

**National Imaginarium. Alternate Histories in Polish Prose After 1989 as an Area of  
Articulating Cultural Memory**

SUMMARY

The aim of this dissertation is to synthesize the phenomenon of alternate histories in Polish prose after 1989, including both reconstruction of the poetics of novels and the definition of the socio-cultural contextualization of works. The selection of the analyzed texts is determined by three criteria: genre, thematic and chronology. These works have specific *genus proximum* and characteristic strategies, they exploit Polish history or they refer to it in an essential way, and they belong to prose written after 1989.

At the very basis of my thesis is the conviction that prescriptive and descriptive definitions of a genre are diverging. By design, alternate history aims to provoke reflection on the mechanisms of history. It is a fictional realization of counterfactual thought which always accompanies historiography. Research practice however, clearly shows that these works are largely identity-related, ideologically determined and characterized by presentism. They not only explore the past but also show the present ways of its conceptualization, revealing the mechanisms and topoi of cultural memory.

The idea of using cultural memory as the basis for methodological framework, determines the interdisciplinary nature of the dissertation. A holistic perspective integrating literary instruments with the apparatus of concepts and categories taken from the memory studies, historiography, postcolonial critique or geocriticism, allows for an in-depth cultural interpretation and recognition of the most interesting aspects of the Polish alternate histories. This approach aims to show the potential of the genre in a broad perspective and also the various possibilities for interpretation, which could be explored in more detail in the future.

The structure of the dissertation was designed to show the key aspects of an alternate history poetics while providing exposition for cultural filter. Chapter one is methodological. I begin with the general positioning of alternate histories in the socio-cultural context and among other genres and trends of literature. I present the origin of the genre, the conditions

for its development and the reasons of its popularity. I confront the specifics of counterfactual literature with the rules of classic historiography and situate literature on the background of the development of historiographical thought. Then, by specifying the research perspective, I complement the conceptual apparatus with categories taken from the memory studies. I recall the most influential theories of cultural memory and, the concepts of Western researchers developing the idea of interpreting alternate histories as a document of memory. Based on the tools described above, I create an outline of the research instrumentation.

Second chapter contains analysis of selected scenarios in Polish alternate histories. The analysis of the novel's event layer aims to reconstruct the strategy of creating an alternate version of history. I confront these strategies with the rules of historical simulation, historiographical concepts and topoi of cultural memory. I highlight the three basic functions of alternate history scenarios: world-building, historiographical and memorial, as well as variants of the latter (legitimization, compensation and subversion).

Chapter three deals with the ways of presenting historical figures. I analyze the strategies of constructing characters and their biographies in relation to historical facts, as well as culturally established images and ideas. I use the figure of transworld identity in the sense of a synthesis of the properties of both planes: historical and allohistorical. I focus on depictions of national heroes, traitors and enemies of the motherland, as well as alternate biographies of scientists and artists. I present the ways in which alternate biographies of known figures articulate memorial and identity concepts (strategies of legitimization, revision, normalization of memory, or symptoms of post dependence discourse).

In chapter four, I focus on the world-building potential of alternate histories, by analyzing space-time. I concentrate on scientific theories founding the concept of the multiverse and literary ways of implementing it. I divide the ways of creating space-time into those representing chronopoetics and geopoetics of novels. Within chronopoetics of allohistories I highlight three strategies (the economy of historical time, the retrofuturism, and the history out of time) that correspond to specific models of time and historiosophical concepts. In turn, within geopoetics I observe two basic techniques of representing space: alternative maps (that generate phantom territories) and virtual topographies (a hybrid space thematizing the palimpsest character of the urban tissue), which articulate memorial issues.

In the fifth chapter, I analyze the metadiscursive strategies, being the exposition of the self-awareness of the genre. I go on to focus on the three basic kinds of metadiscourse: scientific (that explicate scientific theories of the multiverse), historical (referring to historiosophical concepts) and literary-cultural (thematizing the history of second degree –

cultural ways of conceptualizing history). The presence of metadiscourse emphasizes the function of the novels as a "laboratory of history" (because simulation is equivalent to a scientific experiment). This tendency is in turn counterbalanced by symptoms of ideological and memorial determination, which is best realized by strategy of constructing an alternate world along the lines of utopia or dystopia. Confrontation of both aspects of alternate histories indicating a paradoxical combination of self-awareness and memorial limitations leads to the final conclusions.

In the final remarks of the dissertation I summarize the results of my work and indicate the place of alternate histories in contemporary Polish prose.

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