, acknowledging that he exhibits these attitudes to some extent. He acknowledges that he was ambivalent and detached when he wrote the book but also that, upon reflection, his writing revealed something entirely different about himself. All the chapters in *Slon na Zemplíne* demonstrate a profound interest in his homeland.

³⁹ Gažovič, “Slon na Zemplíne, Bán na Slovensku.”

⁴⁰ Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne*, 185. Dzurinda was the Slovak prime minister from October 30, 1998, to July 4, 2006. Dzurinda’s reforms facilitated Slovakia’s initiation of the accession process to the EU and to NATO.

⁴¹ Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne*, 37.

Šimečka compares half-heartedness with tolerance; he warns that there are situations where peoples' self-perceptions of tolerance merely disguise lethargy and indifference.⁴² Social passivity as an important attribute of Slovak society is described in *Medzi Slovákmi*. Šimečka mentioned the indifference of Slovak writers during the normalization period, when many avoided challenging the Communist Party. Instead, they passively accepted state-sanctioned privileges such as publishing opportunities, recognition, and material stability, all of which were contingent on ideological compliance. By prioritizing personal security and career benefits, they became complicit in sustaining the regime's cultural dominance.⁴³ Importantly, he also provides an example of "good" indifference; this involved the Czechoslovak dissident movement, which created an alternative society based on apathy toward the political regime.⁴⁴ Additionally, Šimečka highlights Slovak society's reaction to Vladimír Mečiar, who did not let Slovaks be indifferent and who pushed them toward active opposition.⁴⁵ Šimečka also draws a connection between indifference and anger when mentioning how quickly some Slovaks began to hate members of the VPN movement at the end of 1989.⁴⁶ Indifference and anger are still important features of the Slovak nation and can be seen in both of the books analyzed here. To these responses, Bán also adds the fear of injustice some Slovaks experience, especially regarding politicians and the mafia.

In Slovak history, anger has alternated with half-heartedness. The unprecedented murders of the young journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in February 2018 moved the nation from apathy to anger.⁴⁷ Bán connected this crime with the coming political shift:

⁴² Kirill Ščeblykin and Filip Zajček, *J sme jako oni: Rozhovor s Martinem M. Šimečkou o liberálech, pokrytcích a fašistech* (Prague: Paseka, 2019), 41, 139.

⁴³ Martin Milan Šimečka, *Medzi Slovákmi: Stručné dejiny labostajnosti od Dubčeka k Ficovi alebo ako som sa stal vlastencom* (Bratislava: N Press, 2017), 12–13.

⁴⁴ Šimečka, *Medzi Slovákmi*, 28–30.

⁴⁵ Šimečka, *Medzi Slovákmi*, 63.

⁴⁶ Šimečka, *Medzi Slovákmi*, 53. Verejnost' proti násiliu (Public Against Violence, VPN) was founded during the Velvet Revolution as a civic initiative that then transformed into a political party and won the 1990 elections.

⁴⁷ The investigative journalist Ján Kuciak worked for the *Aktuality* news portal and wrote several articles about the mafia in Slovakia, especially in eastern Slovakia. He also wrote about the businessman Marian Kočner, who was accused of murder but was then released in May 2023. (He is currently [2025] in prison for another crime.) Kočner is connected to various politicians, oligarchs, and businessmen from previous Fico governments. After the murders,

But then, in February 2018, the journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová are murdered. This event breaks something fundamental in society. At first the arrogant and hitherto sovereign Smer does not understand and refuses to believe it, but increasingly outbursts of previously suppressed anger can be seen everywhere. The hitherto intrepid and well-organized army panics, hoping to find some tolerable way to retreat.⁴⁸

In the interview with Štrasser, Šimečka said that this murder helped reveal the true nature of the political system.⁴⁹ The anger from a significant part of Slovak society, which can be understood as righteous indignation, led to mass demonstrations calling for a change of prime minister and the realization that something was rotten in the country.

The anger of Slovaks today is different. Šimečka likens it to a disease which “has been building up over their lifetimes; maybe they did not even know about it. Maybe it would have never surfaced if it had not been for Putin, Kotleba, Fico, and Trump. These angry men showed them that rage and anger are right and something to be proud of.”⁵⁰ Anger is a potent tool for winning votes, as demonstrated by the victory of Peter Pellegrini in the presidential election in the spring of 2024.⁵¹ This anger is rooted in fear, manifesting itself as concern about the war in Ukraine, the impact of immigration, the perceived threat of liberalism, and the experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals and others. Bán mentioned the political discourse based on this; he called anger the most effective ammunition.⁵² Šimečka uses fear to describe the nation when he writes that Slovaks only share a common fear of bears and anger at the government. He also stated

there was a wave of mass protests that led to the resignation of Fico as prime minister on March 15, 2018.

⁴⁸ “Potom však vo februári 2018 zavraždia novinára Jána Kuciaka a jeho snúbenicu Martinu Kušnírovú. Čosi zásadné sa touto udalosťou v spoločnosti zlomí. Arogantný a dovtedy suverénny Smer zo spočiatku nechápe, vzpiera sa uveriť, no čím ďalej, tým viac všade naokolo vidno výbuchy dovtedy potláčaného hnevu. Donedávna neohrozená, dobre organizovaná armáda prepadá panike a dúfa, že nájde ako-tak znesiteľné ústupové cesty.” Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne. Príbehy Slovenska*, 62.

⁴⁹ Ščeblykin and Zajíček, *J sme jako oni*, 206.

⁵⁰ Šimečka, *Príboby tuláka po Slovensku*, 27. Marian Kotleba is a far-right political figure and the leader of Kotlebovci – ĽSNS. From 2013 to 2017, he was the governor of the Banská Bystrica region, and from 2016 to 2022 he was a member of the Slovak parliament.

⁵¹ Peter Pellegrini was the prime minister from 2018 to 2020 after Fico's resignation in March 2018. Pellegrini left SMER and started a new political party called Hlas in September 2020.

⁵² Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne. Príbehy Slovenska*, 87.

that it was impossible to defend democracy, the West, or human rights in Slovak villages.⁵³

A SMALL HISTORY OF A SMALL COUNTRY

In his book of essays titled *Kruhová obrana* (A Round Defense), the philosopher Milan Šimečka invented the idea of a small history of people's lives: "What connects us across the chasms of time are the small histories of human life, defined by birth and death [...]. Great histories have placed us in different social systems, and these prevent our small histories from meeting and understanding each other."⁵⁴ The term "small history" can have other meanings, and it is interesting how Martin M. Šimečka and Bán emphasize the smallness of Slovak history as one of the most significant issues. Bán pointed to the lack of great historical events in Slovakia:

What is interesting about a country where there are no wars, ethnic conflicts, or genocides? A country that has not been attacked by any terrorists, and whose people are not plagued by tsunamis or earthquakes? These people, according to surviving national and socialist mythology, have been living with what they have for centuries; they survive with a loaf of bread in the lee of great events, as if huddled in narrow, deep valleys, hoping that, if it comes to it, the great nations will let them survive.⁵⁵

On the other hand, he emphasized that Slovakia suffered from "a deficit of small history stories—we are constantly repeating the big social and political events, as if there were no histories of drinking and eating, a history of love, or a history of envy, or, more recently, a history of corruption."⁵⁶

There is a third way to use and interpret the "small history" collocation, which is also especially useful for understanding Slovakia today: a small history is a way to denote a noticeably short national memory. Both

⁵³ Šimečka, *Príhody tuláka po Slovensku*, 55.

⁵⁴ Milan Šimečka, *Kruhová obrana* (Bratislava: Archa, 1984), 6–7.

⁵⁵ "Čím je zaujímavá krajina, kde nie sú vojny, etnické konflikty, genocídy, krajina, na ktorú nezaútočil nijaký terorista a jeho ľud nesúžujú ani cunami či zemetrasenia? Ten ľud si podľa prežívajúcej národnej aj socialistickej mytológie stáročia žije, čo žije, on prežíva so skyvou chleba v závetrí veľkých udalostí, akoby zhrbený v úzkych, hlbokých dolinách, a dúfa, že, ak na to príde, veľké národy ho nechajú prežiť." Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne*, 241.

⁵⁶ Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne. Príbehy Slovenska*, 197.

Šimečka and Bán mention this problem, which becomes particularly concerning in the context of Slovak attitudes toward their former regimes. The tendency to revive some aspects of fascism or socialism can be seen in speeches and, even more troublingly, in the actions of some politicians. Indeed, as Bán noted:

The answer, not surprisingly, is the desire of people for strong-arm rule. Any hand, even a lightly communist or fascist one, to which they can cling mightily. It is an inherited code of survival mentality and opportunism. And Fico (and Kotleba) knows this better than anyone.⁵⁷

Bán and Šimečka also warn about the risks of populism and flirting with autocracies in the contexts of the EU and NATO. Both Fico and Kotleba are known for their fierce criticism of these organizations, which they sometimes tend to describe as “oppressors.” In 2017 and 2018, Bán organized discussions all over Slovakia about democracy and the threat of anti-democratic tendencies in Slovak politics. The aim of these discussions was to stop support for far-right politicians before the elections. A few years later, Šimečka became a regular member of the discussion titled “How to Save Democracy.”

There are still an alarming number of Slovaks who pine for socialism, as mentioned by Šimečka himself: “‘During communism, there was a school and a health center with a dentist and an X-ray machine,’ said an elderly man sitting at a nearby table. ‘Now there’s nothing here. Even this pub was once a kindergarten.’”⁵⁸ Bán described an analogous situation: “For the communists, things worked here. After the revolution, on the contrary, everything went downhill: cooperatives, dairies, flour-processing plants, sugar factories, canneries, and especially cattle.”⁵⁹ This nostalgia has worked quite well in election campaigns. Sometimes it was so obvious that Šimečka could compare the Fico government to the Czechoslovak era

⁵⁷ “Odpoveďou, nie prekvapujúcou, je túžba ľudí po vláde silnej ruky. Akejkol'vek, aj ľahko komunistickej či fašistickej, ku ktorej sa môžu mocne primknúť. Je to zdedený kód mentality prežitia a oportunizmu. A Fico (aj Kotleba) ju poznajú lepšie ako ktokoľvek iný.” Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne*, 117.

⁵⁸ “‘Za komunizmu tu bola škola, zdravotné stredisko so zubárom aj röntgenom,’ povedal starší muž, ktorý sip risadol od vedľajšieho stola. ‘Teraz tu nie je nič, aj táto kréma bola bývalá škôlka.’” Šimečka, *Príboby tuláka po Slovensku*, 55.

⁵⁹ “Za komunistov to tu fungovalo, po revolúcii, naopak, všetko kľaklo. Družstvá, mliekarne, závody na spracovanie múky, cukrovary, konzervárne. A najmä plno dobytky.” Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne*, 71.

of Gustáv Husák (known as normalization) when the Communist Party wanted to “normalize” political and economic life by using strict censorship.⁶⁰ This longing for the past was also apparent when Mečiar was prime minister. This period is portrayed in Bán’s book quite implicitly with a drawing of parallels between Mečiarism and Fico’s governments based on populism and corruption. He even uses the term “going from Mečiar to Fico” to describe politicians who made the right decisions at the right time, but who still represented the same political direction—just in a different guise. Bán often tells stories from eastern Slovakia, where he describes parallels between the Mečiar and Fico periods. All of these stories thematize nepotism, stealing, and corrupt practices. Bán and Šimečka draw parallels between the governments of Husák, Mečiar, and Fico, which raise a question about Slovaks and their relationship to autocratic political systems. Šimečka does not refer to this explicitly, but he interpreted this era by saying that Mečiar’s strongest weapon was the Slovaks’ indifference.⁶¹

IS THE GRASS ALWAYS GREENER OVER THE FENCE?

Slovak history cannot be analyzed without looking at its neighbors. For nearly a millennium, Slovakia was a part of the Kingdom of Hungary and then the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After 1918, the Slovaks then spent nearly seven decades in a union with the Czechs, interrupted by the brief existence of the Slovak Republic from 1939 to 1945 as a vassal state of Nazi Germany. After the “Victorious February” of 1948, which marked the beginning of Communist Party rule in Czechoslovakia, there were four decades of close “friendship” with the Soviet Union. The political, diplomatic, social, and cultural relationships with these other nations are still very dynamic and sometimes problematic. This is especially the case in recent years following the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Slovak society is split into two camps. One of them has a strong admiration for Russia. This is one of the reasons why Šimečka and Bán, who both

⁶⁰ Gustáv Husák was the first secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia from 1968 to 1987 and the president of Czechoslovakia from 1975 to 1989. He was a lawyer and an important figure in the 1944 Slovak National Uprising. He was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1951, but then he was released in 1960 and rehabilitated in 1963. In August 1968, he supported the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies and became the leader of the Communist Party.

⁶¹ Šimečka, *Medzi Slovákmi*, 68.

support Ukraine, are so critical of the Fico governments and why they warn of populism and nationalism. Slovaks have a strong tendency to believe in the motifs and narratives spread by Russian propaganda—namely that the war in Ukraine was caused by the West or by Ukraine itself.⁶² Bán mentions the mayor of Veľký Lipník, who had proudly welcomed the Night Wolves [a Russian motorcycle club close to Vladimir Putin] to his village.⁶³ Šimečka sees the role of Russia in Slovak society as highly important, given that his book was written after the beginning of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This is also the reason Šimečka decided to go on a trip to the woods.⁶⁴

The two books, however, mainly reflect on the motif of the Slovak relationship with the Czechs. Due to a common history of living as one state from 1918 to 1939 and then from 1945 to 1993, there are many special characteristics of the relationship.⁶⁵ Even though historians and sociologists often highlight how peaceful the division of Czechoslovakia was in 1993, the relationship between Slovaks and Czechs is not simple. During the first Czechoslovak Republic, the Slovak part of the country needed help in education, science, and administration. After the Second World War, the 1946 elections saw the Democratic Party win in Slovakia, whereas in the Czech lands the Communist Party prevailed. During socialism, which lasted from 1948 to 1989, there were various concerns about the position of Slovakia within the common republic, which resulted in an agreement on a federation in 1969. The split in 1993 was peaceful, but there were areas where Slovakia felt short-changed. The division of Czechoslovakia into the Czech and Slovak Republics led to the separation of various state institutions, including media organizations. A notable example of this was the division of Czechoslovak Television and Radio into two distinct national entities: Czech Television and Czech Radio and Slovak Television and Slovak Radio. Similarly, the Czechoslovak News Agency split into the Czech News Agency and the News Agency of the Slovak Republic. These divisions were originally based on a 2:1 ratio,

⁶² Vladimír Šnidl, “Propaganda už presvedčila polovicu Slovákov, že za ruskú agresiu môže Západ alebo Ukrajina,” *Denník N*, May 26, 2023, <https://dennikn.sk/3395375/propaganda-presvedcila-uz-polovicu-slovakov-ze-za-rusku-agresiu-moze-zapad-alebo-ukrajina/>.

⁶³ Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne*, 118.

⁶⁴ Šimečka, *Prihody tuláka po Slovensku*, 11.

⁶⁵ See Edita Bosák, “Slovaks and Czechs: An Uneasy Coexistence,” in *Czechoslovakia 1918–88*, ed. Gordon H. Skilling (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991).

reflecting the population size and territorial proportions of the two countries. Despite this arrangement, many key documents and materials crucial for the new Slovak state remained in the Czech Republic. This created an imbalance, leaving Slovakia at a disadvantage in terms of access to vital historical, political, and cultural records.⁶⁶ The relationship with the Czechs is now complicated due to the political orientation of the current Slovak government.⁶⁷ Overall, however, the Czechs are the closest nation to the Slovaks; this is due to a shared history as well as the closeness of the Czech and Slovak languages. Indeed, many Slovaks can speak Czech.

This particular emphasis is evident in Šimečka's book, likely due to his Czech parentage. Šimečka used Czech villages as an effective argument during a conversation with Slovak men after they complained about the "bad Western world." He states: "But if the West and democracy were to blame, the Czech Republic would be like us, I argued. But it is not. I was walking through a Czech village a few days ago, and we can contrast it."⁶⁸ In a chapter titled "České" (A Czech Surprise), he states:

It had been a long time since I had been in a Czech village, and, as I walked through it, I slowly realized that I was witnessing a civilizational difference that must have been created in the last decade. A few days ago, I walked through Dobrá Voda, and it seemed to me proof that Slovakia was not in bad shape. It was only when I saw this village of a comparable size that it dawned on me how far the Czechs have come. The houses were similar; the difference was in the public spaces, which in this village were cared for with the same passion as private ones. The difference was in the quality of the sidewalks and the number of benches and trees. It was in the clear message that I missed on the Slovak side—this is our common home.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ľubomír Bajaník, "Od „tretinovej“ televízie k verejnoprávnej televízii nového štátu. 30 rokov od rozdelenia Česko-Slovenska a Československej televízie," *Otázky žurnalistiky* 66, nos. 3–4 (2023): 3–13; Svetlana Hlaváčková, "Historický kontext vzniku a vývinu Tlačovej agentúry Slovenskej republiky (1918–2018)," *Otázky žurnalistiky* 61, nos. 3–4 (2018): 20.

⁶⁷ See Spectator Staff, "Slovakia's Foreign Policy Makes Czech PM Defer Joint Meetings with Slovak Cabinet," *The Slovak Spectator*, March 7, 2024, <https://spectator.sme.sk/politics-and-society/c/slovakias-foreign-policy-makes-czech-pm-defer-joint-meetings-with-slovak-cabinet>.

⁶⁸ Šimečka, *Príboby tuláka po Slovensku*, 55.

⁶⁹ "Už dlho som nebol v českej dedine a kráčajúc ňou som si pomaly uvedomoval, že som svedkom civilizačného rozdielu, ktorý musel vzniknúť v poslednej dekáde. Pred niekoľkými dňami som kráčal Dobrou Vodou a javila sa mi ako dôkaz toho, že Slovensko sa nemá zle. Až pri pohľade na túto dedinu podobnej veľkosti mi došlo, ako ďaleko nám Česi ušli. Domy boli podobné, rozdiel spočíval vo verejnom priestore, o ktorý sa v tejto dedine starali s rovnakou

Šimečka highlights the distinction between the two neighbors, attributing its origins to their differing perceptions and relationships toward the concept of home. The way Šimečka contrasts Czechs and Slovaks was a point of criticism in a review by the sociologist Dominik Želinský which specifically analyzed “civilizational difference.” Želinský took issue with Šimečka’s use of the term “civilizational,” arguing that it lacked solid argumentation and could be misleading. He warned against the overuse of this term, as it could lead to dangerous generalizations and oversimplifications.⁷⁰

Bán primarily examines the Czech Republic through the lens of the former Czechoslovak framework. His portrayal of “our brothers” is noteworthy, engaging with cultural stereotypes in a text characterized by significant moral conviction and rhetorical power. Unlike typical approaches that reinforce stereotypes without substantiated arguments or evidence, he engages in a critical analysis as well as an examination grounded in historical accuracy. Bán presents key historical moments in Czech–Slovak relations as integral parts of Slovak history rather than exploiting them for sensational effect. These include the establishment of Slovak universities, government institutions, postal services, and state administration by Czech intellectuals after 1918; the forced expatriation of many Czechs, particularly teachers and officials, following the creation of the wartime Slovak state; and the enduring stereotype of “loud” Czech hikers. In Slovakia, this last motif serves as a source of humor and has evolved into a metaphor for inadequately attired and unprepared tourists in mountainous regions.

NATURE AND TRADITION IN THE HEART OF EUROPE

The motifs and interpretations in Bán’s and Šimečka’s texts reveal some negative aspects of Slovakia which is otherwise often depicted through its beautiful nature, unique folklore, and its position in the heart of Europe. This cultural stereotype was one of the reasons why Bán did not want to photograph Slovakia and write about it anymore: “The portrayal of that beautiful Slovakia promoted by ethnologists, folklorists, and active

vášnou ako o ten súkromný. Rozdiel bol v kvalite chodníkov, počte lavičiek či vysadených stromov. Bol v jasnom posolstve, ktoré mi na slovenskej strane chýbalo: toto je náš spoločný domov.” Šimečka, *Príboby tuláka po Slovensku*, 44.

⁷⁰ Dominik Želinský, “To sa s Českom nedá porovnať,” *Kapitál*, January 5, 2023. <https://kapital-noviny.sk/to-sa-s-ceskom-neda-porovnat-simecka/>.

journalists, is delusion. Never have these two worlds—the world of tradition and the world of reality—been so far apart.”⁷¹

His book only offers a brief mention of the country's natural beauty. Bán does not use any expressive depictions of Slovak nature; rather, its beauty is implicit in his approach to the country and its people. By contrast, Šimečka assigns a more prominent role to the environment. His solitary wanderings through forests, meadows, mountains, and valleys focus on the natural world. It is noteworthy how frequently Šimečka is moved by the beauty of Slovak nature and how he tends to get sentimental. Its beauty still captivates him, yet he is brought down by the people.⁷²

This aspect also highlights a key difference between Šimečka and Bán: Šimečka writes about his experiences in the countryside, whereas Bán writes about the country and its people—with whom he has a complex relationship. Bán writes his stories from the position of a journalist and reporter; he wants to describe the scene and the actors, explain the problem, and find solutions. He is focused on people and their stories. Šimečka is focused instead on the world as such and his place in it. This can be understood as the main difference between the two books, and this is rooted in the reasons for their wandering throughout Slovakia. Šimečka wants to forget the world and be alone in nature; Bán travels around the country in order to report on its people.

Both authors emphasize the importance of exploring the relationship between the Slovaks and their natural environment. They both identify the danger posed by oligarchs constructing manor houses in forested areas and creating game reserves. While Šimečka addresses these tendencies, Bán focuses more specifically on the issue of (illegal) hunting.⁷³ These tendencies share a common denominator in the bear. As a hiker, Šimečka is frequently made aware of the presence of bears.⁷⁴ As was mentioned above, bears are now a key political issue in Slovakia and involve the anti-establishment and populist parts of the political spectrum. For these people, environmental activists and nature protectionists are “bioterrorists.” Bán refers to wild animals in the context of blood sports, which are organically connected to bears and wolves and the protection offered by national parks. All these questions are frequently discussed because the current

⁷¹ Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne*, 16.

⁷² Šimečka, *Príboby tuláka po Slovensku*, 58.

⁷³ Bán, *Slon na Zemplíne*, 160.

⁷⁴ Šimečka, *Príboby tuláka po Slovensku*, 47, 54, 58, 63, and 72.

leadership of the Ministry of the Environment seems to prefer hunting over the preservation of nature.⁷⁵ The relationship of Slovaks to nature is a difficult topic, and both Šimečka and Bán predicted some of the current political developments in their texts.

EPILOGUE: WANDERING AND WONDERING

Both Šimečka and Bán travel around Slovakia, confronting the paradox of a region that possesses a stunning natural beauty and a reputation for generosity, while also appearing to be evolving into a political and cultural void at the heart of Europe, revealing in turn a notable indifference to liberal democracy in the actions of certain politicians and their voters. Slovaks tend to identify their adversaries because this awareness makes their existence more manageable and tolerable. These perceived adversaries include communists, fascists, the SMER party, Ukraine, Russia, migrants, the LGBTIQ+ community, and bears. A sizable number of Slovaks feel fear and anger, which in turn shapes the sociopolitical landscape. The two books analyzed here convey moral imperatives and serve as cautionary messages for readers and for others. Notably, the predictions made by Bán and Šimečka have come true; the political faction they often portrayed as a destructive force in Slovakia came to power in the September 2023 elections. Consequently, those who have read the texts (as well as those who have not) are now witnessing a resurgence of previous practices. It is evident that their warnings were inadequate; the ominous realities of Slovakia resurface amid this collective distress. Despite Šimečka's journey from Bratislava to central Slovakia and Bán's focus on the east, both authors conclude that the current outlook for Slovakia is rather grim.

They depict Slovakia as a nation beset by apathy, anger, and nostalgia for past political systems. This portrayal reflects a society divided into "us" (progressive, democratic-minded citizens) and "them" (supporters of populist leaders). This chapter has highlighted Bán's and Šimečka's nuanced perspectives. Bán offers detailed, image-rich narratives akin to photography, whereas Šimečka's approach is more symbolic and introspective, even resembling poetry.

⁷⁵ See Lucia Szabová, "Swift Retreat from Democracy: How the New Slovakian Government Ruins Environmental Protection and Civil Society," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, November 8, 2024, <https://cz.boell.org/en/2024/10/28/rychly-ustup-od-democracie-ako-nova-vlada-slovenska-nici-ochranu-zivotneho-prostredia>.

Both authors regard their homeland with a critical yet affectionate eye, warning against the risks of social and political stagnation and promoting a more engaged and self-reflective national identity. This analysis suggests that these reportages serve as a moral compass for Slovak society, offering critical insights and a call for reflection. They critique the romanticized image of Slovakia's nature and folklore, contrasting it with a portrayal of environmental exploitation and socioeconomic challenges. Bán's and Šimečka's works contribute to the evolving discourse on Slovak identity, highlighting moral nuances and offering cautionary insights about the nation's future, particularly considering recent political shifts and societal tensions. This analysis has presented these reportages as essential texts for comprehending Slovakia's intricate sociocultural and political dynamics.

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